

Matthew 1 and Luke 1—Announcements of Christmas

12/12/20

Overview

Nine months before our Lord's birth, "the angel Gabriel" appears to Mary, tells her that she has been chosen to be the mother of the Messiah, and obtains her permission. When Joseph learns of her condition, "an angel of the Lord" assures him that she has not been impure. The two angelic interviews follow remarkably similar patterns (chart):

- the emotional state of Mary and Joseph
- the appearance of an angel to them
- the angel's comforting words
- the coming son: spiritual conception, birth, naming
- reference to OT scripture predicting the event
- end of the supernatural vision
- obedience of Mary and Joseph

The OT law required "two or three witnesses" (Deut 19:15). The Lord arranges that both Joseph and Mary can bear witness to the divine action in the birth of the child.

These similarities show us the kind of things that the Lord was concerned to bring to the attention of Mary and Joseph as they looked forward to the birth of the Messiah. They have a lesson for us as well, as we remember that birth.

Initial Appearance (Table 1, chart)

Both Mary and Joseph receive an angelic visitor. Both stories deal with the mental state of Mary and Joseph, the angel's appearance, and his words of comfort—though in different order.

Mary, Luke 1:28-30: Appearance, Concern, Comfort

In Mary's case, the fear comes from the appearance of the angel.

Luke 1, Mary	Matthew 1, Joseph
27 ... a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, ... and the virgin's name was Mary.	18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.
(v. 29)	19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just <i>man</i> , and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily.
26 And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, 27 To ... Mary. 28 And the angel came in unto her, and said,	20 But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying,
Hail, <i>thou that art</i> highly favoured, the Lord <i>is</i> with thee: blessed <i>art</i> thou among women. 29 And when she saw <i>him</i> , she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.	(v. 19)
30 And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God.	Joseph , thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: ...

Table 1: Concern, Appearance, Assurance

Gabriel is the angel whom God sent to Daniel twice (8:16; 9:21). The second time he revealed the 70 weeks, telling when the Messiah would come. So it is appropriate for him to appear at the conclusion of this period to announce the birth.

He greets her with three expressions of God's goodness to her:

Highly favored.—*χαριτόω* G5487. She has been the object of God's grace, his unmerited favor. The verb appears only one other place in the NT, Eph 1:6, where it clearly refers to the bestowal of God's unlimited favor (chart):

Eph. 1:5 Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, 6 To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath **made us accepted** *χαριτόω* in the beloved. 7 In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace;

She is chosen by sovereign, unmerited love, not for her inherent spiritual virtue.

The Lord is with thee.—As we have seen in Genesis, this is the recurring encouragement that God gives his people, particularly in times of trial.

Blessed art thou among *ἐν* women.—The point is not that she is more blessed than other women, but that other women will declare her to be blessed, as Elizabeth has done in v. 42, and as Mary explains in v. 48, "all generations shall call me blessed." See note.

Mary is troubled (v. 29) at Gabriel's words.¹ In Jewish culture, it was unseemly for men to address women out of their families (see Gill), and as a modest girl, Mary would be even more on her guard against flattering words. But the angel comforts her (v. 30).

Joseph, Matt 1:19-20: Fear, Concern, Comfort

Joseph is troubled about Mary's condition, and the angel comes to reassure him. (We don't know whether this is also Gabriel, or some other angel.) His concern comes from an internal tension.

- On the one hand, he was "a just man," that is, righteous, and so committed to comply with the law of God, which imposed severe penalties for impurity (Deuteronomy 22).
- On the other, he was compassionate, "not willing to make her a public example" by accusing her publicly and having her stoned (contrast Judah's attitude toward Tamar in Gen 38:24, "bring her forth and let her be burned").

Application to Us

Our fear.—Like Mary and Joseph, we are confronted daily with fears, apprehensions, and trials. In the 60's, student activists used to say, "If you're not angry, you're not paying attention." We might say more broadly, "If you're not afraid, you're not paying attention." Yoda had it right when he told Luke Skywalker, who said he was not afraid, "You will be, Luke. You will be." The world is filled with sin and turmoil, and any sensitive person must feel the strain. You have your battles and trials; I have mind, but none of us is free from the burdens of living in this life.

Divine comfort.—Into our perplexed world, the Lord speaks now, as he did then. In OT times, his messenger was typically an angel. Today, it is more regularly his Holy Spirit, the one the Savior has designated particularly as our comforter. But the message is the same: "Fear not."

¹ Angelic appearances in and of themselves sometimes disturb people (though they may appear as ordinary people, Heb 13:2). Luke places special emphasis on his words.

Announcement of the Birth (Table 2)

Next, the angel explains the birth as the work of the Holy Spirit, names the child “Jesus,” and cites one or more verses of Scripture to explain what is going on.

