

Gabriel the Archangel

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July 13 marks the Synaxis of the Archangel Gabriel, the leader of the heavenly hosts of angels. The Prologue from Ochrid reminds us that we can find him in many "appearances and marvels through the whole history of the salvation of mankind."

In the Old Testament, Gabriel appears to Daniel, proclaiming to the "greatly beloved" prophet, "I have now come to give you wisdom and understanding" (Daniel 9:22-23). He imparts to Daniel a vision of both future tribulations and the coming of an "anointed one." It is clear from this encounter that angels sometimes appear in human form, for Daniel refers to his visitor as "the man Gabriel." They also sometimes fly; Daniel says that Gabriel "came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice."

The first chapter of the Gospel of Luke tells of two other appearances of Gabriel, both directly related to Our Lord. First the angel visits the aged priest Zechariah to tell him that he and his wife Elizabeth will not only no longer be childless, but shall have a son who "will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God." To this wonderful news, the old man gives what is definitely the wrong response: "How shall I know this?"

We can imagine the archangel turning his powerful gaze on Zechariah as he says, "I am Gabriel, who stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news." Zechariah is temporarily rendered unable to speak because of his disbelief. In the next verses, when Gabriel tells Mary she will bear the Son of the Most High, she is surprised, and questions him, but unlike Zechariah she believes and accepts his great news.

Both Mormons and Muslims teach things about Gabriel that Christianity absolutely rejects. Mormons claim that it was Noah "in his role as the archangel Gabriel" who visited Zechariah. For Muslims, it was Gabriel who revealed the Qur'an to Mohammed. Therefore, according to Islam, the archangel considered Jesus to be a prophet of Mohammed rather than the divine and only-begotten Son of God. But in that second chapter of Luke, Gabriel tells Mary that Jesus is "the Son of the Most High" of whose "kingdom there shall be no end." Jesus, Gabriel is clearly saying, is the Savior all the prophets were readying us for, not merely a prophet himself of a messiah yet to come.

As Christians we aren't encouraged to speculate about things that are "too great and too marvelous" for us, but the prophet Daniel gives us a wonderful vision of the angels, including Gabriel, worshipping around God's throne: "A stream of fire issued and came forth from before Him; a thousand thousands served Him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him" (Daniel 7:9).

Troparion - Tone 4

Gabriel, commander of the heavenly hosts,
we who are unworthy beseech you,
by your prayers encompass us beneath the wings of your immaterial glory,
and faithfully faithfully preserve us who fall down and cry to you:
"Deliver us from all harm, for you are the commander of the powers on high!"

The Troparion for this day urges us to call on Gabriel: "Deliver us from harm, for you are the commander of the powers on high!"