

Theological reflection on the annunciation

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The text of the Annunciation and Mary's response is found in Luke 1:26-55.

Luke describes the context for the visit of the angel. He sets out the timing, the location and the relationship of Joseph to Mary - verses 26 and 27. She is about to be married and contract-bound to Joseph. Joseph is a 'righteous man' and is of the House of David. This statement shows that he is of 'sympathetic relationship' to God's plans. The visit is in Nazareth which is of no political or religious significance and is noted for that reason. Once this is all established, the focus is turned on Mary, who is visited by the angel who addresses her as; 'the favoured one'. There are no references to or suggestions of the angel 'lying with' or 'having sex with' Mary.

What follows is Mary's story. It is not a meek and weak Mary whom the angel meets that day - the favoured one is 'perturbed' and deep thinking at the nature and content of the angel's greeting. Luke allows time in this account to offer a pen portrait of Mary. She is a rational and thinking person who intends to understand the full extent of the situation. Mary is shown as strong in thought and spirit. Her character is 'full of grace' and there is evidence of wisdom in her attitude - see Luke 1: 29-34.

The angel may have arrived unannounced, but the role of host is still in Mary's hands. Her initial response is to require further understanding about the greeting. The angel obliges by giving the full message in response to Mary's wondering. Verses 30-33 contain the annunciation. The way we speak of or look at the annunciation and its portrayal must always bear in mind the eternal consequences of the interaction:

- If God acts in brutality towards the one who is 'full of grace', then the doctrine of Salvation is diminished as she is eternally wounded by the Eternal One.
- If Mary's consent is not needed for the arrival of the Saviour, then she becomes a puppet rather than a person who is 'made in the image of God'.

It is not possible to believe that God or God's angel is rapacious or abusive in any way and to hold an orthodox Trinitarian doctrine.

The portrayal of the annunciation by Luke avoids any tendency towards viewing Mary as having her free will taken from her. This is important in Arminian or Methodist theology as well as in a doctrine of Salvation.



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Looking at *Annunciation* with an eye to the doctrine of free will, we see the hope of God's messenger - the angel - who knows the full depth of the character of Mary. There is hope that she might add her consent to the annunciation. This intersection of divine plan and human consent adds further weight to the miracle of the Incarnation. God waits on Mary's response.

The miracle of Jesus coming into the world as Saviour for all must include Mary's salvation and it must be an offer of hope for her too, otherwise it fails in purpose and the doctrine falls.

Mary is not diminished but respected in her questioning, both of the form of greeting and the annunciation in verses 31-33. There are difficulties with the wording of Mary's position in relation to the incarnation, see verses 31-2; you have found favour with God. 31 And now, you will... (NRSV) Which itself is an improvement on the bald 'you will' of the NIV.

Mary's response is telling; she is not awestruck or babbling in fear. Verse 34 poses a question and a fact. Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' Mary knows that babies are the result of sexual intercourse. She has not done that. Her response is a challenge to the angel, but the narrative's tenor is not of upset or of anger in Mary's denial of having had sex. She is full of grace and is trustworthy. Mary's response is one of trust and agreement. Mary will trust the words of the angel and verbally agrees to their being worked out in her life. Mary's visit to Elizabeth gives her the earthly confidence and family support in the strange times. Her witness or the story that Mary will tell about her own pregnancy is found in what has come to be known as the Magnificat.

Bibliography

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