

## **Item #28 (The First Christians)**

This was Entry #32 on my previous website.

### *Introduction*

The origins of Christianity are hidden in the eternal depths of God. It was his “yes” outside of time that set in motion the events which believers now know as the “incarnation”. With Christ comes Christianity, but only to the extent that there are Christians who answer with their free “yes” the eternal “yes” of God made manifest in the Word made flesh.

The present article will attempt to sketch something of the adventure of these first Christians, two in number, with reliance on the gospel accounts about Mary and Joseph in Luke and Matthew. A “close reading” of the texts seems called for. Like any close reading, the close reading offered here is open to criticism. But the people being discussed—Mary and Joseph—are the most privileged persons of history, and any insight however small gained into their comportment is worth any possible mistakes.<sup>1</sup>

This will not be an attempt to second-guess Matthew and Luke, so to speak. The texts will be taken at face value as they stand, and an attempt will be made to understand them first in their own context and

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<sup>1</sup> “It is said that the most difficult thing when faced by a Gospel passage is the discovery of its structure, of its centre. This is indeed true; it is a difficult operation and exegetes do not always agree among themselves, conjecturing often one or another structure. We must not be afraid. They are all hypotheses: philological science also has to proceed through hypothesis. The exegetes that would give absolute value to their hypotheses are not to be taken too seriously” (I. Gargano, *Holy Reading: An Introduction to Lectio Divina*. Translated by W. Vitale (Norwich 2007), 82.

then in the context of the story which they recount, each in their own way. The presupposition is that there is a coherent, objective story beneath the gospel accounts, i.e., that the gospels are fundamentally historical. This fundamental historicity cannot be proved any more than it can be disproved. But what can be asserted with reasonable certitude is that the first Christians who heard/read these gospels took them at their face value, for the first Christians lived by a faith which they found reflected in what they saw in the lives of Mary and Joseph. This foundational faith in actors and spectators alike argues for a foundational engagement in the real world, an engagement which, when recounted, is called history.

Faith should not be a stranger to what follows any more than it was a stranger to the persons here described nor to the persons who were told about them under the rubric of the announcing of good news. Only in the context of faith do the lives of Mary and Joseph make sense; only in the context of faith do the authors of their story make sense; only in the context of faith do the other first Christians make sense.

Two texts will provide the principal material for this study: Luke 1,26-36, and Matt 1,18-25.<sup>2</sup> The secondary literature is, of course, abundant to the point of being unmanageable.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The text is that of N-A<sup>27</sup>. Translations are by the present writer. The article will attempt to understand the text (taken at its face value) as it stands, not how it came to be. The presumption operative is that the accounts which Luke and Matthew present are intended to be coherent, each in its own gospel. How they mesh is, of course, something to be discussed.

*Luke 1,26-36*

Chronologically speaking, the place to begin would seem to be Luke 1,26-36. Here Mary is pictured as being surprised by an angelic messenger named Gabriel. Chronologically the time given within the gospel is in relation to the pregnancy of Elizabeth, the wife of Zachariah. Elizabeth is portrayed as conceiving a child after years of sterility. The angelic messenger sent to inform Zachariah of the coming birth is the same Gabriel as the one bringing the message to Mary. Thus the prophecies concerning the two births—Luke 1,5-25 and Luke 1,26-36—are meant to be taken as mutually relevant.<sup>4</sup>

The angelic messenger speaks to Mary in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy in a town in Galilee called Nazareth (1,26). Mary is presented as a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph of the house of David (1,27). The angel begins with a greeting: "Hail, favored woman. The Lord is with you" (1,28).<sup>5</sup> Mary is puzzled by the greeting, which was delivered in such an expected way and by such an

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<sup>3</sup> Three studies have served as the principal points of reference for this article: 1) P. Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben. Neutestamentliche Marienstudien* (Innsbruck–Wien–München 1955); 2) X. Léon-Dufour, "L'annonce à Joseph", in *Melanges bibliques rédigés en l'honneur de André Robert* (Travaux de l'Institut Catholique de Paris 4; [printed in Tournai for Desclée] 1957), 390-397; 3) G. Buccellati, "The Prophetic Dimension of Joseph", *Communio* 33 (2006) 43-99. For an overview of a selection of other recent studies see Buccellati, "Joseph", 46, n. 2.

