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SAVIOR, MESSIAH AND LORD:
AN AUDIENCE-CRITICAL STUDY OF LUKE 1:5–2:52

By
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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity
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Luke 1:5–2:52, commonly referred to as the “infancy narrative” of Luke’s gospel, has been the subject of a myriad of historical-critical and, more recently, literary-critical studies. One method rarely applied to this text is reader-response, or audience criticism. Only a handful of studies have attempted to elucidate how the ancient reader/audience might have interpreted Luke 1:5-2:52.¹ Of these sparse attempts, most examine only a singular aspect of the text. For example, Charles Talbert interprets the text through the lens of a contextualized implied reader,² with the goal of showing that the ancient reader would have interpreted Luke 1:5-2:52 according to the Greco-Roman biographical tradition of famous men. Thus, Talbert’s contextualized implied reader interprets the text exclusively through the lens of genre. While his work provides valuable insights into one aspect of the text certain to influence Luke’s audience, Talbert’s work neglects other aspects that would also influence the ancient audience’s interpretation of Jesus.³ The endeavor of this essay is to produce a robust, multi-faceted audience-critical study of Luke 1:5-2:52, specifically focusing on the character and identity of Jesus. In order to accomplish this, an Iserian-based reader-response approach will be employed to examine Luke 1:5–2:52.⁴ A thorough discussion of the methodology and its underlying assumptions is the essential starting point for this study.

¹ See Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke–Acts in its Mediterranean Milieu* (NovTSup 107; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 65–90. John Darr, *On Character Building: The Reader and the Rhetoric of Characterization in Luke-Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992). Darr does not conduct an exhaustive reader-response study of Luke 1:5–2:52. He applies reader-response to portions of this text with the goal of characterizing John the Baptist.

² This is Talbert’s own assessment (*Mediterranean Milieu*, 15). Talbert draws from the literary theory of Peter Rabinowitz and Hans Robert Jauss (*Mediterranean Milieu*, 14 n. 41–2, 15).

³ Talbert dismisses the Jewish aspects of the infancy narrative as a mere “coloring” of the text.

⁴ As will be described in detail below, the reader-response method used in this study will be based off of the work of Wolfgang Iser. See n. 9 below.

METHODOLOGY

While the term “reader” will be employed in this essay, it is used in full awareness that a large portion of the audience was illiterate and would have been “hearers” of the text. In the world from which the gospel emerged, there was only a fine line separating the aural from the written.⁵ Reader-response criticism is thought to capture the dynamic of the oral actualization of a text more accurately than other methods since it follows the text sequentially, paying attention to the cumulative effects of the text upon the audience. Therefore, it is an appropriate method to apply.⁶

Audience or reader-response criticism has its roots in reading theory and literary criticism. In its application, the method follows the text-reader interaction as the meaning of a text is produced. The goal of this method is to understand how the text affects the worldview of the reader. Some of the questions the method seeks to answer are the following: “What response does the text elicit from the reader?”;⁷ “What associations, expectations and conclusions is the reader making?”⁸ Biblical exegetes have often drawn from the work of reading/literary theorists such as Wolfgang Iser, Peter Rabinowitz, Stanley Fish and Hans Robert Jauss to guide them in defining concrete methods for analyzing texts. This essay will largely follow the reader-response theory of Wolfgang Iser,⁹ as interpreted and applied by biblical exegetes James Resseguie¹⁰ and

⁵ Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark’s World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress 1996), 43–4. Tolbert stresses that texts were written according to rhetorical guidelines and, therefore, were concerned with aural reception. Texts were written with the expectation that they would be read aloud. Likewise, George A. Kennedy, *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric* (SBLWGRW 10; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), ix, points out that the progymnasmata exercises provided the foundational training for both literary and oral rhetorical compositions.

⁶ John Darr, *Character*, 177 n.19.

⁷ Mark Allan Powell, *Chasing the Eastern Star* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2001), 15.

⁸ James L. Resseguie, “Reader-Response Criticism and the Synoptic Gospels,” *JAAR* 52, 2 (1984): 322.

⁹ The main points of Iser’s theory are delineated in Wolfgang Iser, “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach,” *New Literary History* 3, 2 (1972): 279–99; idem, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); idem, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

¹⁰ Resseguie, “Reader-Response,” 307–24.

John Darr. We begin by describing some the fundamental principles that undergird the method we will use to examine Luke 1:5–2:52.

The first fundamental premise of our method is that the reader plays a role in the creation of a text's meaning.¹¹ That is, the reader is not merely a passive recipient of the text but contributes to the creation of meaning as he/she responds to elements within the text. However, as Resseguie points out, the meaning of a text is not the "subjective fabrication of the reader, for the text itself guides the reader in its realization" because "the written portions place limits on the reader's production of textual meaning."¹² But what, exactly, does a reader *do* during the interaction between text and reader? According to Iser, any given text acts as an outline having an "unwritten" portion that "stimulates the reader's creative participation."¹³ As the reader follows the outline, he/she must "shade in" the "unwritten" areas of the text.¹⁴ For example, in the story of John the Baptist's birth, the author of Luke's gospel employs literary allusions to connect Zechariah and Elizabeth with Abraham and Sarah. Although Abraham and Sarah are never directly mentioned, the audience is provided with an "outline" which, if followed, allows the audience to draw a parallel between John's parents and Abraham and Sarah. Thus, the audience fills in an unwritten, but implied, piece of information.¹⁵

The dynamic process of "realizing" the meaning of a text involves more than filling in the unwritten portions of the outline.¹⁶ As readers progress through a text, conclusions are drawn and expectations are formed. These conclusions are continually reassessed as new information is engaged. John Darr describes the process in the following manner:¹⁷

¹¹ Resseguie, "Reader-Response," 308; Darr, *Character*, 18.

