

The Annunciation

The Annunciation scene in the New Testament (Luke 1, 26–38) is one of the better-known parts of the Gospels, its popularity owing much, no doubt, to its incorporation in the centuries-old devotion of the ‘Angelus’. But even many of those who have little or no attachment to Catholic Christianity, are familiar with the Annunciation because it has been so frequently represented in the history of Western art. Its fascination for artists suggests that from this simple scene a message emerges that transcends the framework of historical Christianity in which it was first formulated, and addresses some more general or fundamental truth about the human situation. And yet, this scene has a very precise and definite origin that lies in the first stirrings of Christianity.

In order to approach these early beginnings even tentatively, one might bear in mind that the scene of the Annunciation can probably only be rightly understood if viewed against the background of the meaning that angels had in Jewish culture and literature in, roughly, the two centuries, before the birth of Jesus. For at that time, the myth of the ‘fall of the angels’ was very much alive in Judaism and was even appealed to, much more than the ‘fall’ of Adam and Eve, to explain the source of evil in the world.¹ In this context the term ‘angel’ had by no means the almost entirely positive resonance it has for us today. The myth of the fall of the angels can already be found adumbrated in the Book of Genesis, where we read about ‘the sons of God’ – later understood as ‘angels’ – marrying ‘the daughters of men’ (Gen. 6, 2). The offspring of such unions were known as the ‘Nephilim’

¹ See Gerd Theissen, *Die offene Tür: Biblische Variationen zu Predigttexten* (Munich: Kaiser, 1990), 67. For information on the mythical role of angels in Jewish culture prior to the emergence of Christianity, I am indebted to Gerd Theissen’s reflections on the story of the Annunciation (‘Die Verkündigung an Maria – ein Antimythos zur Geschichte von den lüsternen Engeln’), in *ibid.*, 66–69, from which many of the ideas in this piece derive.

(Gen. 6, 4) – a term that seems to have originally meant ‘the fallen ones’² – ‘mighty men . . . of old, the men of renown’ (ibid.), giants who were warriors and famous heroes, but whose actions brought catastrophe upon the human race and finally provoked, as divine retribution, the biblical flood described in Genesis.

In the few centuries before the birth of Jesus, such ambiguous and threatening ‘angelic’ figures were to be identified, in the imaginative Jewish apocalyptic literature of the period, with the new military and cultural power in the Jewish world, the successors of Alexander the Great, and, somewhat later still, with the Romans, who replaced the former Hellenistic rulers. Such world powers made their presence felt within Judaism above all by their military might, behaving as if they were gods or sons of gods (‘angels’), in their own eyes at least, and being happy to be fêted as such. As tends to be the case with occupying armies, the attitude they adopted to the women of the weaker peoples they had conquered was not marked by any excessive reticence. Those of Jewish origin who first heard the gospel preached will undoubtedly have had this specific historical background in mind, and will have been aware of the sinister, ambiguous aura surrounding the figure of an ‘angel’, whereas for us today, such natural awareness of the cultural background, not just to the Annunciation scene, but to so many aspects of the gospel story, is clearly no longer automatic.

Nevertheless, we can at least try by an effort of the imagination to put ourselves in the place of the earliest Christians who came mainly from the world of Judaism. And if we are willing to do so, it should not be too difficult to sense an element of surprise and reversal of expectations in the fact that the angel who approached Mary in the Annunciation scene was anything but an overbearing or menacing force seeking possibly to exploit her,³ but was rather a force for good wishing only to transmit a divine

² See art. ‘Nephilim’, by Ronald S. Hendel, in Bruce M Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (New York/Oxford: O.U.P., 1993), 556.

³ Theissen also points out that a passage like 1 Cor 11, 10 (‘. . . a woman ought to have a veil on her head, because of the angels’) can be understood against the background of the meaning ‘angels’ had at the time of Christianity’s emergence,

message. And the birth of the child ('the Son of God') which is announced is also quite different from the birth of, say, a violent, militarily powerful ruler, destined to conquer the world. And neither is Mary herself, despite her connection with the house of David through Joseph that Luke also mentions, an important personality in any worldly sense. She has no association with any ruling élite, but is rather a woman of the people. But despite this, the angel does also use the language of power in delivering his message, when he announces that the son Mary will bear will rule over the house of Jacob for ever and that his kingdom will have no end.

The question is, of course, what kind of power and rule is meant here. It seems clear, in the first instance, that no traditional, worldly understanding of power and rule is involved. For the contrast with purely worldly power is highlighted in the Annunciation scene by the fact that not even in the birth of the child is any human effort said to be involved in the realization of what is announced, but only the power of God. In short, God is said to be active in bringing about a different kind of reality from that which purely human power can achieve in this world. And hence Mary's passive response to the angel: 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word.'

The Annunciation scene expresses the redeeming difference that exists between the reality of God and the reality of all exclusively human power, which so often degenerates into cruelty and catastrophe. For the reality of God is other than that of the world, and, even more significantly, it cannot be undermined or ultimately held in check by any inner-worldly force. This simple, but revolutionary truth, which suffuses the entire Bible,

except that unfortunately an element of 'demonizing' (ibid., 68) of women has crept into New Testament thought at this point. Women, Paul seems to be insinuating, could be seen as only too willing to co-operate with the 'angels', or in less mythical language, could be seen as taking too much advantage of the 'freedom' the new Hellenistic culture had imported into traditional Judaism, and so should be forced to hide their potentially seductive appeal. Theissen comments that the Jewish struggle with Hellenistic culture seems to have introduced a new anti-woman element into Biblical thought – as can be seen, for instance, in the Pauline passage just cited – that was to have 'disastrous consequences' for the future (ibid., 68).

is articulated in one way among many others in the New Testament by the inclusion of the Annunciation scene in the Gospel of Luke, who is in fact the only evangelist to describe it. The scene's attraction for future generations may have its source in the other-worldly atmosphere that surrounds it, but it remains for all that – or rather, perhaps because of that – an enduring question-mark over our understanding of this-worldly power.