<sup>4</sup> On the historicity (and factuality) of the accounts here studied see Buccellati, "Joseph", 45, n. 1, and 47-51.

<sup>5</sup> See J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I-IX)* (AB 28; Garden City 1981), 344-346.

unexpected agent (1,29). The angel picks up on this understandable reaction and tells her not to be “afraid” — a standard greeting of a heavenly visitor in the Old Testament (1,30).<sup>6</sup> “You have found favor with God” is also an Old Testament expression, and here is to be understood in connection with the participle *κεχαριτωμένη* in v. 28.<sup>7</sup> 1,31 is best understood as an outline of what will happen according to the program God has in mind, that is, it is conditional on Mary’s reaction, as is shown by 1,38.<sup>8</sup> The Greek plays upon Isa 7,14.<sup>9</sup> 1,32-33 proceed to give a description of Jesus in Old Testament terms relating to the Messiah, although that term is not used.<sup>10</sup> Implicitly this says much about Mary’s understanding of her religious heritage. In 1,34 Mary asks “How will this be, since I know no man?”<sup>11</sup> Her frame of reference is Jewish law.<sup>12</sup> (In the framework of Jewish law, only between husband

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<sup>6</sup> See Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, 325 and 346.

<sup>7</sup> See Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, 346.

<sup>8</sup> See Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 97.

<sup>9</sup> See Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 65. On the name “Jesus” see Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, 347.

<sup>10</sup> See Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, 347-348.

<sup>11</sup> See Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 98. The connotation of *ἀνὴρ* is “husband”, since it would be unlikely that Mary would think of sexual relations outside of the context of marriage.

<sup>12</sup> While the possibility of a personal vow of virginity for Mary cannot be absolutely excluded, from the entire context of the passage it would seem to be unlikely. For example, it seems to go against the need Gabriel feels to answer Mary’s question, “How will this be since I know no husband?” See Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 98: “Wer sich für ein Gelübde Marias entscheidet, muß ein beseres historisches Fundament aufweisen als Lk 1,34”. See also Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 8-11.

and wife are sexual relations permitted.) Her question is “How will this *be?*”, i.e., she does not question the truth of what the angel is saying, thus implying her unquestioning acceptance of his outline. In contrast, Zachariah asks “How shall I *know?*”, that is, he does not accept unquestioningly what the angel has told him, thus betraying a lack of faith.<sup>13</sup> In 1,35 the angel gives the reply to Mary’s question in terms of the holy spirit as the power of the God who will overshadow her.<sup>14</sup> The one born will be holy and called the son of God.<sup>15</sup> In 1,36 the angel explicitly states for Mary’s knowledge what Luke has informed the reader about in 1,26: the pregnancy of Elizabeth. Despite Mary’s being

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<sup>13</sup> This contrast between Zachariah and Mary seems intended by Luke, even though it is not made explicit. The contrast indicates a basically different psychological attitude between Zachariah and Mary. To point this fact out may seem to be an example of “psychologizing”, but it seems called for by the text if the text is to be understood at a level which involves the suppositions operative in the composition by Luke, that is, at a level of a “close reading”. It is at this level at which exegesis should ideally include. Detailed study and exposition of the text would seem to have as one of its goals the creation of a common understanding of the grounds on which it is made, so that it can be seen to be justified or not justified. Fitzmyer (*Luke I-IX*, 348) contends that the passage Luke 1, 26-38 is to be interpreted at two removes from any consideration of what was in the mind of the historical Mary. But that implies that the final author of the text (Luke) is the prisoner of literary conventions that impose a depersonalization of the text and before which he stands helpless. That is to say, the transmission of historical data in tradition automatically implies a built-in devaluing of the human element precisely where it is most human. This seems to be a gratuitous interpretation of form criticism. To the point Buccellati: “It seems important to distinguish between the relevance of literary patterns, on the one hand, and the way in which they were used, on the other. There is no question that exegetical awareness for the literary dimension is basic to any understanding of the texts. But it does not follow that the ‘actors’ mentioned in the texts are themselves literary figures. Rather, it is perfectly consonant with the nature of the evidence to see the actors as individuals who themselves were touched by the full Old Testament ethos, in its substance and in its literary expression” (Buccellati, “Joseph”, 53, n. 12). See also Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 12. On Mary as the source of the information contained in 1,26-38 see Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 66 and 78.