¹² Resseguie, "Reader-Response," 308, summarizing Iser, *The Implied Reader*, 276.

¹³ Iser, "The Reading Process," 280–1.

¹⁴ Iser, "The Reading Process," 281.

¹⁵ Iser uses the term "implied information." See, for example, Iser, "The Reading Process," 279.

¹⁶ Iser, "The Reading Process," 284.

¹⁷ Darr, *Character*, 30.

Moving through a text, a reader begins to formulate expectations and opinions which then become the basis upon which subsequent data is processed... Ideas about characters, events, settings, ideology, etc. are continually being reaffirmed, negated, revised, and supplemented... these mental constructions are sequential, cumulative and subject to change...

In the application of reader-oriented criticism, the critic pays careful attention to the movements of the reader as the narrative progresses – noting when unwritten information may be “shaded in,” and determining both the conclusions reached and the expectations formed. This process of assessing a reader’s activity requires that certain premises and assumptions be made with respect to the text itself.

The most basic premise that reader-response criticism makes regarding literary texts is that they are “rhetorical” in nature because they seek to elicit a response from the reader.¹⁸ In other words, the author of a text has intentionally worded, arranged and patterned the text so as to guide and engage the reader. The employment of recognized patterns, allusions, and literary or rhetorical techniques affect the reader’s response. Writers incorporate these elements into a text with the assumption that the audience will have the competency to respond to them.¹⁹ For example, when the author of Luke’s gospel uses an allusion to expand the meaning of a text, the author has assumed that the audience will be able to recognize the allusion.

Modern literary critics have recognized another prominent strategy authors utilize to guide audiences. The technique, known as defamiliarization, occurs when the author “suspends, twists, turns on its head the familiar or everyday way of looking at the world by substituting a new, unfamiliar frame of reference.”²⁰ James Resseguie describes the effect of defamiliarization as follows:²¹

¹⁸ Darr, *Character*, 17.

¹⁹ Tolbert, *Sowing*, 53.

²⁰ James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2005), 34.

²¹ Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 38.

Defamiliarization works best when textual disruptions cause the reader to slow down and take notice, or when norms and values firmly held by an implied audience are developed and then dashed. An unusual context, a difficult saying, an unexpected twist, a puzzling response, a violation of a readers' expectations, a shattering of commonplace assumptions—any of these disorients readers, forcing them to attend to something new.

While the nomenclature may be relatively new, ancient authors did create situations of defamiliarization to challenge their readers' assumptions and beliefs.²² As the text of Luke 1–2 is examined, it will become evident that the gospel's author does create these situations to challenge the beliefs of the audience.

The final critical premise of our methodology is that both the writing and the reading of any text are influenced by the cultural and historical milieu to which they belong.²³ For our study, we are assuming that the author and audience are contemporaries. If we are to accurately assess how Luke's audience would have interpreted his narrative, we must understand the literary, historical and cultural knowledge shared by both the author and the audience. This shared pool of knowledge is usually referred to as the "repertoire"²⁴ or "extratext."²⁵ More specifically, Darr defines the "extratext" as the background knowledge a reader possesses which makes it possible for the reader to "actualize" the text's meaning.²⁶ Darr identifies the following categories as comprising the extratext:²⁷

- Language
- Social norms and cultural scripts
- Classical or canonical literature
- Literary conventions: genres, type scenes, standard plots, stock characters, rhetorical techniques
- Commonly known historical and geographical facts.

²² For some examples of this in the gospels see Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 34–8; idem, "Reader-Response," 309–16.

²³ Darr, *Character*, 5.

²⁴ This is the term coined by Wolfgang Iser. See Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 53–85.

²⁵ Darr, *Character*, 22.

²⁶ Darr, *Character*, 22.

²⁷ Darr, *Character*, 22.

Identifying this extratext allows the critic to define, or “construct,” the reader. This “reader” becomes the lens through which the critic examines the text.

Before embarking on the process of constructing our reader, some of the limitations of this process should be addressed. While producing a valuable vehicle for criticism, the “constructed” reader is exactly that – a construct and not an actual first-century reader.²⁸ The accuracy of the construction will be shaped and also limited by several factors. The most basic is the fact that there are still gaps in our knowledge with respect to the Gospel’s origins and its surrounding world. Thus, it is often difficult to pinpoint exactly what knowledge a reader was expected to bring to a text. The reader defined for our analysis will also be limited by the following: my own personal assessment of the knowledge the ancient reader brings to the text (literary, religious, social, cultural); my assessment of literary techniques and rhetorical strategies utilized by Luke.

Despite these drawbacks, there is value in the task of employing a reader-response methodology. As already mentioned, this method best resembles the process that takes place when a text is received aurally. The construction of a reader will permit us to enter into the text of Luke 1:5–2:52 and identify at least one possible interpretation of Jesus.²⁹ Unlike form or redaction criticism, this methodology ties the various pericopae of the text together to form a whole. With respect to this study, this facilitates a more cohesive interpretation of the character of Jesus. While not addressed in this essay, a reader-oriented methodology can also provide insights into variant interpretations of a text.³⁰ Bearing these limitations and benefits in mind, we can start the process of defining the basic repertoire of Luke’s reader.

²⁸ Darr, *Character*, 21; Tolbert, *Sowing*, 51.

