

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And coming to her, he said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, ³³ and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" ³⁵ And the angel said to her in reply, "The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. ³⁶ And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; ³⁷ for nothing will be impossible for God." ³⁸ Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Context

From the beginning of the Gospel according to Luke:

^{1:1} Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and ministers of the word have handed them down to us, ³ I too have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may realize the certainty of the teachings you have received.

The preface to the Gospel of Luke's begins with the Greek (*epeidēper*) indicating a formal and important undertaking. And well Luke should write such as he intends to write of the things that God has fulfilled among the believers (*among us*). It establishes that the good news is already planted – not only in that others have already written their gospels – but that this is living tradition (*handed down*) among the community. These things have been fulfilled by God and part of his faithfulness to his promises.

Luke 1:5-2:52 forms the section referred to as the "Infancy Narratives." Luke's account of the conception, birth, and infancy of Jesus is one of his finest narratives. The Gospel of Mark, one of Luke's sources does not have an infancy narrative to guide him. The Gospel of Matthew has an infancy narrative, but there is every indication that Luke and Matthew had no knowledge of each other's work. Rather, they composed their accounts separately at a time when the church was reflecting back beyond Jesus' public ministry to his earthly beginnings.

The traditional preaching outline began with Jesus' baptism (as is evident in the sermons of Peter and Paul in Acts, and in the structure of Mark's Gospel). The infancy stories were added to the front of that outline to serve as a prologue to the main narrative. A prologue announces the themes to be pursued in the body of the work. Both Luke and Matthew proclaim the good news in advance in a kind of mini-gospel based on the birth and infancy of Jesus. If Luke's infancy narrative had been lost before his Gospel began to circulate, we wouldn't know it had existed, because there are no clear references back to these chapters in the later account of the public ministry. But the reverse is not true — there are many references forward to the later developments. What we know about the infant Jesus comes from the teaching of the adult Jesus and the early church's reflection on his life, death, and resurrection. Who is this child? He is Messiah and Lord (Acts 2:36). What does his coming mean? He will save his people from their sins (Luke 24:47). A reader's understanding of the prologue depends on his or her

understanding of the rest of the book. It means much more when read a second or third time after the entire book has been read. The infancy narrative grows in meaning the more the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus resound in the faith of the reader.

The immediate context of our passage is one of announcements:

- Luke 1:5-25: Announcement of John's birth
- Luke 1:26-37: The Annunciation of Jesus' birth

Commentary

from Joel Green, *The Gospel According to Luke*

This second scene of annunciation is closely aligned with the that announcing the birth of John the Baptist (1:-25); in fact, they are so interwoven that we know before we are explicitly told in vv.39–45, 67–79 that these two mothers and their sons belong to one story. First, the opening reference to “the sixth month” (v.26; cf. vv.24, 36, 56) ties the report of Elizabeth’s conception and response to this account. Second, the appearance of the angel recalls Zechariah’s encounter in the temple (vv.11, 19, 26). First from Daniel, more recently from the annunciation to Zechariah, we know Gabriel as an eschatological messenger; what will he say now? Luke uses Gabriel to stage this episode: he comes to the virgin (vv.26–27), delivers his message and receives her response (vv.28–38a), then departs (v.38b). With Gabriel’s departure, Mary will serve as the central figure holding together the scenes of the birth narrative.

Third, both in *language* and *form*, vv.5–23 and vv.26–38 are set in parallel. They share the following progression of elements: (1) Introduction of Parents; (2) Specification of Obstacles to Childbearing; (3) Encounter with an Angel, Gabriel; (4) Response to the Angel; (5) “Do Not Be Afraid,” with Address by Name; (6) Promise of a Son; (7) Objection; (8) Giving of a Sign; and (9) Departure of Gabriel. Although both scenes are examples of an annunciation type-scene found elsewhere in the Bible, these two are more like each other than either is like the other representatives of this form. This similarity can be extended with reference to comparable language:

Luke 1:11–20

Luke 1:28–38

“he was *troubled*” (v.12)

“she was much *troubled*” (v.28)

“the angel said to him” (v.13)

“the angel said to her” (v.30)

“Do not be afraid” (v.13)

“Do not be afraid” (v.30)

“will bear you a son” (v.13)

“you will ... bear a son” (v.31)

“and you will name him” (v.13)

“and you will name him” (v.31)

“he will be great” (v.15)

“he will be great” (v.32)

“said to the angel” (v.18)

“said to the angel” (v.34)

“*and replying*, the angel
said to him” (v.19)

