

BORN  
*for our*  
SALVATION



BORN  
*for our*  
SALVATION

*the nativity and childhood of Jesus Christ*

Martyn McGeown



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Reformed Free Publishing Association  
1894 Georgetown Center Drive  
Jenison, Michigan 49428  
616-457-5970  
rfpa.org  
mail@rfpa.org

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*To my dear wife, Larisa,  
a loving companion and helpmeet in my work.*



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## INTRODUCTION

The greatest miracle in history is unquestionably the incarnation of the Son of God. Every Christian delights in the beautiful, familiar, and comforting history of the birth of Jesus Christ. Even the world has some idea of the events surrounding Christ's birth that are recorded in the gospels according to Matthew and Luke. Mary and Joseph, the angels, the shepherds, and the wise men with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh strike a chord with them. Although the Christmas season is associated with rank materialism, covetousness, and even idolatry, the story of the "child of Bethlehem" is familiar.

Of the four evangelists, only Matthew and Luke describe the circumstances of the birth and early childhood of Jesus Christ. Mark ignores Christ's childhood altogether, beginning his account with the ministry of John the Baptist; while John begins with a sublime prologue revealing Jesus as the divine, eternally preexistent word or *logos* of God, who is both with God and is God (John 1:1). Matthew describes the role of Joseph as the spouse of Mary and adoptive father of Jesus, and he records Herod's murderous enmity against the Christ child and the visit of the wise men from the East, while he gives the actual birth only a passing mention. Luke, on the other hand, describes Christ's birth in Bethlehem, the city of David, and introduces us to his mother Mary, to Gabriel the announcing angel, to lowly shepherds and the glorious angelic host, and to Simeon and Anna in the temple. Moreover, only Luke provides the enquiring reader

with a snapshot of Jesus' childhood, relating the visit of the twelve-year-old Jesus to Jerusalem when he accompanies his family to the holy city to celebrate the Passover feast.

As exciting as the narrative in Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2 is, the main focus of scripture—and therefore of this book—is Jesus Christ. He alone is the Son of God made flesh; he alone is the savior of sinners; and he alone is the redeemer of God's elect. The biblical history is not a sentimental story about the birth of the “little Lord Jesus,” but it describes the first step of Christ's humiliation, which is his lowly birth. This is the first step that Jesus took in our salvation and the first step that would lead to his death on the cross. Since Jesus did not come to be ministered unto but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28), it is fitting that his birth be lowly in Bethlehem's stable.



## GABRIEL'S ANNUNCIATION TO MARY

26. And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth,
27. To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.
28. And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.
29. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.
30. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God.
31. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS.
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.  
(Luke 1:26–33)

Six months before the beginning of the events recorded in the nativity story proper is the announcement of the coming of the forerunner of the Messiah. While I do

not intend to treat that history in detail in this book, a few words about it are in order before we begin.

At the end of the Old Testament the last prophet, Malachi, reveals God's gracious promise to his people: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD" (Mal. 4:5). After Malachi a gloomy period, the intertestamentary period or the four hundred years of darkness, was ushered in. During that time, no new prophets arose in Israel. Heaven was silent. The nation of Israel was a plaything of the nations, acting as a buffer zone between competing regimes: first Persia; then Greece; then Egypt and Syria; and finally Rome. Dreadful persecution ravaged the people of God especially during the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (215–164 BC). The land of Israel was enveloped in thick darkness politically and religiously with the rise of the sects of the Pharisees and Sadducees. At the time of the history recorded in the early chapters of Matthew and Luke, therefore, God's people had almost given up hope that the promised Messiah and his promised salvation would come.

And yet a godly remnant remained who still clung in faith to the promises of God.

God broke the silence when the angel Gabriel suddenly appeared to an elderly priest called Zacharias. The angel informed Zacharias that his barren wife Elizabeth would have a son, who would be the forerunner to the Messiah: "He shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17). The child, of course, was John the Baptist, who prepared the people for the coming of Jesus and pointed to him when he came. John was born some six months before Jesus, just as the angel Gabriel had promised.

With the birth of the forerunner, the one who prepares the way for a great king, the birth of the Messiah himself could not be far away. No wonder that Zacharias, John's father, rejoices so vehemently: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people, and hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David" (vv. 68–69). The "horn of salvation" is not John but the Messiah, whom we know as Jesus. As Zacharias held baby John in his arms, he saw Jesus coming behind him. And he rejoiced!