²⁹ As Powell shows, all texts can yield a multiplicity of meanings (*Chasing the Star*, 13–56).

³⁰ Powell, *Chasing the Star*, 69.

The Essential Repertoire

Using Darr's categories as a general guide, the following topics discuss the extratext essential for a competent reading of Luke 1:5–2:52:

1. Knowledge of Greek Septuagint and Christian catechesis.
2. Cultural scripts: divine power, divine disclosure and divine humans.
3. Genre of Luke's Gospel and infancy narrative.
4. Historical and Geographical information.

Knowledge of Greek Septuagint and Christian Catechesis

The prologue of the Gospel, Luke 1:1-4, provides some useful information regarding Luke's audience. From it we learn that Luke's writing is dedicated to Theophilus, a person who has received some type of catechesis in the Christian faith.³¹ Dedications to patrons were a common formal feature of certain ancient genres including ancient historiography. The name of the patron, Theophilus, means "lover of God," and some scholars consider Theophilus to have been a real person.³² Even if this is the case, this formal dedication does not imply that Luke-Acts was intended to be private communication.³³ This permits us to assume the existence of a broader audience that was also Christian and had also received some type of catechesis. Thus, familiarity with the person of Jesus and the basic Christian kerygma can be assumed.³⁴

³¹ Loveday Alexander, *The Preface to Luke's Gospel: Literary conventions and social context in Luke 1:1–4 and Acts 1.1* (SNTSMS 78; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993), 192. According to Fitzmyer, Theophilus should be regarded as a catechumen or neophyte and not a non-Christian [Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX* (AB 28; Garden City: Doubleday, 1981), 300].

³² François Bovon, *Luke 1: a commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, ed. Helmut Koester (Hermeneia 50; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 23; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 299; Loveday Alexander, "What if Luke had never met Theophilus," *BibInt* 8:1–2 (2000):161–70, 161. Despite these assertions, the reality that Luke-Acts is intended to be widely read supports the notion that the ultimate addressee is not a single individual.

³³ As Alexander notes, "Luke's substantial two-volume work is not by any stretch of the imagination a private letter: the address to Theophilus is a convention, part of the recognized literary etiquette of the Graeco-Roman world" ("What if Luke," 163). Also Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 300.

³⁴ So also John Darr, *Herod the Fox: Audience Criticism and Lukan Characterization* (JSNTSup 163; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 61–2.

Historical-critical studies of Luke's gospel have revealed that the author drew heavily from the Greek Septuagint; allusions to the Septuagint are especially prevalent in Luke 1:5–2:52.³⁵ This implies that the gospel's audience needed to have familiarity with the Septuagint in order to process Luke's narrative effectively. Given the scholarly consensus that Luke's audience was primarily composed of Gentile converts,³⁶ that position will be adopted for this essay. The question, then, is how to assess the level of familiarity that the reader would have had with the Septuagint.³⁷ For our purposes, we will assume that the reader can competently connect allusions and any direct references to Septuagint texts that significantly impact the characterization of Jesus.

Cultural Scripts: Divine Power, Divine Order and Divine Humans

The religious context of the first century CE was complex and dynamic, composed of a wide assortment of religious practices, philosophies and cults. While it would be impossible to describe this environment and all its complexities, a few salient, general observations relevant to this study must be made. Religion and religious practice were inextricably woven into the fabric of Greco-Roman life. While Jews and Christians were monotheists, the larger population worshiped a variety of deities both in public cults and in the household.³⁸ Regardless of religious or ethnic identity, worship of gods was predicated on the fundamental belief that gods possessed

³⁵ Bovon, *Luke*, 4; Darr, *Character*, 28.

³⁶ For example, Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (SP 3; Collegeville: Liturgical Press/Michael Glazier, 1991), 3; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 57–58; Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (ABRL; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 235, and Joel Green, "The Problem of a Beginning: Israel's Scriptures in Luke 1–2," *BBR* 4 (1994): 61–85.

³⁷ Joel Green ("The Problem," 61), notes the following: "We know tantalizingly little about how much intimacy with the Septuagint we might expect from a largely Gentile church in the second half of the first century CE. But we do know that what we now call the Old Testament, especially in its Greek translation, was *the Bible* for those communities."

³⁸ While multiple gods were worshiped, there existed a hierarchy of gods and, in the first century CE, there was a tendency to refer to the higher gods as the "one" god or "most high" god. See Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 34–5. Fox attributes some instances of the adoption of these titles to Judaism (35, 686 n. 27).

incredible power – power that could be wielded in behalf of, or against, individual persons, households or entire nations.³⁹

A corollary to this belief was the notion that the events of human life were ordered by divine powers.⁴⁰ Omens, signs and prophecy were some of the means by which the divine plan for human life was revealed.⁴¹ Again, the occurrence and acceptance of these forms of revelation was widespread among the extant religions of the first-century world.⁴² A first-century audience encountering the various signs and prophecies related in Luke 1:5–2:52, would readily believe that such communication from God was not only plausible but also credible.⁴³

While power was thought to originate in the divine, it was believed that this power could be made manifest in particular human beings. When an individual manifested some supernatural form of benefaction or virtue, it was attributed to divine power. By the time Luke’s gospel was written, several cultural phenomena related to this belief had been well established. The first of these is that persons thought to manifest divine power were elevated to god-like status. For example, the philosopher and mathematician, Pythagoras, was said to have had a golden thigh, indicating his divinity.⁴⁴ Another legend claims that Pythagoras was the son of a human woman named Pythais and the god Apollo.⁴⁵ As the latter example suggests, a second phenomenon that

³⁹ Fox confirms that a preoccupation with divine power existed among the “pagan” populace, “The gods were honoured for their power and their capacity for benefaction: the concept of “divine power” is very prominent in the dedications to pagan gods in the Imperial period” (*Pagans and Christians*, 40).