“*and replying*, the angel
said to her” (v.35)

“Gabriel ... God ... sent” (v.19)

“Gabriel ... sent ... God” (v.26)

“*and now*” (v.20)

“*and now*” (v.36)

The one account recalls and interprets the other. These events take their significance in part from their shared form and language, demonstrating that these scenes and especially these sons function together within the one purpose of God. *Behind both chains of events thus set in motion, stands God, present via his messenger and the unveiling of his aim.*

The points of contrast between these two scenes are equally telling. First, Elizabeth has a need—she is childless, disgraced; but Mary has no apparent need. Similarly, the redundancy in the explanation of Elizabeth’s childlessness (vv.7a, 7b, 18) signals how her *need* has led to the recognition of the *obstacle* that must be overcome prior to its *resolution*. But the triple assertion of Mary’s virginity (vv.27a, 27b, 34) is not presented as an obstacle to the resolution of any need on her part. Because divergences from the expected in a type scene are often clues to the significance of a narrated account, these departures call for interpretive reflection. Fundamentally, they make explicit what was already implicit in the narrative—namely, the real needs here are not those of Mary or even of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Israel is estranged from God, under alien rule, oppressed. God’s covenant with his people has not been realized fully. Hence, God is intervening in human history to bring forth an everlasting kingdom. In doing so, he solicits and embraces the partnership of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and Mary—themselves Israelites and representative in their own ways of the people of Israel.

Third, the descriptions of the promised sons are in some ways comparable, but Jesus obviously outdistances John in his significance. To note only one illustration of this contrast, while “*He [John] will be filled with the holy Spirit even from his mother’s womb,*” Jesus’ conception results from the activity of the Spirit (vv.15, 35). Both are important in the realization of God’s redemptive will, but Jesus is primary.

Fourth, Zechariah’s encounter with Gabriel takes place at the center of the Jewish world, the Holy Place, only a veiled doorway from the presence of God’s glory. But Gabriel travels to Mary, far away from the temple mount in Jerusalem, to Nazareth in Galilee—insignificant, despised, unclean. Finally, the devout, divinely chosen priest Zechariah responds to Gabriel’s words with hesitation rooted in unbelief. Mary, on the other hand, though she is only a young girl, embraces God’s plan, proclaiming herself as God’s servant. These points of dissimilarity bespeak something profound about the focus of God’s redemptive initiative in the Third Gospel, and portend the joy with which “the little people” will receive divine favor.

The significance of this pericope is also grounded in scriptural echoes other than those related to such formal considerations. Especially transparent are the points of contact with the Davidic material. First, Joseph—who has scarcely any role in Luke 1–2 and is only mentioned otherwise in 3:23—receives more of an introduction than Mary, the primary character in the birth narrative. Why? Luke is interested in his royal ancestry. He is “*of the house of David*” (v.27), and this prepares for the identification of his (albeit adopted) son as a Davidide. Second, Jesus’ acclamation as Son of God (vv.32, 35) must be read at least against the backdrop of the use of this expression to designate the Davidic king in the OT. Even more obvious are the unmistakable reminiscences of the divine promise to David of an everlasting dynasty found in 2 Sam 7:11b-16 in vv.32b-33.

26–27 The annunciation to Mary is closely related to the former scenes by temporal and chronological markers, and by the reappearance of Gabriel. The “sixth month” recalls v 24, alerting us that Elizabeth has only now come out of seclusion. This prepares for the sharing of the news of her pregnancy in v 36 and her subsequent reception of her guest (vv.39–45). The geographical focus has shifted north, from Jerusalem and the Judean hills, to Nazareth in Galilee. The narrative has departed the socio-religious culture center, the temple. Gabriel holds these scenes together as God’s spokesperson.

Mary’s status as a virgin is accented by its dual affirmation in v 27, and this has reminded many interpreters of the prophetic word of Isa 7:14. The conjunction of so many points of correspondence between the Gabriel-Mary encounter and Isa 7:10–17 cannot help but produce an echo effect, though it would be going too far to suggest that Luke wants to narrate the *fulfillment* of Isa 7:10–17. Rather, these reverberations establish an interpretive link emphasizing how God is again intervening in history to bring his purpose to fruition.

Moreover, mention of Mary's status as a "virgin" prepares for the ensuing note regarding her relationship to Joseph as his betrothed and for Mary's objection to the angelic announcement (v.34). That "virgin" specifies Mary as a young girl of marriageable age (i.e., approximately 12–13) and as a virgin in the more narrow, sexual sense is demonstrated both by her self-assertion in v 34 and by attention to Jewish marriage regulations.

