

## Advent Reflections 2021: Angels (Week 3)

### The Angel Gabriel

There are only two named angels in the Bible: Gabriel and Michael – three, if we include Raphael who is mentioned in the Book of Tobit (which is part of the OT in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches but part of the apocrypha - a kind of supplement - in Anglican Bible editions). The Jewish tradition knows many more angel names, however, recorded in texts such as the Book of Enoch and later rabbinic tradition fills in a lot of gaps when it comes to naming angels appearing in Scripture (the three angels visiting Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18 become Michael, Gabriel and Raphael in later Jewish thought, for example).

The angel Gabriel (who is listed among 7 archangels in the Book of Enoch and in subsequent Christian tradition) is mentioned by name in the Book of Daniel and in Luke's Gospel. Angels as beings with names and independent character are a legacy stemming from Israel's exile in Babylon: it was here in exile that a definite version of the Hebrew Scriptures was first written down. In Babylon, Judaism was also exposed to Zoroastrian beliefs and practices (which knew 'angels' as aides and assistants to Ahura Mazda, the creator god of Zoroastrianism) which influenced the way sacred scripture was composed and written down.

Gabriel is one of those more independent heavenly beings we find in the Bible. In the Book of Daniel (see Daniel 8.16-26 & 9.21-27), Gabriel helps to interpret a vision and brings wisdom & understanding. In Luke, Gabriel famously appears in the opening chapter to announce and explain what God is about to do. The name Gabriel (from the Hebrew gav-ri-El) is understood to mean 'God's strength' or simply 'Man of God' derived from 'gever' = man and 'El' = God.

We tend to remember that Gabriel appears to Mary in Luke's Gospel (announcing the birth of Jesus), but we sometimes forget that Gabriel also appears a few verses earlier to announce the birth of John the Baptist:

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. <sup>6</sup> Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. <sup>7</sup> But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. <sup>8</sup> Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, <sup>9</sup> he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. <sup>10</sup> Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. <sup>11</sup> Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. <sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. <sup>14</sup> You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>16</sup> He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup> With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' <sup>18</sup> Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.' <sup>19</sup> The

angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.<sup>20</sup> But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.' (Luke 1.5-20)

This scene has strong resonances with annunciation scenes found in the Old Testament: like Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah and Elizabeth receive angelic assurance that they will receive a child despite their advanced years (see Genesis 18.1-15), but there are also parallels with the OT figures of Samson (whose birth is also announced by an angel) and Samuel as both are pledged to refrain from 'wine and strong drink' in order to exercise their respective calling and ministry (see Judges 13.4-5 and 1 Samuel 1.9-15). Clearly, Luke puts John the Baptist into a long tradition of OT prophets and leaders.

The appearance of Gabriel in this Temple scene is reminiscent of the Book of Daniel (where Gabriel also makes an appearance):

While I was speaking, and was praying and confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the LORD my God on behalf of the holy mountain of my God—<sup>21</sup> while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen before in a vision, came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice.<sup>22</sup> He came and said to me, 'Daniel, I have now come out to give you wisdom and understanding. (Daniel 9.20-22)

The Book of Daniel might indeed be the basis for the way Luke describes the Annunciation of John and therefore the reason as to why it should be Gabriel and not some other angel appearing to Zechariah at 'the time of the incense-offering'. As in Daniel, Gabriel offers 'wisdom and understanding' to Zechariah (and later Mary), as the angel reveals what God is about to do and explains God's plan and involvement in the story of humanity and creation.

While Zechariah is 'terrified' at the appearance of an angel in the sanctuary, he nevertheless is objecting to Gabriel's message, resulting in temporary muteness. William Blake captures this detail well, I think, as he renders this scene artistically – for Zechariah looks suitably annoyed as he is being 'interrupted' in his religious duties.

**Q: What may get in our way of listening to God?**

**Are our lives sometimes interrupted so that we can hear God speak?**



*William Blake, The Angel appearing to Zecharias (1799-1800), MET New York*

A similar pattern of angelic annunciation is found in the verses heralding Jesus' birth as Gabriel appears to Mary. But unlike Zechariah, Mary does not seem to be too frightened and is seen as being more receptive of the angel's message to her:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' <sup>29</sup> But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. <sup>31</sup> And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' <sup>34</sup> Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' <sup>35</sup> The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. <sup>36</sup> And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God.' <sup>38</sup> Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her. (Luke 1.26-38)

This passage is the reason why Gabriel is so famous and probably the most depicted angel in Christian art. Here is our 'own' version of this scene as found in HT's great East Window:



*The Annunciation, Detail East Window at Holy Trinity Stirling,  
Clayton & Bell 1878*

Like many traditional images of this scene, Mary looks very calm and meditative, while the angel keeps an appropriate distance so as not to disturb Mary's pondering. It is nevertheless a beautiful image, not least due to the vivid colours in our stained glass, including the shiny red angel wings in the background (although our passages do not mention angel wings, of course, while Daniel describes Gabriel appearing as 'a man'). This image is certainly in keeping with traditional Christian iconography.

As we would expect, there is the lily so often found in images depicting Gabriel (symbolising purity and Mary's virginity), but perhaps even more prominent is the angel holding a mirror (symbolising God's image 'mirrored' in Jesus, but also more generally God's presence and wisdom).

There is, however, another rendering of the Annunciation which has captured my imagination (see below). In this sketch by Rembrandt, we do not see the usual serenity we perhaps have come to expect from depictions of this scene. Here, Mary almost appears to be forced out of her chair as the angel impresses God's message unto her as a matter of urgency. A vivid image, showing the wrestling of Mary with the extraordinary message (and its implications), which makes her Yes even more powerful. Might there even be a reminiscence of Jacob wrestling with the angel in Rembrandt's lines here? As an artist, he will have known the 'wrestling' process which leads to creative expression. But most certainly, Rembrandt shows that angelic messages and life-changing decisions tend not to come politely, but that angels are typically described as a force to be reckoned with.



*Rembrandt, The Annunciation (c.1635),  
Musée Communal Besançon*

**Q: How do you envisage the Annunciation? What images do you find helpful and why? How might angels appear in your life?**