⁴⁰ Talbert, *Mediterranean Milieu*, 76.

⁴¹ Talbert, *Mediterranean Milieu*, 76. These were forms of divine revelation operative and accepted in both Jewish and non-Jewish contexts.

⁴² A.D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 99–121; 239–40.

⁴³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Among the Gentiles : Greco-Roman religion and Christianity* (ABRL; New Haven, Conn. : Yale University Press, 2009), 150.

⁴⁴ Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras*, 28, in *Heroes and Gods* (eds. M. Hadas and M. Smith; trans. M. Smith; New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 105–122.

⁴⁵ Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras*, 2. This is cited in Charles H. Talbert, “Miraculous Conceptions and Births in Mediterranean Antiquity,” in *The Historical Jesus In Context* (eds. A.J. Levine, D.C. Allison and J.D. Crossan; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 79–86, 81.

emerged was the development of legends linking the person's parentage to a deity. A third phenomenon was the development of a cult venerating the person.

Arguably, the most well known cult of this type during the first century would have been the ruler cult. Throughout history, rulers were often accorded divine status because of the immense power they possessed or in recognition of benefits their reigns had procured.⁴⁶ During the reign of Augustus, the Roman Imperial cult was shaped, solidified and propagated extensively.⁴⁷ Temples dedicated to emperors, complete with priesthoods and cults, existed throughout the Roman Empire.⁴⁸ For example, at the sanctuary of Pergamum the temple statue of the goddess Athena was replaced by a statue of the Emperor Augustus and an honorific inscription read: "We honor the Emperor, Caesar, son of a god, the god Augustus, who has oversight over the entire earth and sea."⁴⁹ Another text reflects more fully the beneficence and divine status attributed to Augustus,⁵⁰

Since the eternal and immortal nature of the universe, out of overflowing Kindness, has bestowed on human beings the greatest of all goods by bringing forth Caesar Augustus...the native Zeus and savior of the human race.

The above discussion lets us draw several important conclusions with respect to the broader socio-religious context of Luke's audience. First, during the time the gospel was written, people were preoccupied with divine power and loci of divine power. Secondly, individuals who were

⁴⁶ It is widely recognized that this can be traced back to the Egyptian thought world. Alexander the Great is usually attributed with the genesis of the ruler cult during the Hellenistic period. For a description of the development of the ruler cult from the Hellenistic world into the Imperial Roman period see Hans-Joseph Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity* (trans. B. McNeil; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 250–330.

⁴⁷ Allen Brent, *The Imperial Cult and the Development of Church Order: Concept and Images of Authority in Paganism and Early Christianity before the Age of Cyprian* (VCSup 45; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 19. Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Jerome Lecture Series 16; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 297–300.

⁴⁸ Some Roman emperors, like Caligula, were bold enough to claim divinity for themselves; others respected the human-divine boundary but pressed it to its limits (Klauck, *Religious Context*, 295, 303–4). Klauck cites the example of Augustus who, during his lifetime was not directly venerated as a god. However, the evidence suggests that every possibility stopping short of such a declaration was exploited (299).

⁴⁹ Klauck, *Religious Context*, 322.

⁵⁰ Inscription from Halicarnassus quoted in Klauck, *Religious Context*, 296.

perceived as manifesting supernatural power or virtue often were depicted as divine. Finally, stories and legends developed around these extraordinary individuals.

Genre of Luke's Gospel and Infancy Narrative

Identifying the genre of a written work clarifies some of the shared expectations both author and audience bring to a text. In the case of Luke's gospel, two items have influenced the scholarly consensus with respect to genre. Luke's gospel, as a single work, could be classified as ancient biography.⁵¹ However, because the Gospel is considered to be the first volume of a larger two-volume work (Luke-Acts), critics have used the composite two-volume work to determine genre.⁵² In addition, the prologue of Luke's gospel is considered to be an indicator of genre. The style and form of the Gospel's prologue also indicate that Luke was interested in situating his work within the larger context of Hellenistic literature.⁵³ Indeed, the comparison of Luke's prologue to the prologues of other contemporaneous historical writings has yielded a current scholarly consensus that Luke's gospel belongs to the genre of ancient historiography.⁵⁴ The author's mention of other historical "facts," such as the census under Quirinius (Luke 2:3) and the reign of Herod (Luke 1:5), also supports this conclusion.⁵⁵ However, Hellenistic historiography was, fundamentally, a narration of events written from a specific viewpoint with a

⁵¹ David Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment* (ed. W.A. Meeks; LEC 8; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 77.

⁵² Aune, *Literary Environment*, 77.

⁵³ Johnson, *Luke*, 29.

⁵⁴ The scholarly consensus still maintains that the Gospel's prologue indicates the genre to be that of ancient historiography. However, Loveday Alexander has argued that the prologue is not consistent with ancient historiographical prologues but, instead, with the prologues of ancient technical and scientific manuals. See Loveday Alexander, *The Preface to Luke's Gospel: Literary conventions and social context in Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1.1* (SNTSMS 78; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993). For an effective rebuttal of Alexander's argument see David Aune, "Luke 1:1-4: Historical or scientific prooimion?," in *Paul, Luke and the Graeco-Roman world: essays in honour of Alexander J.M. Wedderburn* (ed. A. Christophersen et al.; London; New York: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 138-48.