<sup>14</sup> See Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, 351, for the justification of the article with “holy spirit”.

<sup>15</sup> See Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, 350-352.

related to Elizabeth,<sup>16</sup> she was unaware of Elizabeth's pregnancy. In 1,37 the angel gives the basis for Elizabeth's pregnancy at such an advanced age: "Nothing is impossible with God".<sup>17</sup> In 1,38 Mary gives her consent: "Behold the servant of the Lord. Let it happen to me according to your word."<sup>18</sup> She ratifies the program God has in mind for her now that she knows that it will not involve any violation of her duties to her future husband. But what it does involve she does not pretend to know. She is casting herself completely on God and his providential care.

So much for an introductory background of Luke 1,26-38. The challenge now is to attempt to tease out of the text the main suppositions which are latent there. Only then can a close reading produce its proper effects.

A contrast seems intended by Luke between the announcement story involving John the Baptist and the announcement story involving Jesus. Some of the principal ones seem be the following:

1) Above all, there is a radical difference in the faith-trust of Zachariah and the faith-trust of Mary. Zachariah doubts whereas Mary

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<sup>16</sup> Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 105-106.

<sup>17</sup> The angel may be alluding to Sarah, the mother of Isaac. Cf. Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, 352.

<sup>18</sup> See Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, 352.

believes. The emphasis on the punishment of Zachariah and the acceptance of Mary points to this.<sup>19</sup>

2) In the announcement of the birth of John there is only one protagonist other than Gabriel: a man, Zachariah. In the announcement of the birth of Jesus there is only one protagonist other than Gabriel: a woman, Mary. Thus Luke subtly hints that the two infants have not only two different “fathers” but two different types of paternity.<sup>20</sup>

3) The announcement of the birth of John is presented as being the result of Zachariah’s prayer (Luke 1,13), whereas the announcement of the birth of Jesus is presented as being completely gratuitous (Luke 1,30). Mary’s obvious surprise is a witness to this. The possibility of what she had been told had never occurred to her.

4) Luke narrates the announcement of the birth of John up to the point where his conception is explicitly referred to, whereas the

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<sup>19</sup> See the words Elizabeth directs to Mary on their meeting: “Blessed to one who believed that what was spoken to her from the Lord would be fulfilled” (Luke 1,45).

<sup>20</sup> Gaechter (*Maria im Erdenleben*, 75) interprets the lack of prominence given to Joseph in Luke 1,26-36 as a sign that he did not have as important a role in the life of Mary as a normal husband would have had and hence was relatively unimportant for her. The present article takes a diametrically opposed view of his relation to Joseph as fiancé and as husband. The lack of emphasis given to him is, as indicated above, a hint, in the context, at the divine paternity of Jesus. It is not that Joseph is not important; it is that God, speaking through the angel, is more important. Catholic teaching, of course, holds that the “father” of Jesus is God the Father, with a fatherhood that transcends physical fatherhood but which is analogous to physical fatherhood so that Jesus can truly be called “son”. Catholic teaching should not be imposed on any text, for that would be to violate the integrity of scripture. But it can and should be operative to illumine what is objectively present in scripture. Such use of tradition is, of course, open to constructive criticism, as it should be, if it is not to be misused.

announcement of the birth of Jesus leaves the reader to infer that the conception takes place immediately after Mary gives her assent.<sup>21</sup>

5) Mary's first instinct when she understands that she would conceive was to think of her fiancé, Joseph (cf. 1,34), for the fiancé of that time and place had complete authority over his fiancée.<sup>22</sup> She was well aware that this was not only a question of morality but of law: If she goes with another man she is treated as an adulteress.<sup>23</sup>

6) Mary was not physically aware of the implementation of the word of the angel in her body as soon as it happened, that is, the becoming flesh of her son through the overshadowing of the spirit was in accord with a normal pregnancy, in which the woman is not usually aware that she is with child for some time after the beginning of the pregnancy.<sup>24</sup>

#### *Matthew 1,18-25*

Against the background of the above summary study of Luke 1,26-36 a study of Matt 1,18-25 is appropriate for a view of Joseph's

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<sup>21</sup> Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 97, 102; Buccellati, "Joseph", 60.

