

# Luke's Account of The Birth of Jesus

Matthew and Luke are the only writers in the New Testament who show an interest in the circumstances of Jesus' birth. Both deal with the sensitive matter that Joseph was not the father of Jesus. They handle this issue in different ways.

Matthew states the situation frankly in his opening chapter. (*Matthew 1:18*) Luke is more circumspect and it is only in the second half of Chapter 3, after describing the activities of John the Baptist, that he explicitly states Joseph is not Jesus' father. (*Luke 3:23*)

The churches regard the angel's announcement to Mary, recorded in the first chapter of Luke, as one of the two pillars of the virgin birth doctrine. (*Luke 1:26-38*) The fact is this passage has nothing to do with "virgin birth" (or more accurately "virginal conception"). The churches have always interpreted Luke's narrative in a way that is totally foreign to the Jewish mind of the first century.

This article analyses what Luke 1:26-38 actually says, at times referring to other sections of the Bible to explain the meanings in these verses.

Quotations are from the New King James Version, unless otherwise stated.

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## The angel Gabriel's announcements

Luke's first chapter includes two announcements by the angel Gabriel, one to Zacharias and the other to Mary. In both announcements Gabriel foretold the birth of a son. The announcements are so remarkably similar, even congruous, that they explain each other. By placing one after the other and structuring them in a similar format, Luke obviously meant the two be read in parallel. (*Luke 1:5-25, 26-38*)

**The first announcement was to Zacharias**, a priest of the division of Abijah. He and his wife Elizabeth were well advanced in years and childless. While Zacharias was serving in the temple the angel Gabriel appeared to him and said:

- Do not be afraid for your prayer is heard.
- Elizabeth will bear you a son.
- You are to call the son John.
- The son would be great in the sight of the Lord, and
- would be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb, and
- would go in the spirit and power of Elijah... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

**The second announcement was to Mary**, a kinswoman of Elizabeth. She was betrothed to Joseph, who was of the House of David. In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her:

- Do not be afraid for you have found favour with God.
- You will conceive and bear a son.
- You are to call the son Jesus.
- The son would be great, and
- would be called the Son of the Highest; and
- God would give him the throne of his father David.

In the points listed it is seen that the angel Gabriel spoke similarly to Zacharias and Mary, the only significant variant being the different roles mapped out for their respective sons.

Nothing Gabriel said to either suggests he was talking about a child conceived other than in the normal way. Certainly Zacharias had only normal conception in mind when he queried the angel's announcement:

18 And Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years."

### Mary's question

Mary too only had normal conception in mind when she responded with a straightforward question.

34 Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not **know** a man?"

At first glance, Mary's question seems odd coming from someone who is soon to be married and no doubt expecting to have children. However, it was for good reason that she was perplexed by Gabriel's message.

What puzzled Mary was Gabriel's statement that this son would be given the throne of David. Mary knew that Joseph, to whom she was betrothed, could not father such a child because he was a descendent of Jeconiah, a line forever barred from sitting upon the throne of David. (*Jeremiah 22:30, Matthew 1:11*)

Mary's question directly addresses this conundrum, and nothing more. This becomes clear when we consult the Greek, in which Luke's gospel was composed, to see what is meant here by the word *know*.

Young's Concordance shows the Greek word used in Mary's question is *ginosko – to know*. Luke uses it on 22 other occasions, for example in Zacharias' question:

18 And Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I **know** this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years."

On these 22 occasions, *ginosko (to know)* never refers to sexual intercourse. Each time it is used in the sense of "learning" or "knowing" about something.

In the case of Zacharias, for example, he did not **know** how this could happen as Elizabeth was past the age of childbearing.

In the case of Mary, she had just been told that her son would be given the throne of his father David. However the person to whom she was betrothed could **not** father such a child, and naturally Mary was perplexed as to how this would come about.

