



JESUS of NAZARETH "THE INFANCY NARRATIVES"

by Pope Benedict XVI

Now, though, it is time to look more closely at the story of the annunciation to Mary of the birth of Jesus. First let us consider the angel's message, then Mary's answer.

A striking feature of the angel's greeting is that he does not address Mary with the usual Hebrew salutation *shalom*—peace be with you—but with the Greek greeting formula *chaïre*, which we might well translate with the word “Hail,” as in the Church's Marian prayer, pieced together from the words of the annunciation narrative (cf. *Lk 1:28, 42*). Yet at this point it is only right to draw out the true meaning of the word *chaïre*: rejoice! This exclamation from the angel—we could say—marks the true beginning of the New Testament.

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There is no need here to enter into a detailed textual comparison between the angel's greeting to Mary and Zephaniah's prophecy. The essential reason for the daughter of Zion to rejoice is stated in the text itself: “the Lord is in your midst” (*Zeph 3:15,17*). Literally it says: “he is in your womb.” Here Zephaniah is alluding to a passage in the Book of Exodus which speaks of God dwelling in the ark of the Covenant as dwelling “in Israel's womb” (cf. Laurentin, *Structure et Théologie*, pp. 70f., with reference to *Ex 33:3* and *34:9*). This same word reappears in Gabriel's message to Mary: “you will conceive in your womb” (*Lk 1:31*).

Whatever view is taken regarding the details of these parallels, there is clearly an inner resemblance between the two messages. Mary appears as the daughter of Zion in person. The Zion prophecies are fulfilled in her in an unexpected way. Mary becomes the Ark of the Covenant, the place where the Lord truly dwells.

“Rejoice, full of grace!” One further aspect of the greeting *chaïre* is worthy of note: the connection between joy and grace. In Greek, the two words joy and grace (*chará* and *cháris*) are derived from the same root. Joy and grace belong together.

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In this context, too, we encounter the name “Jesus,” which the angel assigns to the promised child both in Luke (1:31) and in Matthew (1:21). Concealed within the name of Jesus is the tetragrammaton, the mysterious name from Mount Horeb, here expanded into the statement: God saves. The, as it were, “incomplete” name from Sinai is finally spoken. The God who *is*, is the saving God, now present. The revelation of God's name, which began in the burning bush, comes to completion in Jesus (cf. *Jn 17:26*).

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Mary's response, which we will consider now, unfolds in three steps. To begin with, in reaction to the angel's greeting she is troubled and pensive. Her reaction is different from Zechariah's. Of him it is said that he was troubled and “fear fell upon him” (*Lk 1:12*). In Mary's case the first word is the same (she was troubled), but what follows is not fear but an interior reflection on the angel's greeting. She ponders (dialogues within herself) over what the greeting of God's messenger could mean. So one salient feature of the image of the mother of Jesus is already present here, and we will encounter it again in two similar situations in the Gospel: her inner engagement with the word (cf. *Lk 2:19, 51*).

She does not remain locked in her initial troubled state at the proximity of God in his angel, but she seeks to understand. So Mary appears as a fearless woman, one who remains composed even in the presence of something utterly unprecedented. At the same time she stands before us as a woman of great interiority, who holds heart and mind in harmony and seeks to understand the context, the overall significance of God's message. In this way, she becomes an image of the Church as she considers the word of God, tries to understand it in its entirety and guards in her memory the things that have been given to her.

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