<sup>22</sup> See Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 90.

<sup>23</sup> See Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 90. But Gaechter thinks that the women of the time had no interest in things legal, so that the entire atmosphere of the annunciation scene in Luke is a matter of morality, not of law (see Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 75). But Mary was certainly aware that if she committed adultery, law called for her to be punished.

<sup>24</sup> "Heute kennt die medizinische Wissenschaft Anzeichen, die eine Schwangerschaft schon in den ersten Stadien kenttlich macht. Nachdem aber die alten Quellen nichts davon erichten, dürfen wir ohne weiteres voraussetzen, daß sie dem Altertum gänzlich unbekannt waren" (Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 118). Gaechter cites a number of Jewish sources in the matter. See also Buccellati, "Joseph", 60.



side of the becoming flesh of the son announced to Mary. The two accounts are mutually illuminating if one attempts to get beneath the surface account and reads between the lines. The mutual illumination, in other words, is best attempted on the level of a close reading which attempts to understand the suppositions underlying the surface narration. In Luke 1,26-36 the discourse is focused on Mary as protagonist to the exclusion of Joseph; in Matt 1,18-25 the discourse is focused on Joseph as protagonist to the exclusion of Mary. This focus is all the more obvious considering how Joseph figures so importantly, albeit indirectly, in the discourse of Luke, and how Mary figures so importantly, albeit for the most part indirectly, in the discourse of Matthew.

In 1,18 the content of what is to follow is summed up by the word γένεσις. From the standpoint of the followers of Christ after the resurrection, believers wish to know how the origin of Jesus Christ took place.<sup>25</sup> In what follows the reader is informed of the fact that Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, was engaged to Joseph, but before they “came together” (συνελθεῖν) she “was found” (εὑρέθη) to be “having in her womb from the holy spirit”. The stage is here set for what follows: Joseph and Mary are engaged, but before there is any chance of Mary becoming pregnant in marriage she is found to be pregnant through the agency of the “holy spirit”.

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<sup>25</sup> See Buccellati, “Joseph”, 55.

First of all, the use of the word ἐὺρίσκω is to be noted. In the New Testament it customarily serves as a word to indicate a surprising discovery which has a relation to the kingdom of God.<sup>26</sup> Secondly, the source of this information should be sought. There is not just question of Mary's pregnancy, but of Mary's pregnancy "from the holy spirit". The logical source of this information is Mary herself. The Lucan narrative shows that her first thought at the news of conceiving a child was to think of her fiancé, Joseph (Luke 1,34).

And the reference to "the holy spirit" echoes the words of the angel presented in Luke 1,36. There is no need to posit an intermediary for this communication. It was too solemn a message to be entrusted to anyone except Mary's fiancé who alone had authority over her body.<sup>27</sup> Even before she was physically aware of what had taken place in her body, Mary must have confided this message to Joseph.<sup>28</sup> The

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<sup>26</sup> "Das NT kann mit ἐὺρίσκειν jeden, oft auffälligen, erdgegebenen Tatbestand einführen: Vorwiegend aber bekommt ἐὺρίσκειν im NT seinen Sinn als überraschendes Entdecken und geheimnisvolles Verstehen des menschlichen Seins und des weltgeschichtlichen Geschehens in ihren verborgenen Beziehungen vom Reich Gottes her und ihrem endgültigen Bestimmtsein zum Reich Gottes hin. So redet ἐὺρίσκειν vom Entdecken eines numinosen Tatbestandes Mt 1, 18..." (H. Preisker, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, II, 767).