"The stature of important persons in Luke-Acts is communicated by special note of their pedigree, both kin and clan, thus extending the honor and identity of the ancestors to the contemporary individual." This observation throws into sharp relief Luke's initial characterization of Mary. Joseph is a son of David, but Mary has not yet joined his household and thus has no claim on his inherited status. Mary's family is not mentioned. Indeed, she is not introduced in any way that would recommend her to us as particularly noteworthy or deserving of divine favor.

28–30 The juxtaposition of images related to status honor in vv.26–27 is advanced even further. The angel's greeting and declaration of Mary's favored status (v.28) form an *inclusio* with his reassurance of divine favor (v.30) around Mary's perplexity (v.29). Nothing has prepared her (or the reader) for this visit from an archangel or for such exalted words denoting God's favor. It is no wonder that she is perplexed and silently questions the meaning of this encounter.

Gabriel's opening words to Mary—"Hail, favored one!" (which could also be read *Rejoice!* favored one.)—are related by alliteration in the Greek and by their conjoining of two motifs interwoven throughout the Gospel: God acts graciously, people respond (appropriately) with joy and praise. Many translations read the initial word as a common greeting rather than as an invitation to rejoice. and this is possible. However, apart from the use of the word in openings to letters intended for Greek audiences in Acts 15:23; 23:26, Luke uses the Semitic term "peace" as a formula for greeting. This suggests that this greeting fills in further the picture of rejoicing that will pervade the Third Gospel (e.g., 1:14, 47, 58; 2:10). Moreover, his greeting is reminiscent of Zeph 3:14–15; Zech 9:9; Joel 2:21, where the formula is found: rejoice! + address + reference to the divine action or attitude to which joy is the proper response. "Favored one," then, functions as a name for Mary, designating her as the object of divine benefaction. This reality is accented and clarified by its repetition in v 30, then celebrated (with rejoicing!—v 47) by Mary in v 48. *God has given his favor to one who had no claim to worthy status, raised her up from a position of lowliness, and has chosen her to have a central role in salvation history.*

This message is confirmed by the angel's declaratory promise, "*The Lord is with you.*" This is much more than a greeting, for this language is often used in the OT with reference to a person chosen by God for a special purpose in salvation history; in such contexts this phrase assures human agents of divine resources and protection.

31–33 The logic of the angel's presentation is telling: Mary will conceive, bear, and name the child; God will give him the throne of David; as a consequence, the promised son will reign forever, etc. In other words, the partnership of human and divine is essential if Jesus is to accomplish his mission.

Gabriel's words to Mary echo language used elsewhere in birth announcements, especially Gen 16:11; Isa 7:14. This ties the current scene into the heart of God's story; the eschatological import of the annunciation rests on vv.32–33, not on a "fulfillment" of Isa 7:14. In popular etymology, "Jesus" means "Yahweh saves" (cf. Matt 1:21). As before with John's name (v.13), Luke appears more interested in the role of God in giving the name (and the obedience of parents to the command) than in its etymology. On the other hand, there are subtle hints that Luke considers this meaning to be of significance (see "God my Savior"—1:47; "Savior"—2:11; also 1:71, 74, 77).

On one level, God's promise is to fulfill his commitment to David, spelled out in 2 Sam 7:11–16, then repeated and developed elsewhere in the Scriptures and in later Judaism. The connection of vv.32–33

with the expectation of a restored Davidic monarchy is unmistakable. See, for example, the reference to David's throne, "his kingdom" (2 Sam 7:12, 13; cf. v 16), the perpetual character of this kingdom (2 Sam 7:13, 16), and the correlation of kingship and sonship (2 Sam 7:14). (See also the Davidic echoes in 1:68–79.) Following such hints as those in Isa 9:7 and Dan 7:14, Luke has in mind a single ruler reigning forever as opposed to the dynasty ("house") envisioned by Nathan's prophecy to David. This reflects the eschatological correlation of David's reign with the greater emphasis on the definitive, everlasting dominion of Yahweh.

Gabriel's announcement thus creates a complex of expectations related to Jesus' mission to "reign over the house of Jacob forever." Luke's language contains nationalistic, socio-political reverberations. When this is matched with similar material in the birth narrative, it is difficult to imagine that the anticipated redemption will be anything but a nationalistic restoration of Israel. Other possibilities are not yet excluded, however, and it behooves the reader to continue to listen to the narrative; how will Luke resolve the narrative needs introduced with these strong chords of eschatological anticipation?