Some six months after his announcement to Zacharias, the angel Gabriel was commissioned on another holy errand, this time not to visit an aged priest, but to visit a young virgin in Nazareth. Her name was Mary, and it is to Gabriel's annunciation—or announcement—that we turn as we begin our study of the "nativity story."

## THE HUMBLE RECIPIENT

The Bible's nativity story is a tale of contrasts: in this text we see the contrast between Gabriel and Mary. Gabriel is a mighty angel of God, for in verse 19 he had declared to Zacharias, "I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God." Gabriel appears in the Bible especially as God's messenger. When God has an important message to relate, especially in the New Testament, he sends Gabriel. Thus Gabriel appears in the temple to announce the birth of John the Baptist. Later, the angel, most likely Gabriel, appears to Joseph to command him to take Mary for his wife. And it is likely Gabriel who appears over Bethlehem's hills to announce Christ's birth to the shepherds.

Gabriel is therefore favored with making the most

wonderful announcement the world has ever heard: the long-awaited Savior is to be born. We can well imagine Gabriel standing in the presence of God—in the presence of the God whom he loved, adored, and worshiped. Long had Gabriel pondered the ways of God, for 1 Peter 1:12 reveals that the angels “desire to look into” the things of salvation. Suddenly, Gabriel receives a commission from the Almighty. First, Gabriel must make an announcement to Zacharias the priest, and then, six months later, Gabriel must make an announcement to Mary.

To whom would you have expected the angel Gabriel to be sent? Perhaps Gabriel will wing his way to a noblewoman; perhaps to a princess; perhaps to a queen; at the very least, to a prominent, rich, Jewish family. Contrary to our expectations, Gabriel is sent to Mary.

About this Mary we learn several things. First, Mary was a “virgin” (Luke 1:27), which means that Mary was a young woman of marriageable age. Mary may even have been a teenager, for women married early in those days. More than that, Mary was an espoused virgin. Espousal is not the same as our custom of engagement. Espousal among the Jews was as legally binding as marriage, for in espousal a man and woman exchanged vows publicly and were considered man and wife. Any unfaithfulness during espousal was therefore viewed as and treated as adultery.

In addition, Mary was also actually a virgin or a virgin indeed, that is, Mary and Joseph had not yet consummated their marriage. She was promised to him, and he was promised to her, but as Matthew 1:18 puts it, they had not yet “come together.” The custom was that an espoused woman remained with her parents until her husband came to receive her some weeks or months after the espousals.

Second, Mary was poor. Mary was not a noblewoman, living in luxury in a palace, waited on by servants. We do not know what she was doing when Gabriel arrived, but we can imagine that Mary was engaged in some household chore. Mary's prospects of escaping poverty were not good, for she was not espoused to a prosperous nobleman, but to a man called Joseph, the village carpenter. Any children she and Joseph might have would certainly be loved, but they would not belong to the upper echelons of society.

Besides this, Mary's location was obscure. Gabriel's first assignment had been to Zacharias in the temple in Jerusalem, but now Gabriel is assigned to go to Nazareth, which was an obscure village in Galilee. No grandeur was connected to Nazareth; nothing important had ever happened there; and it was not even mentioned in the Old Testament. Gabriel is not even sent to Bethlehem, never mind Jerusalem. At least Bethlehem had some significance in its connection to David, but, as Nathaniel later expresses it in John 1:46, "Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?"

This young, poor, obscure virgin was God's chosen vessel, for she was "of the house of David" (Luke 1:27), a house or royal family line that ended in Mary of Nazareth. God had promised that the Messiah would come from David's family. Generations of the sons of David had sat upon the royal throne. From Solomon all the way to Zedekiah God had kept his promise: "I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom" (2 Sam. 7:12). The Babylonian captivity had brought an end to the kingdom of David, but God's promise still stood: "David shall never want [lack] a man to sit upon the throne of the house of Israel" (Jer. 33:17). Even after the captivity, God preserved the royal line of David in

the earth, for Zerubbabel, a descendant of David, led the captives home in response to the divinely inspired decree of Cyrus recorded in Ezra 1.

Nevertheless, that royal line had fallen upon hard times, for although the descendants of David survived, they had no throne on which to sit. Both Joseph and Mary were of the house of David, but they could not claim the throne, for on it sat a wicked Edomite king called Herod. And behind Herod stood the mighty Roman emperor, by whose permission Herod ruled over the land of Israel. As we shall see, Herod did not take kindly to perceived rivals or usurpers to his throne.