<sup>27</sup> See Buccellati, "Joseph", 62-63; Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 90.

<sup>28</sup> Buccellati bases his interpretation that Mary informed Joseph immediately after the events narrated in Luke 1,26-36 on two considerations: a) the terse way in which the pregnancy is referred to in Matt 1,18, and b) the emphasis placed by the text of Matthew on Joseph's intention not to make the matter "public" and to release Mary "in secret" (Buccellati, "Joseph", 56-59 (with detailed reasoning). Gaechter holds that the *mores* of the time dictate that the mother of Mary would have both received the news from Mary and transmitted it to Joseph since it would not have been appropriate for

information must have come to Joseph from some human agent (a directly supernatural way of communication is subsequently used in 1,20-23, which would seem to imply that the source of Joseph's information was not supernatural). And Mary or someone to whom Mary communicated the information before she communicated with Matthew, are the only human candidates. That Mary should have trespassed on the rights of her fiancé by revealing what had happened even to someone as close to her as her mother seems, considering her obvious primary concern with the fiancé, unlikely.<sup>29</sup>

From the way the word ἐῦρίσκω in 1,18 is used the implication is that Joseph not only heard of the annunciation but he believed it. And this means that he also believed Mary, for she was his only contact with the message of the angel, thus adding his act of faith-trust to hers.<sup>30</sup> This is the context of what follows.

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Mary to communicate with Joseph directly (Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 106). But a *sui generis* situation would seem to have called for a *sui generis* response.

<sup>29</sup> “As soon as the Annunciation takes place, Mary, whose *fiat* tells us that she believed in both the call (the Annunciation) and its effects (the pregnancy), knows that the one person most immediately affected by the event is her husband (they are betrothed, but the form of betrothal is such that a change of plans requires a formal act of separation or divorce; hence Joseph is in fact already her husband). While the call could be taken as exclusively addressed to her, the pregnancy clearly affects him as well. The only responsible thing to do is to tell him, immediately” (Buccellati, “Joseph”, 62-63).

<sup>30</sup> “What she communicated... was the annunciation, for the consequence of which (i.e., the conception of a child) she had, as yet, no verifiable physical sign. She merely accepted what the angel had communicated to her and communicated it in turn, before any physical verification, to Joseph.... The Annunciation, and Mary's report of it to Joseph, is not just a statement about assent (the *fiat*), but a statement about faith (the Annunciation is accepted blindly and unequivocally as meaning conception) and mutual trust (between Mary and Joseph)” (Buccellati, “Joseph”, 59).

In 1,19 Joseph is referred to as Mary's ἀνὴρ. In the context (in the previous verse Mary is said to have been engaged to Joseph) this connotes “fiancé”, but, of course, “fiancé” in the meaning the word had in the strict Jewish culture about engagement and marriage in Galilee which the gospel passage presumes.<sup>31</sup> He is described as being δίκαιος which, in the context of the preceding genealogy (Matt 1,1-17), is best understood as meaning “just” in the sense of “legitimate heir”. The genealogy gives what Matthew wishes his readers to understand about the nature of Jesus’ descent from Abraham and from David.<sup>32</sup> In the immediately following verses (18-25) Matthew wishes his readers to understand how this was managed even though Joseph was not the physical father of Jesus, though Mary was the physical mother (cf. 1,16).<sup>33</sup> The assurance with which Matthew presents the genealogy

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<sup>31</sup> See Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 83-93, for an exhaustive presentation of Jewish marriage law and custom at the time. In the presentation of Luke 1,34 the word ἀνὴρ had the connotation “husband” because the context presumed cohabitation. Here, as a prelude to Joseph’s contemplating finalizing the engagement by marriage, the connotation would be “fiancé”.

<sup>32</sup> “Der Redaktor übergibt seiner Gemeinde eine Genealogie Jesu, um ihr zu sagen, daß alle frühere Geschichte so angelegt war, daß ihr Lauf sich im Kommen Jesu vollendet. Damit hat sich die Hauptlinie der jüdischen Messiaserwartung erfüllt: In Jesus ist der messianische Sohn Davids gekommen (v. 2-16), und in ihm hat Gott sich einen Sohn geschaffen, der Gottes Königtum in der Welt verkündigen soll” (A. Sand, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* [Regensburger Neues Testament; Regensburg 1986], 46).