Mary was not challenging what Gabriel had just told her, rather she was seeking further information. Her question could quite reasonably be put like this: *How can this be, since I do not **know** a man who has the credentials to be father of the son you have just told me about?*

It is only in the context of Mary being betrothed to Joseph, but knowing that he could not father the child spoken of, that her question makes sense.<sup>1</sup>

That Mary's question was one of genuine enquiry can also be ascertained by comparing the different treatments handed out to Mary and Zacharias. In response to the announcements, each asked the angel an apparently similar question. Zacharias' question sprang from his unbelief at what he had been told, and for this he was punished. (*Luke 1:20*) If Mary's question had similarly come from unbelief, it is reasonable to expect she also would have received a punishment like Zacharias. But Mary received no such rebuke, indicating that her question was not an expression of disbelief, but a request for more detail.

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussion on this matter, see

Appendix 1: *How Bibles translate Mary's question*

Appendix 2: *The Roman Catholic explanation of Mary's question*

## Gabriel's response to Mary's question

The churches claim that Gabriel's reply to Mary's question describes a virginal conception. It is a sign of how flimsy the arguments for virgin birth are when one of the two main pillars supposedly supporting the virgin birth doctrine is found not in the announcement to Mary, but merely in the response to her question. (*Luke 1:35-37*)

Even so, the angel's reply to Mary would **not** have conveyed the idea of a virginal conception to her, or to the Hebrew people of the Bible. For today's reader, the best way to understand the angel's reply is to compare each part of the reply with similar situations or words used elsewhere in the Bible.

### Firstly, what is meant by the Holy Spirit will come upon someone?

35 And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you..."

The terms *Spirit of God* and *Holy Spirit* occur in both the Old and New Testaments. The Hebrew and Greek words for *spirit*, as used in these terms, are *ruach* and *pneuma* respectively. Both words can be translated as "wind" or "breath". *Spirit of God* and *Holy Spirit* is the same thing. The Holy Spirit is the spirit of God and is holy, because it is of God. Both terms denote the power or animating spirit of God.

The Holy Spirit figures prominently in the first three chapters of Luke's gospel. At separate times, John, Elizabeth and Zacharias were all "filled with" the Holy Spirit, (*Luke 1:15, 41, 67*) while the Holy Spirit was "upon" Mary, Simeon and Jesus. (*Luke 1:35, 2:25, 3:22*) It means the spirit of God was with these six persons at these times.

Elsewhere in the New Testament it is recorded that the Holy Spirit came "upon" the apostles and others. (*Acts 1:8, 10:44, 11:15, 19:6, 1Peter 4:14*) The same concept is expressed frequently in the Old Testament where it is recorded how the Spirit of God came "upon" the prophets, Judges and others. (*Numbers 11:17-29, Judges 3:10, 6:34, 11:29, 14:6, 15:14, 1Samuel 10:10, 2Chronicles 15:1, 20:14, 24:20, etc.*) Clearly, the Holy Spirit, that is the spirit of God, "coming upon someone" is not describing the act of impregnation.

When the Bible speaks of God's role in a person's conception, it is not suggesting anything other than normal conception. These examples from the Old Testament illustrate this:

- Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: "**Before I formed you in the womb** I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; And I ordained you a prophet to the nations." (*Jeremiah 1:4-5*)
- So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife; and when he went in to her, **the LORD gave her conception**, and she bore a son. (*Ruth 4:13*)
- And **the LORD visited Hannah, so that she conceived** and bore three sons and two daughters. (*1Samuel 2:21*)
- And **the LORD visited Sarah** as He had said, and **the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived** and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. (*Genesis 21:1-2*)
- Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, and said, "**I have gotten a man from the LORD.**" (*Genesis 4:1*)
- And **the Angel of the LORD appeared to the woman** and said to her, "Indeed now, you are barren and have borne no children, but **you shall conceive and bear a son.**" (*Judges 13:3*)
- **The Spirit of God has made me**, And the breath of the Almighty gives me life. (*Job 33:4*)

Where the Bible says Hannah and others conceived through God's intervention, no one takes this to imply virginal conception. Why should it be any different in Mary's case?

## What did Gabriel mean by the terms *Holy One* and *Son of God*?

35 ... therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.

