

Jesus' Birth Foretold to Mary - Luke 1:26-38

The announcement of the birth of Jesus is now told. The story is so similar to that of John the Baptist that one cannot help but feel that it was consciously arranged in such a way to bring out the parallelisms (Marshall, 62). Both contain (1) the appearance of Gabriel, (2) the perplexity of the recipient, (3) the message itself, (4) questions, and the (5) reassurance that what was said would come to pass. Although they are two separate events, they are both part of the same story of God announcing the coming of His kingdom. The two accounts also demonstrate that Jesus is markedly greater than John. John's conception is remarkable; Jesus' conception is miraculous. John was to prepare the way for Jesus; his mission was temporary. Jesus' mission was messianic; His rule is eternal. John was filled with the Holy Spirit from birth; Jesus was conceived by the Spirit. John will turn many to God; Jesus will reign over the people as God.

1:26 Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee, called Nazareth,

1:27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

1:28 And coming in, he said to her, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

1:29 But she was greatly troubled at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this might be.

1:30 And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God.

The reference to the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy and the reappearance of the angel Gabriel link this story to that which has just preceded. The connection to Elizabeth again in verse 36 pulls the two stories together even closer as God's power over human reproduction is emphasized.

The fact that Nazareth had to be identified as a town in Galilee indicates its obscurity and the humble conditions that Mary was in. Although Nazareth probably had a population of only 500 people at most, it was a vibrant village producing wheat, wine, oil, fruit, honey, and millet (Edwards, 44).

Gabriel was sent to a virgin named Mary (see Broadus, Matthew, 8, for information on Mary). Although the word "virgin" is literally "a young unmarried girl," it carries the implications of virginity. Some have tried to suggest that a young woman, not a virgin, is all that is intended, but verse 34 leaves no doubt that Luke is speaking of a virgin. The fact that she was only engaged, not married, supports this as well.

Engagement in Jewish life was a legally binding relationship that usually lasted about a year before marriage. Only divorce or death could sever an engagement. If one of the parties died, the survivor was considered to be a widow. Women were usually pledged to be married while quite young. Girls could be engaged as early as 12 years old (Marshall, 64). Mary may have just been in her teens when the angel came to her (Liefeld, 830).

Although Mary was not living with Joseph, he is mentioned because he was of the line of David, a fact that becomes important if Jesus is to rule on the throne of David as the angel announces.

Mary is told not to fear. This particular word for fear is used only once in the NT and is stronger than the word used to describe Zechariah's fear in Luke 1:12 or Herod's fear in Matthew 2:3. Ironically, Mary, who is the greatest model of faith, is the one who fears most (Edwards, 45).

The angel calls her "highly favored." (Lk. 1:28). The reason she is highly favored is because she is a recipient of God's grace. The same expression is also used of us in Ephesians 1:6. There it says that God has made us "*accepted* in the Beloved." We are "highly favored" because of our relationship to Christ. While this special address could be due to Mary's outstanding character, the parallel in Ephesians suggests that it is that grace given by God apart from human merit (Liefeld, 830; Marshall, 65).

More contrasts can be seen between the announcements of Jesus' and John's conceptions:

- Elizabeth is said to be blameless; nothing is said of Mary's obedience.
- John was an answer to Elizabeth's prayer; God blesses Mary out of grace.
- Elizabeth is beyond the age of child-bearing – her situation is beyond probability. Mary is a virgin; her situation is beyond possibility.
- Zechariah was gripped by fear at the appearance of the angel (Lk. 1:12); Mary was troubled by his words. In her humility she could not imagine why such a glorious heavenly being would address her in such exalted terms.

1:31 "And behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus.

1:32 "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David;

1:33 and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end."

The annunciation in verse 31 is a fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14; "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel." As with John the Baptist, the child's name is given by God (see note on Matt. 1:1 for the name "Jesus." Also Matt. 1:21).

