

God's entrance: 2 Samuel 7:1-16; Luke 1:26-38

The angel Gabriel bursts into the life of an ordinary young woman without permission, terrifying her.

by [Fleming Rutledge](#) in the [December 8, 1999](#) issue

How strange that in the space of just one recent week a book reviewer in the *New York Times* mentions the "frisson-inducing" discovery only nine years ago of a ninth century BC stele referring to the "House of David," thus issuing "a stony rebuff to those who think that David is a mythical figure," while another reviewer, writing about Thomas Cahill's new book, raised seriously the question of whether the historical person called Jesus of Nazareth ever existed. These are the challenges that Christian interpreters and believers must meet every day now. Which of our scriptures are to be regarded as "historical" and which as "mythical"? Raymond Brown wrote amusingly in a footnote of being called on the phone every Christmas by reporters who wanted to know "what really happened." Brown would reply, one imagines with some asperity, that they would do well to ask instead what the real message of the stories was.

Yet another reviewer (same week!), this time assessing a TV movie about Jesus, complains of the "greeting-card sentiment" that permeates the script. She writes that the movie is a lot "better when it sticks to scripture." She cites the scene when John the Baptist "announces convincingly, 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.'" It's encouraging to get this kind of support for the unique simplicity and grandeur of the Bible. Even as the reviewer urges the writer of the teleplay to stick to The Script, however, the point is again being made: John and Jesus are purely literary presences. This could be worse—they could be ignored as having no presences at all—but it makes the job of believing interpreter more difficult. How to distinguish between what the church says and what the literary critics say?

What really happened? Did the prophet Nathan really say to the "historical David" that his throne would be established for ever? Shall we settle on David as a historical presence and Jesus as a purely literary one? Surely it would make more sense to have it the other way round. Isn't it easier by far to conclude that David is a mythical King Arthur type than it is to believe that the human religious imagination would dream up a crucified Messiah?

That is not a rhetorical question. Perhaps one of the problems is that many people who are tossing off opinions about these matters do not realize what crucifixion was as a mode of execution. It is flatly inconceivable that anyone would invent a Son of God who was consigned by church and state alike to die the most extreme form of death by degradation and dehumanization known to the ancient world. We need not waste time on debating Jesus's actual existence. The question that is up for grabs is: Who was "crucified under Pontius Pilate"? Everybody who speaks of Jesus of Nazareth, thinks of him, prays in his name or (increasingly) uses his name as an expletive, will be taking a position with regard to this, whether they consciously realize it or not.

The angel Gabriel, according to St. Luke, burst into the life of an ordinary young woman without permission, terrifying her. Every angelic appearance in scripture causes fear, because the angel mediates the searing intrusion of the living God. But the angel said, "Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favor with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. He . . . shall be called the Son of the Highest, and the Lord God shall give him the throne of his father David . . . and of his kingdom there shall be no end." Is this literary truth? mythological truth? historical truth? or no truth at all? What really happened, and does that matter?

The one thing that matters, I think, is that we ask ourselves about the single most fundamental affirmation in the story. Did God act? That question has two facets: Did *God* act? and did God *act*? Do we see here an event set in motion by spiritually precocious human beings with divine aspirations, or do we see the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? And second, do we see a God at a remove, watching over events as they transpire, or do we see here the definitive entrance of God upon the world stage as he reclaims lost human nature for himself? If a stele were to be found in Bethlehem saying, "Here was born Jesus bar-Joseph . . .," would that make a difference? Wouldn't most of us still want to convert the story into a pretty, painterly scene of an angel and a maiden, suitable for ornament?

Karl Barth wrote that the church's creedal affirmation of the virginal conception is "the doctrine on guard at the door of the mystery of Christmas." Matthew and Luke have both posted guards at the entrances to their Gospels: "Danger, God at work." Are these purely literary devices? Did it "really happen"? If not, what do we need to know?

And the angel said, "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 called holy, the Son of God. And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son . . . For with God nothing will be impossible." As the millennium turns, this Christmastide will be another blessed opportunity for bearing witness unashamedly to the church's ancient faith that very God of very God really happened here. "The Incarnation is like a dagger thrust into the weft of human history" (Edwyn Hoskyns). Let not the celebrated literary power of the stories themselves obscure this truth: "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."