### *holy one*

The term *holy one* applies to others besides Jesus. As Luke tells us in his next chapter, it is written in the Law that **every male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord**. Jesus was the first-born, and was called holy to the Lord according to the Law. (*Luke 2:23*)

### *son of God*

In the Bible *son of God* denotes an ethical or special relationship between God and man, not a biological relationship. It has the same meaning throughout the Bible. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* explains the use of the term in the Old Testament:

The title "son of God" was applied in the Old Testament to persons having any special relationship with God... In a similar manner it was given to Israelites (Deut., xiv, 1); and of Israel, as a nation, we read: "And thou shalt say to him: Thus saith the Lord: **Israel is my son, my firstborn**. I have said to thee: Let **my son** go, that he may serve me" (Ex., iv, 22 sq.)

(Article: *Son of God*)

Gabriel did not say that Jesus would be the *Son of God*, but that he would be **called** the *Son of God* (same as v.32, "*will be called the Son of the Highest*"). This prediction was not fulfilled by Jesus' birth, but some thirty years later by Nathanael when he **called** Jesus the *Son of God*. Nathanael said this while believing Jesus was a mortal man, the son of Joseph. (*John 1:45, 49*)

Interestingly Jesus used similar words: "*Blessed are the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God.*" (*Matthew 5:9*)

## What did Gabriel mean by "for with God nothing will be impossible"?

36 Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren.

37 For with God nothing will be impossible."

Some think that the words "*for with God nothing will be impossible*" allude to a virginal conception. In fact the words refer as much to Elizabeth as they do to Mary. Gabriel said Elizabeth, although old and called barren, had conceived and would soon have a child, *for with God nothing is impossible*. It is never suggested that Elizabeth had conceived other than in the normal way.

In pointing to the example of Elizabeth, Gabriel was assuring Mary that what he had told her would eventuate. Just as God had overseen what had happened to Elizabeth, so too God would ensure what had been told to Mary would come to pass.

Mary would have a son who would be eligible to sit upon the throne of David. This would come about in spite of her present circumstances, *for with God nothing is impossible*.

**Note:** The word translated "*conceive*" is from the Greek word "*sullambano*" and means "*to receive seed*". According to Young's Concordance, this Greek word is used in relation to both Elizabeth and Mary. (*Luke 1:24, 36, and 1:31, 2:21*)

## **Gabriel's message had nothing to do with a virginal conception**

The angel Gabriel told Mary she would have a child who would be given the throne of David.<sup>1</sup>

Mary was betrothed to Joseph, who was of the House of David.

But, although of the House of David, Joseph's line could never ascend the Davidic throne. God had expressly forbidden it.

It was this knowledge about Joseph that prompted Mary's question. Mary was asking how this could come about since Joseph could not father such a child as the angel had described.

The angel assured Mary that what God had decreed would come to pass, just as it had with her kinswoman, Elizabeth. This assurance was to do with the son she would bear, not the manner of his conception.<sup>2</sup>

The angel spoke to Mary about a normal conception and a normal child. When the same or similar words are used in the Bible about other people, theologians do not assume they are describing a virginal conception or divinity. It is only when the words are applied to Jesus that theologians, in order to prop up their virgin birth story, give them a unique interpretation.

*T. Crosthwaite*  
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<sup>1</sup> The angel told Mary that her son (Jesus) would be given the throne of his father David, and he would reign over the house of Jacob forever. (*Luke 1:32-33*)

As this is an earthly throne, and there has been no throne in Judah since about 586 BC, this prediction is as yet unfulfilled.

The New Testament points to a future fulfilment. (*Acts 1:6-7, 2:29-30*)

<sup>2</sup> Luke 3:23 names the father of Jesus, who was a descendant of David, and from a line eligible to sit upon the throne of David. See *The Two Genealogies in the New Testament*.

## Appendix 1

### How Bibles translate Mary's question

34 Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?"

Mary's question to Gabriel, as explained earlier, was due to the fact that Joseph could not father the child that she had just been told she would bear. How can this be, she was asking Gabriel, when I do not know a man who could be the father of this son you have just told me about?

Nonetheless, churches have explained Mary's question in ways to accommodate the virgin birth story. Despite the variety of their explanations, generally they claim that Mary had in mind her carnal or marital state when she asked her question.