Jesus will be called great; the same adjective is applied to John the Baptist as well, but is used in a much fuller sense of Jesus. John the Baptist would be "great in the sight of the Lord" (Lk. 1:15), but Jesus is great because He is the Son of the Most High. As Arnold points out, this relationship to God "is not merely functional – a special relationship to God by virtue of His role as king. He is rather the Son of God from the point of conception, before he has taken on any of the functions of kingship" (Arnold, 80). This sets Jesus apart from all others. Because He is the Son of the Most High, He is the one who will sit on the throne of David (Marshall, 67; 2 Sam. 7:12-16; Psa. 2:7; 89:27-29; Isa. 9:6; 55:3-5) and rule forever (Mic. 4:7; Isa. 9:7; Dan. 7:14, etc.). When His reign will begin is not mentioned.

1:34 And Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

Zechariah asked for evidence that the angel's words concerning his son would come true (Lk. 1:18); Mary asks how the angelic promise will come true in light of her circumstances. She assumes that what the angel said will come to pass, but she wonders as to the manner in which it would take place.

Some are puzzled by her question since there was nothing to indicate that she couldn't bear children nor did the angel tell her she would conceive while a virgin. However, as the narrative continues, it is obvious that her question arises from the fact that she was thinking that the angel was speaking of her conceiving a child before she was married. Her assumption was proven true by the angel's response (see Marshall, 69-70 for 5 different attempts to answer this question).

Mary's virginity is not spoken of as a proof of her holiness and worthiness (as Catholics believe), but as an obstacle to her conception that can only be overcome by a miracle. The Messiah was to be divinely conceived, not just divinely appointed (Arnold, 81).

ESV Luke 1:35 And the angel answered her, "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.

NAS 1:36 "And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month.

1:37 "For nothing will be impossible with God."

The mechanics of how Mary could become pregnant is not explained. The angel simply says, "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" and then offers Elizabeth's conception as a sign to Mary that God can do the impossible.

The expressions Luke uses demonstrate a close continuity to the OT. Three connections can be seen:

1. In the OT the Holy Spirit has a divinely active creative function; He is the agent in the old creation (Gen. 1:2; Ezek. 37:14; Psa.104:30; Ezek. 37:14). Here, He works as the agent of the new creation. The Spirit who creates existence out of non-existence will cause Mary to become pregnant with new life. Just as God can create man from dust so He can create life in a womb.

One cannot help but to think of Psalm 139:

13 For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb.

14 I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Wonderful are Your works, And my soul knows it very well.

15 My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth;

16 Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; And in Your book were all written The days that were ordained for me, When as yet there was not one of them.

2. The idea of the Holy Spirit coming upon individuals is also found in the OT. The Holy Spirit often "came upon" people enabling them to accomplish God's purposes for them.

3. To "overshadow" means to cover and was used of the presence of God's glory resting on, or overshadowing, the tabernacle in the cloud. In Exodus 40:35 it says, "And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle." This

is most likely the primary reference. As Edwards says, "God infused the tabernacle with the presence of His glory. In the tabernacle, God chose to materialize and localize Himself with a particular time and space. . . The divine cloud that established His presence in a place now does so in a *person*. The divine overshadowing of the earthly tabernacle was a *foreshadowing* of the living tabernacle, the incarnation" (Edwards, 49).

It is also used metaphorically of God's protective hovering over His people (Ps. 91:4 "He will cover you with His pinions"; 140:7).

In the NT it was used of the cloud at the transfiguration (Matt. 17:5; Mk. 9:7; Lk. 9:34) that signified divine empowerment (2 Pet. 1:16-18). At the transfiguration a voice came that identified Jesus as the Son of God - a striking reminder of Luke 1:35 (Liefeld, 832).

In sum, the virgin birth was not an act of God working through natural processes, but a new, creative act of supernatural power (Marshall, 73).

The Holy Spirit functioned in a manner that maintained the sinlessness of the one who was to be born: "the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy- the Son of God." (see Garland, 82 who leans toward the NAS, and Edwards who prefers ESV). Jesus was the only person created by God's hands besides Adam (cf. 3:38 where Luke's genealogy ends with "the son of Adam, the son of God" - Bock, 123).