Luke 1, Mary	Matthew 1, Joseph
	20 ... for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.
31 And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS.	21 And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.
32 He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: 33 And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end. [Nathan in 2 Sam 7]	22 Now all this was (has been) done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet [Isa 7:14], saying, 23 Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.
34 Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? 35 And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.	(v. 20)

Table 2: Announcement of the Birth

Mary, Luke 1:31-37, Name, Scripture, Spirit

The angel’s promise echoes the words of Isa 7:14, “behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son.” LXX for “bear” is the same as “bring forth” here.

The angel names the baby “Jesus,” which means “Jehovah saves,” not “Immanuel” as does Isa 7:14. Throughout the Bible, God’s presence delivers his people from their trials. God is with us, not to keep us company or entertain us, but to protect and save us from our sin and its consequences. Even in Isaiah, the name “Immanuel” assures the nation of deliverance from a hostile coalition. Messiah is Immanuel in order to be Jesus; God is with us in order to save us.

The five statements in vv. 32-33 all recall God’s promise to David in 2 Sam 7 (Table 3, chart). The first two statements emphasize his deity. The last three emphasize his humanity.

He shall be great.—In 2 Sam 7:9, God told David, “I have made thee a great name, like unto the name of the great *men* that *are* in the earth.” But the Psalms, including three ascribed to David, treat this as a title of deity: Psa 48:1; Psa 145:3 (David); 1 Chr 16:25 (David); Psa 86:10 (David); Psa 147:5; 135:5; 96:4; 99:2.²

He shall be called the Son of the Highest.—This title has two elements.

- “The Highest” is a name for God (Psa 18:13; 87:5; Luke 1:35, 76; 6:35), the Hebrew (*elyon*, usually translated “Most High.” This is the name by which Melchizedek identified God to Abraham in Gen 14:18. Thus this is a very formal way of saying, “Son of God.”
- The notion of “Son of God,” in turn, leads to 2 Sam 7:14, where the Lord says to David, “I will be his father, and he shall be my son.”

2 Cf. Simon’s claim in Acts 8:9. Something similar was said of John the Baptist (1:15), but there the angel adds, “in the sight of the Lord,” making him subordinate to the Lord.

2 Sam 7	Luke 1
8 Now therefore so shalt thou say unto my servant David, Thus saith the LORD of hosts, I took thee from the sheepcote, from following the sheep, to be ruler over my people, over Israel: 9 And I was with thee whithersoever thou wentest, and have cut off all thine enemies out of thy sight, and have made thee a great name, like unto the name of the great men that are in the earth.	32 He shall be great ,
14 I will be his father, and he shall be my son .	and shall be called the Son of the Highest :
12 And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever.	and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David :
8 ... to be ruler over my people, over Israel : ... 10 Moreover I will appoint a place for my people Israel , ... 11 And as since the time that I commanded judges <i>to be</i> over my people Israel ,	33 And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever ;
13 ... I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever . 15 But my mercy shall not depart away from him, as I took <i>it</i> from Saul, whom I put away before thee. 16 And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever .	and of his kingdom there shall be no end .

Table 3: Luke 1:32-33 as synopsis of 2 Samuel 7

the throne of his father David.—This title identifies him as son of man, as surely as the previous one makes him the son of God. It also introduces the notion of ruling, which is continued in the next two titles.

He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever.—Here we have the objects and the duration of his rule.

Of his kingdom there shall be no end.—Once again, the duration is emphasized.

Finally, the angel describes to her how this promised birth will come about, not by the ordinary means of generation, but by the work of God’s Holy Spirit.

Joseph, Matt 1:20c-23, Spirit, Name, Scripture

The angel gives Joseph a much-abbreviated version of the message he gave Mary; that her conception is due to the HS, and that the child is to be named Jesus. (He does explain the name to Joseph; Mary received no such explanation).

The KJV translates v. 22 as though it were Matthew’s comment, not what the angel said. But the parallelism with the announcement to Mary suggests that it would make sense for the angel to quote scripture at this point, and examination of the phrase “this was done that it might be fulfilled” in Matthew shows that it can be spoken by the character rather than the narrator (see note). Thus Joseph as well as Mary receives a scriptural confirmation of what the angel is saying. In his case, the reassurance comes from Isa 7, the prophecy of the virgin birth of the Messiah.

The critical point is that a supernatural appearance alone is not sufficient to constrain these saints. The angel may get their attention and comfort their fears, but it is the authority of the word of God that persuades them to obey.

Application to Us

Compare the role of the Holy Spirit today. He gets our attention and comforts us, but the authority for what he says is always confirmed by the scriptures that he calls to our attention.

Obedience (Table 4)

Finally, both Mary and Joseph do as the angel commands them.

Luke 1, Mary	Matthew 1, Joseph
38 And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her.	24 Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him , and took unto him his wife: 25 And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS.

Table 4: Obedience

Luke 1, Mary

The course that the angel is describing is a very serious one. It will appear that Mary has been unfaithful to her betrothal vows. She will be in danger of execution (Deut 22), and the rumors will cling to her (as in John 8:41, when the Jews said to Jesus, “we be not born of fornication,” implying that he was). Yet she yields herself to the divine purpose.