But God had promised that in the latter days “there [would] come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch [would] grow out of his roots” (Isa. 11:1) and that the Messiah would grow up “as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground” (53:2). Although Mary, as a pious, believing Jewess, looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, and although she longed for it, little did she imagine that *she* had been chosen to be the mother of the Messiah! Surely God could find a worthier home with more earthly promise and potential than a virgin espoused to Joseph in Nazareth!

Mary’s circumstances were humble, and she was humble in her own estimation. We see that in her reaction, for she can hardly imagine that the angel would speak thus to her. “Who am I,” we might paraphrase her reaction, “that an angel should come to me?” That is always the reaction of God’s people to angels in scripture: amazement at God’s condescension mixed with fear at being in the presence of a heavenly messenger. Mary did not boast of her encounter with Gabriel: she probably did not tell anyone at that time, because, after all, who would have believed her? Such



humility is the necessary, gracious preparation for anyone to receive the word of God.

God does not bring his word to proud, haughty, self-sufficient souls. When we come to hear the word, we must receive it as Mary did: who am I that God should speak to me the words of the gospel of Christ? That kind of demeanor is impossible for sinners. In Mary, it was a fruit of God's grace, and in us, it must also be a fruit of divine grace.

### THE UNEXPECTED SALUTATION

As Gabriel enters the house—we presume that Mary was home, that she was alone, and that he entered through the doorway or appeared miraculously in the room—he greets her. The greeting or salutation of the angel has suffered corruption at the hands of the Roman Catholic Church, for they have transformed a simple salutation into a prayer to Mary called “Hail Mary” or the “Ave Maria.” Such a prayer is popularly recited during the rosary.

Contrary to the practice of Rome, we notice that the word “Hail” in Luke 1:28 is not a form of worship, nor even a salutation reserved for royal personages, but that it is a common greeting. Gabriel does not worship, adore, or fall prostrate before Mary, nor does he encourage anyone else to do so. The word “Hail” is simply an expression of wellbeing or even an expression of joy. Judas greets Jesus with “Hail” before he kisses him in Matthew 26:49; Jesus greets certain believing women after his resurrection with “Hail” in Matthew 28:9; James greets the church in James 1:1 with the same expression; and an unbelieving soldier writes to the governor with the same word in Acts 23:26.

Never in scripture is “Hail” used as a prayer, and never

in scripture is prayer addressed to anyone except to God. “The Lord is with thee” (Luke 1:28) is simply an expression of God’s favor. God is said to be “with” his people when he blesses them in covenantal fellowship. The Lord could—and does—greet any of his believing people in this way.

The circumstances of Mary’s life might have seemed difficult, but the angel assures her that the Lord, Jehovah, in his power and grace, is with her, to bless her, to protect her, and to save her. These words encouraged Mary that the angel had come with a gracious purpose, and how she would have to cling to those words in the months ahead, for the news she was about to receive was nothing short of earth-shattering.

The two other controversial phrases used in the Roman Catholic Church’s “Hail Mary” prayer require further explanation. Gabriel says, “Thou that art highly favoured” (v. 28). The Roman Catholic Church, following the Latin Vulgate translation, renders this expression as “full of grace.” By “full of grace” Rome means several things: first, Mary is so full of grace that she has no sin. By a singular grace, argues Rome, Mary has been preserved from the stain of original sin; hence she is called “immaculate.” Second, Mary is so full of grace that she is a fountain of grace for others. Sinners ought to go to her for grace and mercy in time of need. Third, Mary is uniquely graced, for no one has as much grace as she does. Rome teaches that there is a treasury of grace in heaven made up of the merits of Christ, Mary, and the saints. About Mary, Rome declares, “This treasury includes the prayers and good works of the Blessed Virgin Mary. They are truly immense, unfathomable and even pristine in their value before God.”<sup>1</sup>

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1 *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 1477 (Dublin, Ireland: Veritas, 1994), 332.

Thus Rome builds a superstructure of Mariolatry, the idolatrous veneration of Mary, on one word from the angel Gabriel.