⁵⁵ Johnson, *Luke*, 5-6.

specific intent; it was not a narrowly defined genre.⁵⁶ The writing of ancient narrative, and historical narrative in particular, was a rhetorical endeavor having persuasion as a fundamental motive.⁵⁷ Luke’s self-stated purpose reflects this fact: he intends to “write an orderly account” of events so that Theophilus might have “τὴν ἀσφάλειαν” with respect to the instruction Theophilus had received.⁵⁸ An audience reading an historiographical account would have expected to encounter a narrative of events deemed by the author to be accurate and reliable.⁵⁹

As has been pointed out by scholars, ancient historiographical narrative was a fluid genre, often comprised of “subgenres,”⁶⁰ and much of Luke 1:5 –2:52 can be categorized as biographical material. Indeed, it has been shown that Luke utilized elements common to the Hellenistic literary-rhetorical topic lists of encomium and syncrisis – topic lists widely employed in Hellenistic biographies.⁶¹ Technically, the encomium was a means of praising an individual and was frequently used to prove an individual’s extraordinariness. Syncrisis was a technique utilized to compare two things, often the lives of two people, to demonstrate the superiority of

⁵⁶ For a brief examination of the rhetorical nature of Hellenistic historical writings, see Daryl D. Schmidt, “Rhetorical Influences and Genre: Luke’s Preface and the Rhetoric of Hellenistic Historiography,” in *Jesus and the Heritage of Israel* (ed. David P. Moessner ; Harrisburg: Trinity Press 1999), 27–60.

⁵⁷ Generally, narrative was understood to be rhetorical in nature regardless of the genre in which it was utilized. This is exemplified by the fact that narration was an integral component in rhetorical training. For further details see John O’Banion, “Narration and Argumentation: Narration as the heart of Rhetorical Thinking,” *Rhetorica* 5 n. 4 (1987): 325–51; Schmidt, “Rhetorical Influences,” 51.

⁵⁸ Johnson, *Luke*, 29 n. 4, emphasizes the fact that “τὴν ἀσφάλειαν” implies a “mental state of certainty or security...[therefore] Luke’s narrative is intended to have a convincing quality.

⁵⁹ From the audience’s point of view, a narrative’s believability was influenced by several factors. One of these factors was the reputation of the person reporting the events. Thus, those holding the author in esteem would have been more likely to believe Luke’s narrative. More importantly, the progymnastic manuals indicate that historiographical narrative, among the different types of narrative (dramatic, historical and political), was considered to be a narration of true events (see Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 75, 136–37, 183). Therefore, considering the fact that the Gospel’s preface accords with historiographical conventions, and the author also directly describes the text as a “*diegesis*,” one would have to conclude that the audience would deem the events narrated in the Gospel as true.

⁶⁰ George A. Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, ix; Aune, *Literary Environment*, 29–31; 77–112. Aune states that “Distinctions between history and biography, however, were more theoretical than practical. During the late Hellenistic period history and biography moved closer together with the increasing emphasis on character in historiography. Biography and history became more and more difficult to distinguish; encomium could and did pervade both.” (30).

⁶¹ See Michael W. Martin, “Progymnastic Topic Lists: A Compositional Template for Luke and Other *Bioi*?,” *New Testament Studies* 54 (2008): 18–41, 22.

one over the other.⁶² Luke uses syncrisis to compare John the Baptist and Jesus, thereby clarifying and accentuating certain aspects of Jesus' identity. Encomium and syncrisis often included discussion of the following topics: parents, nationality, city, ancestors, upbringing, circumstances at birth/miraculous occurrences at birth, deeds and depiction of virtues.⁶³ The author of the gospel incorporates most of these topics in Luke 1:5–2:52. In the world of the Gospel's author and audience, these topics were among the most fundamental indicators of character and identity, utilized in both literary and oratorical forms of communication.⁶⁴

Furthermore, biographical literary evidence suggests that there existed a widespread convention of depicting a "hero," or benefactor, as manifesting the above character traits in a supernatural manner, even from the earliest phases of life. Our prior reference to the legend of Pythagoras's conception is one example of this. Talbert has shown that, in the ancient Mediterranean world, stories depicting divine parentage, miraculous births and miracles/omens associated with birth were commonplace in biographical accounts of heroes.⁶⁵ As explained earlier, these stories were a means of accounting for the exceptional character of these heroes. In the case of Luke 1:5–2:52, they are strung together in a chronological narrative to form an "infancy narrative." The infancy narrative may be called a genre in its own right, and there is

⁶² Syncrisis, as defined in the progymnastic exercises of Aelius Theon is "language setting the better or the worse side by side. There are syncrises both of persons and of things." See Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 52–3. Undoubtedly the most famous use of syncrisis is found in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*.

⁶³ Although these topics varied according to each progymnastic manual, overall there is a great deal of consistency among the topic lists. For specific descriptions of the topic lists sampled from four progymnastic manuals (Theon, Ps.Hermogenes, Aphthonius and Nicolaus), see Martin, "Progymnastic," 22.

⁶⁴ Koen De Temmerman, "Ancient Rhetoric as a Hermeneutical Tool for the Analysis of Characterization in Narrative Literature," *Rhetorica* 28, n. 1 (Winter 2010): 23–51. Temmerman surveys the progymnasmata manuals as well as a wide variety of rhetorical treatises to identify the dominant "loci" used to describe and characterize individuals in ancient narrative literature.