<sup>33</sup> That Matthew intended 1,18-25 to be read in the light of 1,1-17 is further indicated by his use of γένεσις at the beginning of each passage: “Le fait de la naissance légale, que la généalogie avait affirmé dans son style hiératique, notre récit en raconte la réalisation: ‘Voici comment naquit le Christ Jésus’; (v. 18), ou plus exactement, en tenant compte des mots-agraves qui relie le passage à la généalogie: ‘Or du Christ Jésus telle fut la genèse’, rappelant le premier verset du chapitre: ‘Livre de la genèse

indicates that he knew that his readers were well aware of the importance that descent had in the Jewish way of looking at legitimacy before God. In 1,19 his use of δίκαιος to describe Joseph would accordingly appear to indicate that the “being just” was in reference to this genealogy: Joseph not only was a legitimate heir to Abraham and David, but he was aware of the fact.<sup>34</sup> This awareness is addressed explicitly by the first words of the angel in the dream, “Joseph, son of David” (1,20). The καί which follows δίκαιος ὧν is best taken in an adversative sense<sup>35</sup>: Joseph, “being just”, but not being willing “to make a public spectacle” of Mary (δειγματίσαι), decided to separate himself from her secretly. That is to say, Joseph presumed that the pregnancy of Mary meant that she was not intended to be his wife and share in his legitimacy. Inasmuch as he was not the father, he could not betray his ancestors and his descendants by assuming the legal responsibility for a child which, whatever its origin, was definitely not his.<sup>36</sup> His only course

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*de Jésus Christ, fils de David, fils d’Abraham”* (Léon-Dufour, “L’annonce à Joseph”, 395).

<sup>34</sup> See the definition of δίκαιος in Matt 1,19 given by Bauer–Aland: “1. v. Menschen *gerecht*, wie פְּדָיָה = den Anforderungen d. Menschen in Recht u. Sitte sowie denen Gottes entspr., nach ihnen handelnd. – a. m. Betonung d. Rechtssphäre . . . Mt 1 19...” (*Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch* von W. Bauer, herausgegeben von K. Aland und B. Aland [Berlin–New York 1988], col. 393).

<sup>35</sup> See M. Zerwick, *Graecitas biblica* (Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici; Romae 1966), §455, b), β) for examples.

<sup>36</sup> “Joseph se montre juste non en ce qu’il observe la loi autorisant le divorce en cas d’adultère (elle n’a que faire ici), ni en ce qu’il se montrerait débonnaire (plus de motif à cela), ni en raison de la justice qu’il devrait à une innocente, mais en ce qu’il ne veut

in the face of his legal responsibilities was to dismiss her “secretly” (λάθρα), i.e., without making the reason, her pregnancy, known.<sup>37</sup> He undoubtedly felt that since the pregnancy was not the result of his action, what followed on the pregnancy was not his responsibility. God would provide.<sup>38</sup> Thus the word ἀπολύσαι is to be taken in its full legal sense of “divorce”.<sup>39</sup> He is portrayed as having made up his mind in the matter.<sup>40</sup>

At this point in the narration the angel puts in an appearance. He addresses Joseph by name but with no greeting and goes right to the heart of the problem. He calls Joseph “son of David”, that is, he

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pas se faire passer pour le père de l’Enfant divine (Ephrem)” (Léon-Dufour, “L’annonce à Joseph”, 396).

<sup>37</sup> He could hardly have dismissed her “secretly” in the sense that he dismissed her privately, because presumably the betrothal was a public act. By refusing to carry through the betrothal to its normal conclusion, i.e., marriage, he could not avoid dismissing her publicly. The secrecy comes in when he refuses to make a public spectacle of her by saying that she was pregnant not by himself. He fully believed Mary, but he could hardly expect others to do so. She would have been looked on as an adulteress. And her child, as illegitimate. Thus “secretly” refers to the grounds of his action, not to the action itself which, given the betrothal, was of necessity not secret. But the pregnancy would inevitably take its course and in time become evident. Joseph’s decision to dismiss Mary without giving the grounds of his action implies a strong faith-trust in the actions of divine providence as regards Mary.