Some Bibles translate Mary's question literally. However, the translators of many other Bibles have taken it upon themselves to interpret "*I do not know a man*" in a way that supports the churches' explanations, and in doing so distort both the words and meaning of the question. Some examples of these translations are given below.

Keep in mind that at the time Mary was betrothed to Joseph.

Then Mary said to the angel, 'How can this happen? I have no husband.'<sup>i</sup>

Mary said to the angel, "I am a virgin. How, then, can this be?"<sup>ii</sup>

Mary said to the angel, 'But how can this come about, since I am a virgin?'<sup>iii</sup>

But Mary said to the angel: "How is this to be, since I am having no intercourse with a man?"<sup>iv</sup>

Mary said to the angel, "But how? I've never slept with a man?"<sup>v</sup>

Mary asked the angel, "But how can I have a baby? I am a virgin."<sup>vi</sup>

These renderings could more accurately be called "interpretations", rather than "translations", of the original words.

Although no doubt unintentional, a consequence of these "interpretations" is that they present Mary as being either very naïve or dim-witted. They have her saying that because she is **presently** chaste or unmarried, she cannot understand how at some **future** time she could have a child.

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<sup>i</sup> Worldwide English (New Testament), *also see* Amplified Bible, Contemporary English Version, Moffatt, The New English Bible (1961 edition), Revised Standard Version, Weymouth, Young's Literal Translation

<sup>ii</sup> Good News Bible, *also see* English Standard Version, New American Standard Bible, New English Bible (1970 edition), New International Version, New Revised Standard Version, The Revised English Bible

<sup>iii</sup> The Jerusalem Bible, *also see* New Century Version

<sup>iv</sup> New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures, *also see* The New American Bible, Holman Christian Standard Bible, The New Jerusalem Bible

<sup>v</sup> The Message, *also see* New Life Version

<sup>vi</sup> New Living Translation, *also see* The Living Bible (Illustrated Catholic Edition)

## Appendix 2

### The Roman Catholic explanation of Mary's question

Roman Catholic scholars, from Augustine and Aquinas to Newman and Knox, all maintain that Mary and Joseph had made a pact of perpetual virginity, and this was the reason for Mary's question to the angel. (How can I have a child when I intend to remain a virgin?)

For the Jews, children were a blessing of God and to be childless a reproach. The proposition that a betrothed Jewish couple had made a pact to permanently refrain from sexual relations and to be childless, as an act of piety, is so ridiculous that it is an offence to common sense.

Yet, in order to explain Mary's question, this is the proposition put forward by the scholars of the Roman Catholic Church. One of the most esteemed of their theologians of recent centuries, Cardinal Newman, wrote:

“Though all Jewish women in each successive age had been hoping to be the Mother of the Christ, so that marriage was honourable among them, childlessness a reproach, Mary alone had put aside the desire and the thought of so great a dignity; she who was to bear the Christ gave no welcome to the great announcement that she was to bear him, and why did she act thus towards it? Because she had been inspired, the first of womankind, to dedicate her virginity to God, and she did not welcome a privilege which seemed to involve a forfeiture of her vow. How shall this be, she asked, seeing that I am to live separate from man?”

*The Glories of Mary for the Sake of her Son*, quoted in *The Teaching of the Catholic Church: A Summary of Catholic Doctrine arranged and edited by Monsignor Canon George D. Smith, D.D., Ph.D.*, Fourth Revised Edition, p 519

An authoritative Roman Catholic Commentary states the same proposition thus:

“... the reason she gives for her question would be meaningless unless it supposes, as Catholic tradition holds, that she had a previous compact with Joseph about the observance of virginity. If it be objected that such a thing would be at complete variance with accepted Jewish thought, we answer first that the Incarnation and all its circumstances were also at variance with prevailing Jewish Messianism and thought.”

*A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture: Commentary on St Luke, 748d*,  
First published February 1953

The Roman Catholic position on Mary's question is based on the assumption that Mary was referring to her carnal state and intentions in this regard when she said, “*I do not know a man*”.