

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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2 Samuel 7:1-11,16

NRSV

David is now installed as king in Jerusalem. A key to understanding this passage is that the word “house” (consistently *bayith* in Hebrew) has three different meanings here: palace (vv. 1, 2), temple (vv. 5-7), and dynasty (or royal *house*, v. 11). After various wars, most recently with the coastal people, the Philistines, David consults his court prophet, Nathan: since I now have a palace, I think the time has come to build a temple for the Ark. Nathan agrees.

But that night, God speaks to Nathan (v. 4); tell David that he is not the one to build a temple for me. Ever since the Exodus I have not had one (v. 6), and have never asked for one (v. 7). (“Cedar”, vv. 2, 7, was the best building material at the time.) God tells Nathan to give David a personal assurance (vv. 8-9): God has raised him from shepherd boy to king, has always been with him wherever he went (local gods were confined to one place on earth), and has defeated all his enemies. God will make him great. God will also (vv. 10-11) give the people of Israel, his people, a settled life, peace and security – which they lacked under the *judges*. He will make him founder of a dynasty, a “house”; both it and David’s kingdom will be God’s for ever (v. 16). In v. 17, Nathan duly tells King David all God has promised.

Luke 1:47-55

NRSV

This is known as the *Magnificat*, from the first word of the Latin translation. Mary is visiting Elizabeth and Zechariah. God’s messenger, Gabriel, has told her that she will bear Jesus, “Son of God” (v. 35), successor to David and founder of an eternal kingdom. Now she thanks God. Speaking today, she might begin: *I, from the depth of my heart, declare the Lord’s greatness and rejoice in God my Saviour*. Vv. 48-50 extol the fruits of the earth and of lowly dependence on God’s mercy; vv. 51-53 speak of the great reversals God has, and will, achieve through all ages; vv. 54-55 recall that he has fulfilled, and continues to fulfill, his promises to the patriarchs. In choosing Mary, God goes against conventional wisdom: he chooses the poor and lowly over the “proud” (v. 51) and “powerful” (v. 52).

Romans 16:25-27

NRSV

These are the closing words of Paul’s letter. I offer the following paraphrase of this grammatically complex passage: *God has commanded my preaching of the good news, and the proclamation of Jesus Christ in order that the mystery that was long kept secret might be revealed to all people through the Scriptures, and that by this revelation God might strengthen you in faith and thus in obedience to him. To the only wise God be the glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen.* God’s “command” (v. 26) to Paul is that he preach the good news. Jesus’ procla-

mation makes clear the “mystery” (v. 25) of who the Messiah is in the “prophetic writings” (v. 26), i.e. in the Old Testament and contemporary Jewish writings about the future.

Luke 1:26-38

NRSV

In vv. 8-17, Luke has told us about Zechariah seeing an angel in the sanctuary of the Temple. The angel told him that his wife, Elizabeth, will bear a son, who will be named John. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit and “turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God ... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Elizabeth is now in the “sixth month” (v. 26) of her pregnancy. God sends the angel Gabriel to Nazareth. (Angels have appeared at great moments in the story of salvation. Gabriel also appeared to Daniel in Babylon. In John 1:46, we read “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” It was a town known for its jealous, materially minded people.) It is through Joseph (not Mary) that Jesus is of the lineage of David. Mary’s name in Hebrew is *Miryam*, meaning *exalted one* (“favoured one”).

The angel, speaking Aramaic, probably said *shalom! Peace be with you!* Mary is especially “favoured” (vv. 28, 30) with God’s love, and as such has long been part of God’s plan. “Perplexed” (v. 29), she reflects on this greeting (“pondered”, v. 29), drawing on her faith: in what way am I “favoured”? She might have panicked in the presence of God’s messenger: awe can easily turn into fear. Gabriel now tells her (vv. 30-33): she will bear a son, Son of God, a king. (God says “do not be afraid” to Abraham when he tells him he will have a son.) V. 31a recalls Isaiah 7:14: there Isaiah tells King Ahaz that “the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel” (meaning *God with us*.) Psalm 89:26-27 also speaks of the link between the dynasty of David and sonship of God. (“The Most High”, vv. 32, 35, is God.) The prophet Micah often speaks of the *house of Israel* as the “house of Jacob”; in his book (4:7), we read “the Lord will reign over them ... forevermore.” (Jacob is renamed *Israel* after his struggle with God at Peniel (Genesis 32:28), but we find both names used for the man and the people from that point on.)

While Mary does not doubt Gabriel’s message from God, she does wonder *how can this be?*. The last clause in v. 34 can be rendered *since I have no husband*. Mary is engaged to Joseph. Gabriel, in v. 35, answers Mary’s question by telling her that she will conceive through the power of the Holy Spirit (not through sexual union): a gift from God. The child will be filled with the Holy Spirit (“holy”), dedicated to the service of God, and “will be called Son of God”. V. 37 is like Genesis 18:14, where God says “Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?”. There (as with Elizabeth) in advanced years (“in her old age”, v. 36), after a normal gestation period, Sarah gives birth to a son. Jesus’ birth is even more exceptional than those of Isaac and John the Baptist. To be a “servant of the Lord” (v. 38) is special: David, in v. 8 of today’s first reading, is called a *servant*. Luke is doing more than telling the story of the Annunciation: he is placing Jesus in the context of Old Testament prophecies.