

The Sign Revisited: The Annunciation to Joseph, Matt 1:18–21; the Annunciation to Mary, Luke 1:28–38; the Virgin Birth & the Angelic Annunciation, Luke 2:7–11; Old Testament Prophecies, Micah 5:2; Isa 7:14; the Sign of the Cross, Luke 2:12; the Sign Will Be Instructive: “Sparganōō”: Burial Cloths, Prophecy: Isa 53:5, 9; Sacrificial Lambs Depict the Death of Messiah, Rom 5:8; 1 Pet 2:24; 2 Cor 5:21; the two Deaths of Christ

The Sign Revisited

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The Annunciation to Joseph:

Matthew 1:18 – Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.

v. 19 - And Joseph her husband, being [εἰμί, *eimí*] a righteous [δίκαιος, *dikaíos*] man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away privately.

The phrase “being a righteous man” begins with the present active participle of the verb *eimí*. It is linear *aktionsart* indicating continuous action. Joseph was a man of integrity. He is also noted as being righteous: *dikaíos*, which means he was a believer in the coming Messiah.

Because of these things, he did not want to disgrace her. So, after giving the situation detailed thought, he decided not to go through legal channels but to quietly return her to her father.

This is an area of personal sacrifice. By deciding to follow the least public approach, Joseph demonstrated his true love for Mary. A man would never humiliate the woman he loves in public, but rather protect her at all costs.

As usual for the positive believer, solutions to intractable dilemmas are resolved by application of the Word of God. Joseph had wisdom enough to know that if he went the legal route that Mary’s name would be besmirched throughout Nazareth. Having no knowledge of the fact that his betrothed was pregnant due to parthenogenesis: “Reproduction without concourse of opposite sexes or union of sexual elements,”¹ Joseph considered a bill of divorcement.

Parthenogenesis is a compound of two Greek words: (1) **παρθένος** (*parthénos*): virgin, and (2) **γένεσις** (*généσις*): origination. The 23 male chromosomes, miraculously created by the Holy Spirit, were united with Mary’s ovum to produce the perfect zygote of the Lord’s true humanity.

Ignorant of this, Joseph’s ability to completely protect Mary’s honor was impossible. Her pregnancy would eventually become known but at least the citizens of Nazareth would assume it was Joseph’s since in other parts of Judea more liberal attitudes toward the betrothal period allowed such behavior. He would at least have spared her a stoning and he would be able to assume the blame.

His problem was resolved by the appearance of an angelic messenger with the news that not only was the pregnancy not the product of adultery but rather the miraculous appearance of the Messiah into human history.

Matthew 1:20 - But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

v. 21 - “She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v.: “parthenogenesis.”

This is referred to as an Annunciation, i.e., the angel *announced* the news that Mary would give birth to the Messiah. *The Annunciation* is usually assigned to the angel's announcement to Mary of her impending pregnancy in Luke 1:28–36. The messenger is identified in Luke 1:26 as Gabriel, a seraph-rank, offer-of-arms archangel in the Angelic College of Herald's, who is commissioned to communicate divine revelation to select individuals.

The Annunciation to Mary:

Gabriel's opening remark to Mary was an uplifting salutation:

Luke 1:28 - The angel came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you!"

Two factors need to be observed. First, Jews were aware of angelic messengers' appearances to biblical personalities. Secondly, on several occasions these angelic heralds were bearers of impending divine wrath. To be approached by a seraph angel would obviously cause one to become startled. Mary is described as being confounded:

Luke 1:29 - But she was very perplexed [διαταράσσω (*diatarássō*)] at this statement, and kept pondering [διαλογίζομαι (*dialogízomai*)] what kind of salutation this might [εἰμί (*eimí*)] be."

Diatarássō means to be confounded, i.e., confused, bewildered, and puzzled. She is said to ponder the meaning of this angelic encounter, *dialogízomai* means that Mary began to concentrate on what was said but the optative mood of *eimí* indicates that she has great doubt.

But Gabriel told her to relax by preceding his remarks with the mandate **Μὴ φοβοῦ** (*Mé phobou*): "Do not be afraid!" He then gave her a detailed explanation but did not include information Mary considered vital:

Luke 1:30 - So the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid [Μὴ φοβοῦ (*Mé phobou*)], Mary, for you have found favor with God!

v. 31 - Listen: you will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name Him Jesus [Ἰησοῦς (*Iēsoús*): **Savior**].

v. 32 - He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David.

v. 33 - He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will never end [**Davidic Covenant; see 2 Samuel 7:16**]."