⁶⁵ Talbert, "Miraculous Births and Conceptions," 79–86. While Jewish writers did not claim divine parentage for their heroes, evidence from the writings of Philo and Josephus suggest that they otherwise followed biographical/progymnasmata practices rather closely. For examples see (Talbert, *Mediterranean Milieu*, 72; 76) and (Martin, "Progymnastic Topic Lists," 30–6).

ample evidence that it was employed in Jewish, Greco-Roman and Christian contexts.⁶⁶ Given the prevalence of this type of biographical literature, it is reasonable to assume that Luke's audience would have encountered it elsewhere.⁶⁷ For Christian converts familiar with the adult life and deeds of Jesus, encountering the infancy narrative of Luke's gospel would have been well within their range of expectations.

History and Geography

A variety of rulers and geographical locations are mentioned in Luke 1:5–2:52. From a general and broad perspective, the historical figures and places are mentioned to indicate a timeframe and setting for the events being narrated. Thus, the audience would need to be able to attribute some significance to the persons and locations mentioned. Yet, given the factual discrepancies that exist with respect to the mention of the census under the reigns of Quirinius and Augustus, one must conclude that historical specificity was not the primary information a reader would glean from these references. Reading through the text it is obvious that, from a narrative perspective, the mention of rulers and locations signal to the audience the beginning of a new phase in history.⁶⁸ Darr notes that the listing of “rulers and realms” was an established

⁶⁶ García Serrano's study of infancy narratives is the most thorough and comprehensive to date. See Andrés García Serrano, *The Presentation in the Temple: The Narrative Function of Lk 2:22–2:52 in Luke-Acts* (Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2012), 87–145.

⁶⁷ Richard Pervo, “Israel's Heritage and Claims upon the Genre of Luke and Acts” in *Jesus and the Heritage of Israel*, ed. David P. Moessner (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 1999), 134–35 and Aune, *Literary Environment*, 12–13, note that comparative studies of Luke-Acts with contemporaneous literature suggest that its affinities lie with the popular literature of the time and not with the more formal histories or biographies. This suggests that Luke's audience belonged to the middle and lower social classes. However, as Aune points out, “Listening to the public recitation of written works was also a popular form of entertainment. All levels of the population of the Roman world were exposed to the variety of structures and styles found in rhetoric, literature and art that were on public display throughout the Empire” (13). Thus, regardless of social class, it can be assumed that a typical reader of Luke's gospel would have had familiarity with biographical conventions.

⁶⁸ So also Darr, *Herod the Fox*, 139.

historiographical convention, utilized as an introductory formula.⁶⁹ Given this, it is reasonable to assume that the audience was acquainted with this convention and interpreted it appropriately.

The most significant ruler mentioned in Luke 1:5–2:52 is the Emperor Augustus. Aside from the mention of Augustus in Luke 2:1, the gospel's author alludes to him in other sections of Luke 2. Lauded as the greatest Roman emperor, Augustus and his accomplishments were well remembered, commemorated and venerated long after his death.⁷⁰ Despite the fact that the audience of Luke's gospel would not have lived under the rule of Augustus, as inhabitants of the Roman Empire, familiarity with this figure would have been inescapable.

⁶⁹ Darr, *Herod the Fox*, 139. For examples from the Septuagint and Greco-Roman historiographical writing see 139 n. 4.

⁷⁰ Statues, pictures and coins bearing his likeness were daily reminders of Augustus (Zanker, *The Power of Images*, 298–300). Coins with Augustus's likeness commemorating his divinity were minted even during the reigns of later emperors [Bradley S. Billings, "'At the Age of Twelve': The Boy Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:41–52), the Emperor Augustus, and the Social Setting of the Third Gospel," *JTS* 60, 1 (April 2009): 70–89], 82, 82 n. 51.

APPLICATION OF METHODOLOGY

Preliminaries: Characterization as Rubric

Although several themes are set forth in Luke 1:5–2:52, our ultimate goal is to understand how the ancient audience/reader would perceive Jesus based on a reading of that text. Therefore, as the reader-response method described above is applied to the text, characterization will be the focus of our study. As each pericope is examined, some general questions can be posed in order to deduce an audience’s perceptions of a character. The most significant questions relative to characterization are the following:⁷¹

1. How does the narrator describe the character?
2. What do other characters say about the character being examined?
3. What does the character do and say?
4. Does the setting indicate anything about the character?

These questions provide a broad framework for understanding how Jesus is characterized.

However, it is also necessary to identify specific character attributes and characterization techniques relevant to the first-century milieu. Several of these were mentioned earlier in our discussion of genre.

In his broad survey of texts, Koen De Temmerman identifies rhetorical “loci” and techniques used to characterize individuals in ancient rhetoric and literature.⁷² Likewise, in his study of the influence of the progymnasmata manuals on ancient biography, Michael W. Martin

⁷¹ These questions are standard questions posed by narrative critics. For a comprehensive discussion illustrating the significance of these questions, see Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 87–166.

⁷² Cf. n. 60.

summarizes the common topics used in biographical characterization.⁷³ Drawing from these two studies, the following topics and techniques are relevant to our study of Luke 1:5-2:52.⁷⁴

- Syncrisis: comparison with another
- The attribution of epithets or titles (antonomasia)
- Identification of origins: parents, city, nation
- Events, omens or miracles associated with birth
- Nurture, upbringing and training
- Description of actions and speech
- Description of mind (virtues) and body
- Setting

As the various pericopae are examined, the use of these indicators and their effect on audience interpretation will be highlighted.