According to the angel's words, Jesus will be "*Son of the Most High*," a designation synonymous with "*Son of God*" (see the parallel—vv.32, 35). What "Son of God" connotes in the context of this Lukan scene must be discussed in light of v 35. At this point, it is worth mentioning that Luke otherwise associates Jesus' kingship/messiahship and sonship (cf. 4:41; 22:29, 67–70; Acts 9:20–22).

34–37 Although Mary's role in the realization of God's salvific will is crucial, the initiative and powerful work of God are much more so. Ultimately, the purpose of Mary's question (v.34)—which leads to Gabriel's answer (v.35) and the giving of a sign (v.36) and word of reassurance (v.37)—is to emphasize that all of this is God's doing.

It is not immediately clear how the objections of Zechariah and Mary differ, even if it is certain that the angel can distinguish one from the other. In both cases we subsequently learn what motivated these questions—in Zechariah's case, unbelief (v.20); in Mary's case, belief (v.45). One can also distinguish between Zechariah's request for a sign ("How will I know?") and Mary's request for an explanation ("How can this be?"). The reader has seen God's miraculous work with Zechariah and Elizabeth, and Mary has become the recipient of God's grace, so neither we nor she entertains any doubt *that* the angel's words can be realized. The only question is, *How?* With her query, Mary repeats for us information already available from the narrator (1:27). What her question does not account for fully, however, is the information that she was betrothed to Joseph. As such, and since Joseph is "of the house of David," it might have been evident how she would conceive and bear a son of David to whom God could give the throne. What is more natural than for a betrothed virgin to expect to conceive and bear a child in the near future? On the one hand, her question plays a vital theological role, for it accents the fact that she is still a virgin. After Gabriel departs, "*in those days*" Mary travels to the home of her kinswoman where we discover that she has now become pregnant (v.42)—and that without a narrated encounter of any kind with Joseph (or any other man). By contrast, Zechariah "went to his home" and "after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived" (vv.23–24). This contrast shows how, in this way of narrative, Luke has affirmed the virginal conception of Jesus. On the other hand, the point of her question is rhetorical, inviting further information from the angel.

The first two clauses of Gabriel's response parallel one another and prepare for the third:

The Holy Spirit	will come upon you, and
the power of the Most High	will overshadow you;
consequently, the child to be born will be called holy	the Son of God.

These parallel affirmations do not suggest sexual activity, but do connote divine agency. The Holy Spirit is identified with God's power in a way that anticipates Acts 1:8. The verb "to come upon" also anticipates Acts 1:8, and, then, the Pentecost event. The text may call to mind Isa 32:15, which anticipates the Spirit's being poured out upon God's people as a mark of the age of peace. The second phrase has connections with the transfiguration scene in 9:34, and more broadly with scriptural accounts of manifestations of the glory of God (e.g., Exod 40:35; Num 9:18, 22).

The report of the consequence of this divine agency focuses on its christological repercussions. God's intervention will result in the special nature of the child. Here Gabriel's words recall his earlier announcement:

(v.32ab): He	will be great, and	
	will be called	the Son of the Most High
(v.35d): [He]	will be called holy,	the Son of God.

Previously, "Son of God" was related directly to Jesus' role as king, a usage well known in the Scriptures (v.32; cf. 2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7). Other uses of the title were known, however, and together these point above all to divine sonship in the first-century Palestinian milieu as connoting the special relationship of a person with God and that person's obedience to and representation of God on earth. While Luke's interest in Jesus' sonship builds on these conceptualizations, his understanding has clearly developed beyond them in two significant ways. First, he emphasizes the relation of the Spirit's activity and Jesus' sonship: Jesus is "Son of God" not as a consequence of his assuming the throne of David (as in Ps 2:7), but as a result of his conception, itself the result of the miraculous work of the Spirit. As Jesus prepares for and commences his public ministry, the relation of the work of the Spirit and his identity as God's Son will be further developed (3:21–22, 38; 4:1, 3, 9, 14, 18). Second, though Luke is not working with Johannine or later trinitarian categories, he is nonetheless moving toward a more ontological (and not only functional) understanding of Jesus' sonship. Like John, Jesus is set apart (i.e., "holy") from birth to special service in God's redemptive purpose; unlike John—indeed, uniquely in salvation history—Jesus' sonship extends backward to the prevenient work of God in his creation as a human being.

Mary has not requested a sign but, as often in scenes of this kind, she is given one. She receives what is for her new information; Elizabeth has just come out of seclusion (vv.24, 26, 36), so Mary could not have known of her pregnancy. The repetition of this information also serves to emphasize again the trustworthiness of Gabriel's words and the heightened sense of the miraculous already penetrating this story.