But that is not what the phrase means. A better translation is “O favored one” or “O graciously accepted one.” The meaning is simply this: Mary is the recipient of grace. In fact, all Christians are “highly favored” (or graced). Grace, remember, is God’s favor, which, when it comes to sinners, is undeserved, unmerited favor. The same verb, albeit in a different grammatical form, is employed in Ephesians 1:6 (“accepted in the beloved”), where the reference is to all saints, elect in Christ Jesus.

Gabriel adds, “Blessed art thou among women” (Luke 1:28). The question is not whether Mary is blessed or not, for she most certainly is. The question is, *in what* is she blessed? Is she blessed by being the mediatrix of all graces, is she blessed by being the queen of heaven, is she blessed by being the immaculate, ever-virgin fountain of salvation, as Rome insists? No, of course not. She is blessed among women because she, in distinction from all other women, and merely out of God’s unconditional grace, has been chosen and set apart to be the mother of the Messiah. All Christians are recipients of grace, and all Christians are blessed, but only Mary is the mother of Jesus Christ, a task and a privilege given only to her. Incidentally, when in a burst of enthusiasm a Jewish woman extolled the blessedness of Mary, Jesus reminded her of true blessedness: “It came to pass, as he spake these things, a certain woman of the company lifted up her voice, and said unto him, Blessed is the womb that bare thee, and the paps which thou hast sucked. But he said, Yea rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it” (11:27–28).

However, before Gabriel gives the explanation for his peculiar greeting, Mary is troubled. She was not troubled so much at the appearance of the angel, although, of course, that surprised her greatly, but she was troubled at the angel's words. In Luke 1:29, we read, "She was troubled *at his saying*" (emphasis added).

The trouble comes from the sudden shock of these words. One moment, she had been occupied with some mundane task, and now an angel stands before her and pronounces her "blessed." She is troubled at the one bringing the words, for how incongruous and how unexpected that an angel would speak to her and say, "Blessed." How could she be "blessed"? Moreover, she is troubled at the setting of the angel's words. Here, in her humble home, the angel comes with such words—"hail," "highly favored," and "blessed," even "blessed among women."

She responds as mortals usually do when confronted with an angel: she fears. Some people think that to meet an angel would be the "coolest, neatest" thing ever. It is well for us that we do not meet with angels because the experience is terrifying. We should be happy that God has wrapped his word in a less intimidating package. He gives us a minister of flesh and blood, or an earthen vessel (2 Cor. 4:7), to explain the scriptures.

Mary feared because she had no idea what the angel meant, for what *could* he mean? Luke 1:29 describes her state of mind: "She...cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be." She brought together in her mind different threads of thought and tried to make sense of them all. Her mind was terribly confused, as it well might be, given the circumstances.

She probably thought about her past, about her life,

about her sins, about her future, about God's promises, and she wondered, "How does this fit? How does it fit *with me*?" This deliberation did not continue for very long, because almost immediately Gabriel interrupts her thoughts to bring his wonderful news.

### THE ROYAL SON

Gabriel's news is similar to the news he brought to Zacharias, for it concerns a "son" (v. 31). Mary was espoused to Joseph; therefore, the news that she would have a son was not all that surprising. Undoubtedly, Mary and Joseph hoped to have children. When Gabriel says, "Thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son" (v. 31), his tidings were not in themselves unusual. Mary was not in the same position as Elizabeth had been. Unlike her cousin, Mary was not old, barren, and past childbearing. She was a young, espoused virgin. The issue was not that she would have a son, but the issue was the identity of the son.

Gabriel continues: "[Thou] shalt call his name JESUS" (v. 31). That is not unusual either. There were many little boys called Jesus in Israel, because Jesus is simply the Greek equivalent of Joshua. It is unusual—and a sign of some significance—for an *angel* to give the name to a child before his birth. Gabriel will repeat that name to Joseph later and give a further explanation of the name's meaning (Matt. 1:21). The fact that an angel came to announce the conception of her son would make Mary imagine that there is something special about him, but Gabriel has not finished his explanation and message.

Next, Gabriel describes the greatness of Mary's son: "He shall be great" (Luke 1:32). When we think of "great,"

we imagine a military commander, a general, or an artistic genius (a composer, a sculptor, or an award-winning author). But how could that be, for Jesus would not be born into a great family. He would not have access to the great schools, and he would not mix with the great and the good of society. He would live and grow up in a cultural backwater called Nazareth; therefore, his parents would not be able to promote him to high honors.