As implied in question 2 above, characters within a narrative help to define one another. With respect to the characterization of Jesus, three characters are of special importance. The author's use of syncrisis indicates to the reader that the characterization of John the Baptist is a reference point for the characterization of Jesus.⁷⁵ Throughout the infancy narrative, the "offstage" figure of God guides the progression of events. From the moment Jesus is introduced into the narrative, his identity and mission are intimately related to the actions and words of God. With the exception of Luke: 2:41–52, all of the information revealed about Jesus is done through divine messengers or through humans under God's influence. Therefore, it is impossible to treat any aspect of the character of Jesus without some reference to God's character and action. Finally, because Mary is Jesus' parent, certain aspects of her characterization are relevant to understanding the characterization of Jesus.

⁷³ Martin, "Progymnastic Topic Lists," 22.

⁷⁴ I have not included all of the loci, topics and techniques identified in the work of these scholars. I have only included those items which apply to Luke 1:5-2:52.

⁷⁵ Syncrisis was employed to compare to known figures against one another. To compare a prominent figure to an unknown figure would have greatly diminished the effect of the syncrisis. Therefore, we can assume that the audience knew of traditions that held John the Baptist in significant esteem.

Because syncrisis is a narrative structural technique that provides a framework for information, some initial observations regarding its use in Luke 1–2 are helpful. As previously mentioned, the gospel’s author uses syncrisis to compare and contrast John the Baptist and Jesus. The use of syncrisis mandates that we pay careful attention to the characterization of John the Baptist so that we can accurately interpret the characterization of Jesus. The following table illustrates the parallel structure of the biographical material.⁷⁶

Table 1: Syncrisis of John and Jesus in Luke 1:5–2:52

<i>John</i>	<i>Jesus</i>
<p>A. Annunciation narrative Parents/setting (1:5–10) Miraculous annunciation of birth⁷⁷ (1:11–20) Setting transition (1:21–23)</p> <p>B. Confirmation of pregnancy (1:24–25) Elizabeth hides for 5 months Elizabeth acknowledges the Lord’s beneficence</p>	<p>A’. Annunciation narrative Parents/setting (1:26–27) Miraculous annunciation of birth (1:28–38) Setting transition (1:30–40)</p> <p>B’. Confirmation of pregnancy (1:41–55) John leaps in Elizabeth’s womb Elizabeth’s proclamation Mary’s canticle of praise/summary</p>

⁷⁶ For another perspective on this parallelism, see Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 313–4.

⁷⁷ Brown, *Birth*, 156, provides a detailed multi-step description of the general form of biblical annunciations of birth. The basic pattern is as follows:

1. An angel of the Lord appears
2. The visionary exhibits fear or reacts to the angel’s presence
3. The divine message is delivered
4. The visionary objects or asks for a sign
5. A sign is given

<p>C. Birth of John (1:57–58)</p> <p>D. Circumcision/naming (1:59–79)</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Portents/prophecy/signs</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Naming of child controversy</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Zechariah’s tongue released</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Reaction of crowd</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Zechariah’s praise/prophecy</p> <p>E. None</p> <p>F. Growth (1:80)</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">John grows, strong in Spirit, in the wilderness</p> <p>G. None</p> <p>H. None</p>	<p>C’. Birth of Jesus (2:1-20)</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Setting</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Birth</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Miraculous annunciation of Birth</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Portents/prophecy/signs</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Angel</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Doxa of God appears</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Heavenly army appears</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Reaction of shepherds, Mary and “all who heard”</p> <p>D’. Circumcision/naming (2:21)</p> <p>E’. Presentation in the Temple (2:22–39)</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Setting</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Prophecy of Simeon</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Reaction of parents</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Prophecy of Anna</p> <p>F’. Growth (2:40)</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Jesus grows, strong, filled with wisdom, favored by God</p> <p>G’. Childhood deeds/virtue (2:41–51)</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Jesus in the Temple at age 12</p> <p>H’. Growth (2:52) – wisdom, stature, favor</p>
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As is obvious from this table and often noted by commentators, the material is not a balanced syncrisis.⁷⁸ The material related to Jesus outweighs the material depicting John in both quantity and quality. Sections B and B’ differ significantly, with the latter containing divinely inspired testimony in reaction to Jesus’ conception. The major additions include a second “annunciation of birth” after Jesus is born (see C’), the scene depicting the Presentation of Jesus (E’), the pericope detailing Jesus at age twelve (G’) and a second growth statement (H’). John’s character exits the narrative at the end of Luke 1 and does not appear again until after the infancy narrative

⁷⁸ For example, Brown, *Birth*, 250.

is completed. The narrative parallelism is most obvious between sections A and A' since they are separated by only the short, transitional scene labeled B.⁷⁹ Thus, it is at the very outset of the narrative that the arrangement of the syncrisis has its greatest impact on the reader. The salient elements of the syncrisis will be discussed as the text is analyzed.

Analysis of the Text

The infancy narrative immediately follows the rather eloquent prologue. In the shift from the prologue to the infancy narrative, a dramatic stylistic change occurs. According to Luke Timothy Johnson, the author of *Luke-Acts* is using a common Hellenistic literary technique in which language is stylistically archaized to give the reader a sense of being transported back to another point in time.⁸⁰ Bovon suggests that this technique would have indicated to the reader that Luke was writing the continuation of biblical history – a history with long-established roots.⁸¹ Accompanying the stylistic change in language is a change in the person of the narrator. Luke moves from the first person voice of the prologue, to a third person omniscient narrator, thereby lending a sense of increased reliability to the account being narrated.