In calling herself “the handmaid of the Lord,” she likely has in mind two OT passages.

One is Joel 2:29, which describes the Messianic age in terms of the coming of God’s Spirit upon the “handmaids” (δούλη).

Joel 2:29 And also upon the servants and upon the **handmaids** in those days will I pour out my spirit.

The prophecy that the angel has given her, from 2 Samuel 7, points to that age, and so she willingly accepts the role he has appointed to her.

The other passage is the only place in the OT where a woman is described as the “handmaid” of the Lord, Hannah’s prayer for a son:

1Sam. 1:11 And she vowed a vow, and said, O LORD of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of **thine handmaid**, and remember me, and not forget **thine handmaid**, but wilt give unto **thine handmaid** a man child, then I will give him unto the LORD all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head.

In answering her prayer, he gave Samuel, the last of the judges, a priest and a prophet, and the one who anointed Israel’s first kings. Now Mary acknowledges that same divine intervention in bringing into the world the Messiah, who is not only priest and prophet, but also king.

The angel departed.—It would have been nice if the angel had stayed by her throughout the time she carried the baby and gave birth. But he departed. God uses spiritual mountaintops to encourage and guide us, not as daily sustenance.

Matthew 1, Joseph

Joseph’s encounter was in a dream. When he awoke, the angel disappeared. Like Mary, he does not have the ongoing presence of the angel to buoy him through the ridicule that must have

surrounded the family. Yet he, like Mary, obeyed.

Application to Us

In our daily walk, the Lord comes to us just as he did to Mary and Joseph.

Focus on the Lord Jesus.—The promises to both Mary and Joseph drew their attention to the Lord Jesus, and his role as Savior. No true heavenly messenger will guide our gaze anywhere other than to him. Preoccupation with the Holy Spirit or with angels is only a sign that one does not understand the function of either of these entities. We need to be reminded that it is the Lord who saves us, not only from our sin but from every other threat that we face every day.

Scriptural reinforcement.—The Holy Spirit may use many different ways to capture our attention, but ultimately he will draw our attention to the Word of God as the authority and persistent reminder of the Lord’s care for us.

End of the mountaintop.—If there are to be highs in our spiritual lives, there must also be times that are more routine, when we do not feel the immediacy of the Spirit’s working. This does not mean that the world has come to an end. The Lord is still with us. We still have the Scriptures that he has brought to our attention to guide us.

Ongoing obedience.—What matters most that we obey what he has revealed to us.

Notes

Luke 1:28 among women

Does the construction with ἐν mean that Mary is *more* blessed than other women?

Judg 5:24 LXX has this construction, but the Hebrew has מְנַשִּׁים, not בְּנָשִׁים. The second clause, with the same Hebrew syntax, is translated ἀπο γυναικῶν, which is more appropriate if the sense is to be blessed more than someone else. Does LXX read בְּנָשִׁים in the first clause?

Judith 14:7 seems a better indication: to be “blessed in X” means that X will bless you. It goes on to describe the reaction that those in whom someone is blessed will have when they hear the name of the blessed one.

Tobit 4:12 offers yet another sense: to be “blessed in X” means to receive blessing in the form of X.

Luke 1:38 handmaid δούλη

Mary probably has in mind the use of this Greek word in the LXX of Joel 2:29, where it translates שִׁפְחָה. (Or she may in fact have spoken in Hebrew, saying שִׁפְחָה directly.) Table 5 shows the correspondences. While the Hebrew word (63x) can be rendered either δούλη (16x, as in Joel 2:29) or παιδίσκη (41x), δούλη clearly dominates when the emphasis is on the relation of the handmaid to someone else (here tabulated as instances of a pronominal suffix).

	שִׁפְחָה	שִׁפְחָה + suff	אִמָּה	אִמָּה + suff	Total
δούλη	16	14	19	19	50
παιδίσκη	41	15	28	13	88
Total	63	28	56	47	

Table 5: MT antecedents of δούλη (Lk 1:38)

Matt 1:22—Who is speaking?

Matthew is not the only one in the gospel who talks about fulfilled scripture. Characters in the gospel do as well (26:54). The precise phrase τοῦτο γέγονεν ἵνα πληρωθῇ / πληρωθῶσιν, which occurs three times in Matthew, is once unambiguously on the Lord's lips (26:56) and could be on the speaker's lips in the other two cases (here and 21:4). It seems best to take it this way here. When it is narrative, the purpose clause ἵνα / ὅπως πληρωθῇ supports a clause in the narrative. Only these three instances stand independent by virtue of the τοῦτο γέγονεν, and it is reasonable to see them as spoken by the characters.

See further discussion in notes to the exposition of Matthew 1 (<https://www.cyber-chapel.org/sermons/matt/notes/Matt1.pdf>). In the original exposition I advocated the view that Matthew is speaking, but I now believe it is the angel.