Luke 1:34 - Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I have not had sexual relations with a man?"

Mary has been happily involved in preparations for her wedding which was still nine months off. Now she is interrupted by Gabriel's honorific introduction followed by what she interprets as an insult. It is incongruous to her that she would be assigned the duty of giving birth to Messiah since she retorts to Gabriel, "How will this be since I have not had sexual relations with a man?"

Gabriel quickly addresses her concern with the revelation of the divine plan to introduce the God of the universe into human history by means of hypostatic union:

Luke 1:35 - The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the Child to be born [**true humanity**] will be holy; He will be called the Son of God [**undiminished deity**].

v. 36 - "And look, your relative Elizabeth has also become pregnant with a son in her old age—although she was called barren, she is now in her sixth month!

v. 37 - "For nothing will be impossible with God."

v. 38 - So Mary said, “Yes, I am a servant [**feminine singular of δούλη, *doulē*: slave woman**] of the Lord; let this happen to me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

The miracle that occurred in Mary was created by the Holy Spirit. Three words in verse 35 describe the miracle of the virgin pregnancy. The first phrase states that the “Holy Spirit will come upon”: **ἐπέρχομαι (*epérchomai*)**: “will rest,” plus the preposition **ἐπί (*epí*)**: “upon.”

This is followed by the source of the miracle, “the power of the Most High,” the noun **δύναμις (*dúnamis*)**: “omnipotence,” plus the designation of the Third Person of the Trinity, the descriptive noun **Ἵψιστος (*Húpsistos*)**: “Most High.”

What follows is the future active indicative of the verb **ἐπισκιάζω (*episkíázō*)**: “to envelop.” The future tense is predictive for an event that is expected to occur at a future time. The active voice stipulates that the Holy Spirit will produce the action of the verb. The indicative mood denotes this is a future event in the divine decree guaranteeing certain futurity.

On the occasion of the virgin birth, this human life belonged to Jesus of Nazareth who is also called the Son of God—the union of true humanity with undiminished deity: the hypostatic union.

Luke 1:35 - Seraph Gabriel replied, “The Holy Spirit will rest upon you, and the omnipotence of the Most High will envelop you. The sanctified One—set apart to the service of God—which is to be born will be called the Son of God.”

The Virgin Birth and the Annunciation to the Shepherds:

Luke 2:7 - And Mary gave birth to her first-born Son. She wrapped Him in strips of cloth [**σπαργανώω, *sparganóō***] and she laid Him in a manger [**φάτνη, *phátñē***] because there was no vacancy in the inn.

v. 8 - In that same region there were shepherds living out in the fields and they were guarding their flocks by night.

v. 9 - And an angel from the Lord [**Γαβριήλ, *Gabriel*: seraph rank king of arms of the Angelic College of Heralds**] stood before them and the glory of the Lord shined around them and the shepherds were very afraid.

v. 10 - And the angel said to them, “Stop being afraid! For behold, I bring you good news of great happiness which shall be for all people.

v. 11 - “Today, in the city of David there has been born for your benefit a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

Two passages from the Old Testament are fulfilled at the time of this annunciation to the shepherds:

Micah 5:2 - “As for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, yet from you One will go forth on My behalf to be ruler of Israel [**true humanity**]. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity [**undiminished deity**].”

Isaiah 7:14 - “Therefore, the Lord Himself shall give you a miraculous sign: Behold, the virgin shall become pregnant and bear a Son, and she will call His name Immanuel [**God with us**].”

The Sign of the Cross:

Luke 2:12 - “This sign is for your benefit: you will find the Baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a feeding trough.”

There is a technical grammatical arrangement leading off this verse that causes a very subtle but yet misleading translation in our English Bibles. The three major ones read basically the same: "This is a sign for you."

However, the verb **εἰμί, eimí**: "to be," is not in the Greek manuscripts. The grammar demands it but it is not unusual for the sake of emphasis to leave the verb out of certain sentences and such is the case here.

The emphasis is on the word **σημεῖον, sēmeíon**, and translated "sign." The verse begins with the pronoun **οὗτός, houtós**, translated "this." It draws attention to the subject, "sign."