1:38 And Mary said, "Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Mary's response demonstrates true humility. She doesn't question, worry or complain, but says, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." As a "slave girl" of the Lord she recognizes her responsibility to be completely submissive. She has no desire but to do the will of her Master. This is reinforced with, "May it be to me as you have said."

"We are apt to take this as the most natural response and miss Mary's quiet heroism. She was not yet married to Joseph. His reaction to her pregnancy might have been expected to be a strong one and Matthew tells us that he did think of divorcing her (Mt. 1:19). Again, while the death penalty for adultery (Deut. 22:23 f.) does not seem to have been carried out often, it was still there. Mary could not be sure that she would not have to suffer, perhaps even die, but she recognized the will of God and accepted it" (Morris, 82). In the least, a pre-marital pregnancy would have brought Mary shame.

Mary's Visit to Elizabeth - Luke 1:39-56

1:39 Now at this time Mary arose and went with haste to the hill country, to a city of Judah, 1:40 and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth.

Mary left immediately after the visit of the angel to see Elizabeth. Gabriel had visited Mary when Elizabeth was six months pregnant (Lk. 1:26) and Mary remained with her for about three months

(Lk.1:56), probably until the birth of John. This confirmed the sign that the angel had spoken to her about (Lk. 1:36, 37).

The NIV says that Mary went to a town in “the hill country of Judea,” though the Greek literally reads “in the hill country of Judah” emphasizing the connection to that great patriarch, Judah (Morris, 82). The actual location where Zechariah and Elizabeth lived is unknown. All we can ascertain from the text is that they lived in the country, perhaps 50 –70 miles (80-100 miles – Marshall, 80) from where Mary lived. This was a major trip (Liefeld, 834) taking about 3- 4 days (Marshall, 80).

1:41 And it came about that when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

1:42 And she cried out with a loud voice, and said, "Blessed among women are you, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!"

1:43 "And how has it happened to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

1:44 "For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy.

1:45 "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord."

When Mary greeted Elizabeth, the baby in her womb immediately moved. This of course happens often, but Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit who interpreted the movement as the baby rejoicing (Lk. 1:41, 44). John was also filled with the Spirit even while still in the womb (Lk. 1:15). It was at that point when Elizabeth recognized Mary as the one who would bear Messiah and aptly refers to her as the mother of her Lord (Lk. 1:45; Ps. 110:1; note: “mother of God” as used of Mary by the Catholic church never appears in the Bible). Without a word yet spoken by Mary of her pregnancy, Elizabeth is given knowledge of what happened to Mary and the future of the child. This was also the beginning of the witness that John would bear of Jesus. Full of excitement herself, Elizabeth cries out in a loud voice, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!” “Blessed” describes the joyful situation of those who receive God’s favor and further confirmed to Mary what the angel had told her. Finally, she pronounces another blessing upon Mary for believing God’s word (Lk. 1:45), which provides a stark contrast to her own husband who still bore the results of his unbelief (Lk. 1:20).

We can’t help but notice the complete lack of jealousy that Elizabeth had toward Mary. Her question in verse 43 expresses her unworthiness over the fact that the mother of Messiah might visit her. Elizabeth had been blessed in her old age, but she humbly recognizes that God had given Mary an even greater blessing. Another interesting note is that John the Baptist didn’t recognize Jesus as Messiah until His baptism (Jn. 1:32 f.). Evidently, Elizabeth’s knowledge was not revealed to others until much later.

NOTE: Why a virgin birth?

Although we speak of this as the virgin birth, the miracle was not in the birth, but in the conception.

There are a number of truths embedded in Jesus’ virgin conception.

1) The virgin conception signifies the supernatural character of Jesus. Jesus was not just another prophet in a long line of prophets. Jesus' whole life was bookended by two unambiguously supernatural events (His conception and resurrection). Both of these were embedded in the soil of history and cause us to ask this question: "Who is this that is conceived of a virgin and conquered death by His resurrection?" It highlights his divine origin and supernatural character.