The description of Elizabeth as "your relative" serves three functions. Most obviously, it is one more way in which the stories of John and Jesus are interwoven. Second, it serves as a bridge back to the story of Elizabeth, preparing for the encounter between Elizabeth and Mary (vv.39–56) and John's birth (v.57). Finally, it is a further indication of how carefully Luke has staged his characterization of Mary. Only at the end of this scene do we learn that she belongs to the family of Elizabeth and may thus share her ancestral heritage; the timing of this disclosure is significant, for the most memorable quality of Mary for Luke is her relation to God, a relationship God initiated.

Gabriel's final words may echo the comparable statement of the Lord to Sarah in Gen 18:14 (LXX) "Is anything impossible with God?" In this case, Gabriel's analogy would work best with reference to Elizabeth, since both Sarah and Elizabeth are old and barren. However, the purpose behind reporting Elizabeth's pregnancy to Mary was to provide her with a sign that Gabriel's words in her case were trustworthy. Thus, this final affirmation of the infinite possibilities with God would be extended to Mary's case as well. This latter emphasis is highlighted all the more by Gabriel's denial of the

impotency of any word of God; this point is taken up immediately by Mary (“*May it be done to me according to your word,*” v 38), then underscored by Elizabeth (“*Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled,*” v 45). In this way, Luke’s concern with the efficacy of divine power is intimately related to his further concern to present Mary as one whose response to the word of God is exemplary.

38 Mary’s response to the divine announcement contrasts sharply with that of Zechariah, with the result that she, surprisingly in scenes of this type, has the last word. She unreservedly embraces the purpose of God, without regard to its cost to her personally. Her response is exemplary, demonstrating how all Israel ought to respond to God’s favor.

In describing herself as the Lord’s servant (cf. 1:48), she acknowledges her submission to God’s purpose, but also her role in assisting that purpose. Moreover, she claims a place in God’s household, so to speak; indeed, in this socio-historical context, her words relativize and actually place in jeopardy her status in Joseph’s household. For her, partnership in the purpose of God transcends the claims of family. In antiquity, the status of a slave was determined by the status of the householder. In his characterization of Mary as “slave of the Lord,” Luke has begun to undercut the competitive maneuvering for positions of status prevalent in the first-century Mediterranean world. Mary, who seemed to measure low in any ranking—age, family heritage, gender, and so on—turns out to be the one favored by God, the one who finds her status and identity in her obedience to God and participation in his salvific will.

Notes

Luke 1:26 sixth month: using this phrase here and in v.36, Luke connects the two birth announcement scenes. **Gabriel:** “Gabriel” This Hebrew name means “God’s strong man,” “man of God,” or “God is my warrior.” This is God’s messenger angel (cf. 1:26; Dan. 8:16; 9:21). There are only two angels named in the Bible: (1) Gabriel, who is God’s messenger angel to Daniel, Zacharias, and Mary, and (2) Michael, who is the national archangel (cf. Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 9; Rev. 12:7). **a city in Galilee called Nazareth** Galilee was known as a Gentile area although many Jews lived there (apparently a community from the royal tribe of Judah lived in Nazareth). The name Nazareth itself may be related to the Messianic title “Branch” (*nezer*, cf. Isa. 11:1; Matt. 2:23).

Luke 1:27 a virgin betrothed: Much as been made of the Isaiah *alma* – translated into Greek as *parthenos* – referring to any young unmarried women without reference to sexual experience. Little notice is given to the vigorous defense of the virginity from the beginning days of Christianity – pointing to a clear understanding of the identity of Jesus as “Son of God.” **Betrothed:** refers to a binding agreement recognized in Jewish tradition that describes the period before common living, but already affording the moniker “wife” to the woman.

Luke 1:28 Hail! favored one: There is no English translation that will capture the alliteration *chaire kecharitōmenē*. It is the tradition of our “Hail Mary” that this is translated “full of grace.” That comes from the vulgate *gratia plena* – which is a marginal translation on linguistics or contextual grounds. The word *chaire* comes from the verb *chairō* which “welcome” or “rejoice” [EDNT 3:451]. Luke mostly uses the word for “Rejoice” rather than a simple greeting.

Luke 1:33 house of Jacob: This is a somewhat archaic designation for Israel (e.g. Gen 46:27, Exod 19:3, Isa 8:17) perhaps pointing to what was intended from the foundation of the world.

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