But the greatness of Mary's son is spiritual: "He...shall be called the Son of the Highest" (v. 32). "The Highest," of course, refers to God, for God is often called "the Highest" or "the Most High" in scripture, which is a reference to his majesty and transcendent glory. This "Son," then, would not only be the son of Mary, but he would also be (and already was, and always is) the Son of God. Gabriel knew this one, for this one is the eternal, only begotten Son of God, the second person of the holy Trinity, whom all heaven adores.

At this point, Mary's eyes must have been widening with utter amazement and wonder, and Gabriel must have been becoming more and more excited. "I, Mary of Nazareth, am going to give birth to the Son of the Highest?" "My son, whom I will conceive in my womb, will be the Son of Yahweh?" "I, Mary of Nazareth, daughter of poor parents, espoused wife of a poor Nazarene carpenter, of all the women in the world and in the history of God's covenant, have been chosen to bear the Messiah?" It is not likely that Mary immediately understood the import of Gabriel's words, but she would begin to grasp the meaning later.

Yes, Mary—and there is more. In this son, thy son, the Son of the Highest, all the promises to David shall be fulfilled. We must understand that this son—Jesus—is fully

human and fully divine. He is fully divine: “He...shall be called Son of the Highest” (v. 32). That means that as Jehovah is eternal, so this Son is eternal, for he has all the same attributes as God. The Son is of the same essence with the Father, and he has the same power and glory as the Father.

Before Gabriel came to Nazareth to announce this news to Mary, Gabriel knew the Son of God, for he served him, he worshiped him, and he adored him. To use the language of Paul, this Jesus is “in the form of God” and “equal with God” (Phil. 2:6), or to use the language of John, this one, “the Word,” “was with God” and “was God” (John 1:1). Therefore, for Gabriel too, the news that he brings to Mary is a wonder—a marvel. For this “Son of the Highest” was about to become human: he would be “made flesh, and [dwell] among us” (v. 14); he would be “made of a woman, made under the law” (Gal. 4:4); and he would make “himself of no reputation, and [would take] upon him the form of a servant, and [would be] made in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:7). The Son of the Highest is fully divine, but he would become also fully human, and as a human he would sit on David’s throne: “The Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David” (Luke 1:32).

The Son has a father, who is David, that is, his father according to the flesh (Rom. 1:3). But David is not the Highest, for God alone is this Son’s eternal Father within the Godhead. Therefore, this Jesus is both the Son of God and the son of David; he is both the Son of God and the son of Mary. But how can a poor virgin of Nazareth fathom the depths of that? No wonder she marveled, and well might we marvel at these words, although they are familiar to us!

To your son, who is God’s Son, says Gabriel, God will give the throne of David, on which he will sit forever, ruling

over the house of Jacob. This was the Messianic promise of salvation set forth in the Old Testament, and many of those prophecies were familiar to Mary. Consider Isaiah 9:6–7, “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.” Or consider Daniel 7:13–14:

13. I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him.
14. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.

This Son, born of Mary, would accomplish what neither David, nor Solomon, nor any of his sons had accomplished—an everlasting kingdom, a kingdom without successors, and a kingdom that would never fall because it is God’s kingdom. But where is that kingdom, and what is that throne? Clearly, that kingdom and throne are not on the earth, because Jesus never sat on David’s earthly throne in Jerusalem. He died while one of the ungodly Herods, the puppet kings of the Roman Empire, occupied David’s earthly throne.

Nor is it the case that Jesus will sit upon that throne sometime in our future. Jesus never came to set up such a kingdom, as he himself explained. Indeed, Peter declares this about Jesus on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:30–33:



30. Therefore being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne;
31. He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption.
32. This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses.
33. Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear.

Jesus Christ is on David's throne now: that throne is in heaven. All who belong to him and believe in him are citizens of his heavenly, spiritual, everlasting, blessed kingdom.

But there is one aspect of the truth that Gabriel did not explain to Mary because she would not have understood it and because she was not ready to face it. Later, in Luke 2:35, Simeon will hint at it: "A sword shall pierce through thy own soul also." Mary heard about the greatness, the divinity, and the humanity of her son, but she did not yet know about his suffering and death. But we know, for it is in his suffering and death that our salvation lies. Jesus is born of a young, poor, humble, obscure virgin, so that he can die. It is the first step along a painful path that leads to the cross.

O come let us adore him, Christ Jesus our Lord!