What follows is an ellipsis where the verb *eimí* would ordinarily go and then the subject: "This is a sign" would be the complete translation. The word for "sign": *sēmeíon*, would normally be in the nominative case, but, instead, it is in the accusative case. This opens up a number of possibilities for the exact translation. But in context, the emphasis is not going to be on the sign itself but on what the sign represents.

Therefore, the following conclusion is reached: *sēmeíon* is a nominative subject in accusative form. This demands that the verb *eimí* be supplied for the ellipsis. Because of the accusative form the following translation emerges: "This sign is for your benefit."

The word *sēmeíon*, or "sign," has three applications in context all of which are to the benefit of the shepherds as well as all believers of any generation:

1. Something by which something is known. By this sign we will be able to learn a very important doctrine.
2. A system which teaches something important. A very important doctrine is going to be associated with the Messiah's clothing and location. It helps describe the "good news of great happiness" spoken by Gabriel in verse 10.
3. A sign for identification of a person of great importance. The mission of the Messiah is revealed in the sign.

What follows is the revelation of the sign in two sentences. Number 1: "You will find the Baby wrapped in strips of cloth."

The words, "wrapped in strips of cloth" are one word in the Greek, the perfect passive participle of the verb **σπαργανῶ, sparganō**: "having been wrapped in strips of cloth." The etymology of this word is instructive:

1. *Sparganō* was first used by Hippocrates, the fourth-century B.C. Greek physician known as the Father of Medicine. However, he is incorrectly credited with writing the Hippocratic oath administered to graduate physicians.
2. The best definition of *sparganō* is "burial wrap." In the ancient world, medical areas had a supply of this cloth available so that whenever a patient died he could be immediately wrapped and buried.
3. When a wounded patient was being treated for cuts, swaths of this material were torn off and used as bandages.
4. That the newly born Christ Child is wrapped in burial cloths is said by Gabriel to be a sign: the Messiah is identified with death on the day of his birth.
5. Those who were believers would be able to understand the sign. They could relate Old Testament prophecies with a suffering Messiah. For example:

Isaiah 53:5 - He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our peace [**reconciliation**] fell upon Him, and by his scourging we are healed [**spiritually**].

v. 9 - His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man [**Joseph of Arimathaea**] in His death, because He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth.

6. For these shepherds, knowledge of such passages of Scripture enabled them to understand the sign of the death wrappings around the newborn Messiah.
7. The Father's plan for salvation called for the undiminished deity of the Second Person of the Trinity to become inseparably united with true humanity, yet without sin.
8. This required the virgin pregnancy and the virgin birth.
9. Without a human father, Jesus was born as Adam was created. He was trichotomous, minus an inherited sinful nature, and therefore, minus the imputation of Adam's original sin.
10. Consequently, on that first Christmas night, Jesus arrived in this world as a Lamb without spot or blemish—the very same description applied to the sheep the shepherds were guarding on the outskirts of Bethlehem.
11. These were sacrificial animals—without spot or blemish—whose blood covered the sins of the people on each Day of Atonement.
12. Jesus as the Christ was destined to be a substitute for the people; He was decreed to die on the cross once for all.

Romans 5:8 - God demonstrated His own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died as a substitute for us.

1 Peter 2:24 - He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds we are now healed.

2 Corinthians 5:21 - God made Him Who knew no sin to be made sin as a substitute for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

13. In Romans 5:8 and 2 Corinthians 5:21 we see the translation “as a substitute for us.” This includes the preposition **ὑπέρ (hupér)** which is usually translated “for us.” Combined with the genitive of advantage of the pronoun **ἐγὼ (egó)**, translated “us,” the phrase can be rendered “on behalf of us,” or “instead of us.” Both carry the idea of substitution and this is the best way to translate the phrase: “as a substitute for us.”
14. The Christ Child wrapped in burial cloths is a sign that He entered this life at the first Christmas with the assigned mission to become our substitute: to die spiritually for our sins (Isaiah 53:9) and to die physically so that we might have a resurrection body just like His (1 John 3:2).
15. The substitutionary death of Christ is often diminished, ignored, or unknown to those who write commentaries. Yet it is the source of our salvation although His physical death is quite often assumed to be.
16. Here are two sources that comment on **מָוֶת (maweth)** the Hebrew word for death which is found in:

Isaiah 53:9 - His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man in His deaths [**מָוֶת (maweth)**], because He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth.