

The message of the angels

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WHILST MATTHEW'S 'Jewish' Gospel records the appearances of angels to Joseph by dream (1:20; 2:13,19), the opening chapters of Luke are unique in the recording of the threefold physical appearing of angels: to Zacharias, to Mary and to the shepherds. The immediate purpose of the writing of the Gospel is helpful when considering the reasons why the Spirit by Luke chose to include these in his Gospel. Writing to "most excellent Theophilus" (see the [background article](#) on page 251), it appears that Luke in the opening chapters is stressing that here is good news, which begins, not with earthly origin, but with the powerful endorsement and involvement of heaven: "having had perfect understanding of all things *from above*" (1:3).¹

In each case the angelic message contains assurance of comfort—the essence of the gospel for man—in the words, "Fear not". In each case, here was the heavenly messenger bringing news which was not to be feared, nor given to cause

anxiety, but which was to answer prayer (1:13), to bring God's favour (v. 30) and to bring great joy (2:10). Here was an angelic announcement of the Lord's involvement in the affairs of men; a matter for rejoicing, knowing the certainty of God's plans. Here is a message of certainty (1:4), a message of joy, and, most of all, a message to be believed (1:1).

A forerunner

The miraculous provision of a son to Zacharias and Elisabeth was to be accompanied with great natural joy. However, this joy would extend beyond John's parents to include "many" (1:14). This natural joy is principally fulfilled in 1:58, but the joy felt extends beyond the natural to the spiritual, to the "many" (an allusion to Daniel 11:33?) who

1. The Greek word *anōthen*, translated "the very first" in the AV, can mean 'above', which is surely the better rendering here.



PICTURE: Tony Benson

Looking from the southern edge of Jerusalem towards Bethlehem. Somewhere in this area the shepherds were watching their flocks when they received the momentous tidings from the angels.

would be instructed and be caused to turn to God by him. The reasons for the joy would be:

- John's greatness in the sight of the Lord (of more importance than the excellence of worldly renown)
- John's dedication/devotion to the Lord (in the form of the Nazarite vow—an appeal to all readers of the Gospel)
- God's involvement in John's work, giving power to the message in preparing people (like Theophilus?) for the Lord.

Zacharias' doubt is met with a singular reminder of the purpose of the visit: "I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings" (Lk. 1:19). Do not doubt that God's hand *is* at work to bring the fulfilment of His purpose.

A saviour

Again the miraculous provision of a son is the promise to Mary. Once again the message declares the involvement of God at every turn, declaring:

- Jesus' greatness as the Son of the Highest
- God's giving him a throne and kingdom for ever
- God's faithfulness in fulfilling the promises made to David (2 Sam. 7:12-14).

Mary's question (here not of doubt but of faithful expectation) is met with further assurance of God's involvement and power, and the magnitude of what was to take place: "therefore also that

holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Lk. 1:35).

All people

These two angelic appearances, it would seem, present an appeal in these first chapters to grasp the power and certainty of the heavenly message. Here was (and is) heavenly good news. But to the testimony of these two appearances is added the third. Not to the great and mighty, not to nobility or leaders, but to ordinary shepherds come "good tidings of great joy"; not just for individuals such as Zacharias or Mary, but joy "which shall be to all people" (2:10). As Paul says, "the gospel of Christ . . . is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16). The relevance of this to Theophilus would perhaps not be lost on him, nor should it be on us.

The message which came to the shepherds anticipated response: "I bring *you* good tidings . . . For unto *you* is born this day . . . this shall be a sign unto *you*" (Lk. 2:10-12). This is a deeply personal appeal through the record to recognise our intimate involvement with the message of salvation and the comfort brought by the angels. The joy of the angels, singing at the birth of the one in whom the world would find itself created anew, should and can be echoed in our own joy of our understanding of the certainty of the things which are most surely believed among us.