<sup>38</sup> “Joseph accepts Mary’s report as to how she had conceived, and thus, far from being scandalized by assuming adultery, he is profoundly respectful of a divine intervention that seems to preempt his role as husband. He yields, rather than rejects” (Buccellati, “Joseph”, 70).

<sup>39</sup> There would accordingly seem to be no need to posit here a meaning of ἀπολύσαι different from the rest of the gospel (where it means a legal and definitive separation of husband from wife) as does a Léon-Dufour, “L’annonce à Joseph”, 396, n. 2.

<sup>40</sup> “τὰυτα δὲ αὐτοῦ ἐνθυμηθέντος — the aorist tense of the participle in the genitive absolute implies termination of his mulling over the problem. See the translation of the *BJ*: “He had made up his mind to do this [i.e., divorce Mary secretly]” (*The New Jerusalem Bible* [London 1985], 1610).

addresses him at the precise point which is the cause of Joseph's perplexity. As legitimate descendant of David Joseph has an obligation to be completely honest about any child for which he assumes the role of father. The angel tells him "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife". The fatherhood of the child which has been conceived is attributed to the holy spirit (1,20). Joseph is to "call his name Jesus" (καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦν). These are the same words which the angel Gabriel directs to Mary (1,31). Both Mary and Joseph are given the command to name Jesus with the singular, implying that they share equally in the title of parent: both are of the house of David. The command to take Mary as his wife is significant, for it implies that Joseph is to act at once, as is indicated by Joseph's action as a result of the dream (1,24). The angel concludes with a citation from Scripture to indicate that Mary's conception was indeed virginal and had been prophesied (1,23-24).<sup>41</sup> Thus, in one sense, the son will be of the house of David with regard to Joseph, but in another sense, no.<sup>42</sup> Mary is the

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<sup>41</sup> "Matthew's care in providing a translation ('which is interpreted with-us-is-God,' Mt 1:23) emphasizes the significance of the name and its overall semiotic relevance. In other words, Matthew sets up a parallel: Mary was found to be 'the-one-who-has-a-child-in-her-entrails-from-the-Holy-Spirit' and Jesus was found to be 'the one-through-whom-God-is-with-us'" (Buccellati, "Joseph", 58).

<sup>42</sup> But there is no suggestion in the text that Matthew, with his talk of a 'holy *spirit*', attributes the conception of Jesus to an act of sexual intercourse. "There is little question but that Matthew assumes the conception as having been outside of the natural channel of sexual intercourse—hence, clearly, there is no question of a theogamy, or, to put it differently, 'God does not become the biological father of Jesus'" (Buccellati, "Joseph", 56). The same is true, of course, for the account of the annunciation in Luke.

physical mother although she is a virgin; the divine nature of the son is hinted at (1,24).

All of this implies that the marriage between Joseph and Mary took place within a short space after the annunciation to Mary and the annunciation to Joseph.<sup>43</sup> There is no necessity to posit an anticipation of the marriage for the engaged couple: the timing of the annunciation to Mary was entirely in God's hands, not only as to substance, but as to date.<sup>44</sup> Further, the visit of Mary to Elizabeth occurred, it would seem, at the suggestion of Gabriel who informed her of Elizabeth's pregnancy.<sup>45</sup> The view that Mary and Joseph were married soon after the annunciation facilitates theorizing of how Mary journeyed to Elizabeth.<sup>46</sup> Joseph would have accompanied Mary: no need to communicate the reason for the journey, and no need to seek anyone else's approval, and no need to provide companions. The fact that Joseph is not mentioned in the account of Mary's encounter and stay with Elizabeth is not surprising, given that Luke and Matthew concentrate on the persons central to their point of view: Joseph was irrelevant for what happened

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<sup>43</sup> See: Buccellati, "Joseph", 63.