2) The virgin conception is a sign of God's judgment on human nature. No one born of a woman in a natural way could bring salvation to humanity. Everyone naturally born is born in a corrupt, sinful nature. In John 3 Jesus told Nicodemus, "unless a man is born from above he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." Man does not need a touch-up; he needs a new birth. Everyone born naturally is tainted with Adam's sin. Joseph is set aside to signify our need of help beyond this world. When the angel visits Joseph, he tells him to call his name Jesus for "**He** will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). The one born of a virgin will save the people from their sins. Christ is God's invasion into the world that shows that nothing in this world can help us and save us from sin.

3) The virgin conception is a sign that Jesus is a new beginning. When Adam rebelled against God, we sinned in him. He was our representative head. When he fell, we fell with him. Jesus came into the world as a founder of a new humanity. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:22, "in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive." The virgin conception is a signpost to a better world.

When we come to faith we become united to Christ. We are members of a new race (Ro. 5:17-19), and all that He has becomes ours.

4) The virgin conception demonstrates that salvation is a monergistic act of God; that is, God works independently of the human involvement to bring about salvation. Mary is passive. The Holy Spirit would come upon her; He would initiate. There is no human input. Joseph is nowhere to be seen. Mary did not earn God's favor; God's favor was given to her. From the very beginning, the One who would bring salvation was conceived by an Act of God alone. If God didn't act, salvation would not happen. Bloesch says that the virgin conception "graphically shows that salvation comes 'from above' and that the source of our hope and confidence lies in the living God who entered into human history in the historical figure of Jesus Christ." (94).

5) The virgin conception demonstrates that Jesus identifies with us in the frailty of our human nature; His nature was our nature. In His humanity He experienced what we experience. He is "one who in every respect has been tempted as we are" (Heb. 4:15). He learned obedience (Heb. 5:8). He suffered thirst and hunger (Jn. 19:28; Matt. 4:2).

6) The virgin conception marks out Jesus' distinctiveness from us. He is the last Adam; He is the man from heaven. He does not share our sin nature. Although He was sent in the likeness of human flesh (His flesh bore the weaknesses that we do in our unglorified state- Ro. 8:3; #5 above), He remained holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners (Heb. 7:26). He was tempted in all things as we are, yet

without sin (that is, He did not have a sinful nature - Heb. 4:15). As the *sinless* Lamb of God, it is possible for Him to bear our guilt.

7) The virgin conception alone insured both the full deity and full humanity of Jesus. "If God had created Jesus a complete human being in heaven and sent him to earth apart from any human parent, it is difficult to see how he could be truly a man. If God had sent his Son into the world through both a human father and mother, it is difficult to see how he could be truly God. Rather, 'God, in his wisdom, ordained a combination of human and divine influence in the birth of Christ, so that his full humanity would be evident to us from the fact of his ordinary human birth from a human mother, and his full deity would be evident from the fact of his conception in Mary's womb by the powerful work of the Holy Spirit' (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 530)" (Storms, <http://www.samstorms.com/all-articles/post/virgin-birth>).

Thus, the virginal conception is not a peripheral doctrine; it belongs to the heart of the gospel. Al Mohler states, "Christians must face the fact that a denial of the virgin birth is a denial of Jesus as the Christ. The Savior who died for our sins was none other than the baby who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, and born of a virgin. The virgin birth does not stand alone as a biblical doctrine; it is an irreducible part of the biblical revelation about the person and work of Jesus Christ. With it, the Gospel stands or falls" (Can Christians deny the virgin birth? <http://www.albertmohler.com/2007/12/05/can-a-christian-deny-the-virgin-birth-3/>).

Lastly, we see that in every phase of Jesus' life the Holy Spirit is active. He is there at Jesus' baptism. It is the Spirit who drives Him into the wilderness to be tempted. Jesus did not import His divinity into His humanity, rather, as a human par excellence He relies upon the Spirit to fulfill His mission for God. As Hebrews 9:14 says, "through the eternal Spirit [He] offered Himself without blemish to God."