<sup>44</sup> Gaechter holds that the marriage between Mary and Joseph took place after Mary's visit to Elizabeth (Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 115-117), although he holds that the conception of Jesus took place at the moment of the annunciation to Mary. The result is that he has to make Mary resort to various subterfuges in order to hide what to outsiders would appear as Jesus' illegitimacy.

<sup>45</sup> See Buccellati, "Joseph", 63; Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 104.

<sup>46</sup> See Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 104-106.



between Elizabeth and Mary. But the reason why Mary wanted to remain with Elizabeth until she gave birth would have been of interest to Joseph, as well: the sex of the child.<sup>7</sup> Once Elizabeth had given birth the presence of Mary's presence was no longer important from the standpoint of the full verification of what the angel had told her, and she and Joseph returned to "her" house where she was the wife.<sup>8</sup> But from the very first entrance of Mary into Joseph's house, Matthew wishes the readers to know, "he did not know her until she bore a son, and he called his name Jesus" (1,25). Just as the birth of John was a verification of what the angel had told Mary, so is the birth of Jesus a verification of what the angel had told Joseph. And his naming of the child Jesus seals his part in the first stage of this most profound of adventures.

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<sup>7</sup> See Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 110-111.

<sup>8</sup> The fact that the marriage of Joseph and Mary took place immediately after the annunciation would seem to follow from the presumed meshing of the annunciation in Luke with the annunciation in Matthew. Given the responsibility of Joseph over Mary as his fiancée in the culture of the times in Galilee (Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 90-93) along with Mary's acute awareness of the fact (Luke 1,34), given the apparent lack of suspicion in the later life of Jesus of the date of his birth (Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 115-117), and, finally, given the lack of an explicit mention of the marriage ceremony between Joseph and Mary (Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 59), it is much more probable that Joseph took Mary to be his wife immediately after the annunciation portrayed in Luke 1,26-36. And thus, before the visit to Elizabeth. But perhaps the decisive argument in favor of the marriage immediately after the annunciation to Mary is the conclusion which Gaechter is forced to adopt as a consequence of his dating of the marriage to the time after the visit to Elizabeth: "Maria muß bald nach der Heimführung mehrere Jahre aus dem Blickfeld der Nazarethanerinnen verschwunden sein. Nur unter dieser Annahme erklärt sich deren Nichtwissen um die Daten der Geburt und Empfängnis Jesu" (Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 117). Given the presumed social climate of a small village in Galilee in the first century, this position of Gaechter merits the comment, "Unglaublich wohl". See Buccellati, "Joseph", 63, n. 26.

*Conclusions*

The present study has attempted to rehearse the story of the first Christians, Mary and Joseph, as it is presented in the texts of Luke 1,26-56, and Matt 1,18-25. Much study has gone into these texts but it is not clear that all that they imply has been successfully discovered. The principal conclusion has been to emphasize the profound faith-trust of Mary in her reply to the unexpected message given her by the angel,<sup>95</sup> and the profound faith-trust of Joseph in his unqualified acceptance of Mary's word and the angel's word. And in providing this emphasis, the intention has been to outline the specific circumstances in which this profound faith-trust was exercised, occasionally by indicating considerations which do not seem to be current.

Via della Pilotta, 25  
00187 Rome, Italy

JAMES SWETNAM, S.J.

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<sup>95</sup> Gaechter alludes to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception (Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben*, 95) and apparently presumes that the principal effect of this privilege with relevance to the motherhood of Mary is her being freed from sexual concupiscence. While the freedom of Mary from original sin obviously must have affected her entire moral life, sexual desire included, it would seem that with regard to her motherhood her extraordinary readiness to bestow faith-trust where it was called for was a major effect as well.

## SUMMARY

The accounts of the annunciation to Mary in Luke 1,26-56 and the matching account of the annunciation to Joseph in Matt 1,18-25 give a remarkable picture of the profound faith-trust of these first Christians. The article attempts to sketch a chronology of events presupposed by Luke and Matthew, a chronology which underlies the gospel texts as they stand. The article makes use of much existing study to explain many points, but also attempts to clarify others by proposing new hypotheses.

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