Annunciation of John's Birth

The character of John the Baptist is depicted through a description of the setting, his parentage, and an angelic announcement. The pericope opens (Luke 1:5) using a convention common to ancient historiography: the listing of a ruler(s) and the corresponding realm(s). The use of this convention accomplishes two things with respect to the audience. First, it signifies that a new

⁷⁹ Brown, *Birth*, 250.

⁸⁰ Johnson, *Luke*, 34-35. According to Johnson, Luke's archaizing includes the use of Semitisms, allusions to the Septuagint, and a more distinct change in the rhythm of the language.

⁸¹ Bovon, *Luke*, 30.

and important historical event is occurring.⁸² Secondly, it informs the audience of the chronological time and geographical location of the events being narrated. In the case of Luke 1:5, the narrator takes the audience back in time to the reign of Herod the Great (37 BC –4 CE), the king of Judea. During Herod’s reign the Jerusalem temple had been expanded and was still standing.⁸³ Indeed, the narrative setting of the first event is the Jerusalem temple.

The narrative describes the priest, Zechariah, and his wife, Elizabeth, in terms that are exclusively Jewish. He is of the priestly division of Abijah and she of the daughters of Aaron. Their character is revealed in parallel statements made by the narrator:

- 1:6a And both were righteous before God
 b Walking blamelessly in all the commandments and regulations
 of the Lord.

Despite their impeccable faithfulness, they have no children; Elizabeth is barren and both are old. Given the audience’s familiarity with basic Septuagint stories, the description of Zechariah and Elizabeth would have triggered a connection with at least two of Israel’s ancient ancestors: Abraham and Sarah.⁸⁴ Like Sarah, Elizabeth is barren. In addition, both sets of parents are beyond their childbearing years. The allusion reinforces the point that the story of Christianity is rooted in the ancient story of Israel.

As the narrative continues, the audience learns that Zechariah is chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the temple and offer incense. This “winning” would have been interpreted as a divine decision,⁸⁵ especially in the context of the temple. Thus, the reader begins to perceive that

⁸² Darr, *Herod the Fox*, 139.

⁸³ Even if the audience did not know of Herod the Great or his rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple, at a minimum, the audience could be expected to know that Judea was the location of the Jewish temple.

⁸⁴ While other childless couples were depicted in the Old Testament/Septuagint, the depiction of Zechariah and Elizabeth corresponds best to the situation of Abraham and Sarah.

⁸⁵ The casting of lots was viewed as an expression of divine decision in both Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts. See William Beardslee, “Casting of Lots at Qumran and the Book of Acts,” *Novum Testamentum* 4 n.4 1960 p. 245–52.

God is directing events. This perception is further substantiated when Zechariah enters the temple, begins to offer incense and, suddenly, an angel “του κυρίου” appears next to the altar.⁸⁶ The angel, the first character to speak in the narrative, assures Zechariah that his prayer has been heard by God and then delivers an oracle declaring a miracle: Elizabeth will bear a son whom they will name John (1:13).

From the audience’s perspective, the angel’s announcement could have precipitated several conclusions. First, this event clearly indicates to the audience that the God of Israel and, therefore, the God of Christians is reliable; God hears and answers the prayers of those who are faithful.⁸⁷ Secondly, as attested in Israel’s past history, God is able to overcome impossible obstacles in order to fulfill the divine plan. A third possible conclusion would be that overcoming barrenness is an established part of God’s repertoire – it is not an unprecedented miracle on God’s part. Finally, the assignation of a name to the child would suggest that John has a significant and special place in God’s plan.⁸⁸

Aside from announcing the birth of John, the angel’s words provide a detailed description of John’s identity and role. In a series of statements that are rich in Old Testament/Septuagint allusions and echoes,⁸⁹ the character and mission of John are revealed.⁹⁰

- 1:14a You will have joy and gladness
- 1:14b and many will rejoice at his birth.
- 1:15a For he will be great before the Lord,
- 1:15b and he will drink no wine or strong drink.

Luke also assumes that the audience would have been familiar with the rarity of winning the privilege of offering incense. On this see Brown, *Birth*, 259.

⁸⁶ Luke employs the Hellenistic title “ὁ κύριος” as a title for YHWH throughout his narrative. On the origins of this practice, see Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 200-2, especially the references on (202).

⁸⁷ Fox points out that, in the larger Greco-Roman religious context, the concept of the gods “hearing” the prayers and invocations of supplicants surged during the time of early Christianity. This is witnessed to by the fact that models of large ears were dedicated in numerous temples (Fox, *Pagans*, 127).

⁸⁸ Brown, *Birth*, 272; Darr, *Character*, 63. Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 325.

⁸⁹ See Brown, *Birth*, 270–9; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 316 .

⁹⁰ I have chosen to follow the translation of Raymond Brown, as found in *The Birth of the Messiah*, throughout.

- 1:15c And he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb,
- 1:16 and he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.
- 1:17a And he will go before Him
- 1:17b in the spirit and power of Elijah
- 1:17c to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children
- 1:17d and the disobedient unto the wisdom of the just,
- 1:17e to make ready for the Lord a prepared people.

From the oracle, Luke's audience learns that John's birth does not merely fulfill the prayers and hopes of faithful parents; John's birth will bring "rejoicing" to "many." This joy and rejoicing come about because of who John is and what he will do; John's identity and role are described in terms that intimately connect him to God. John will be considered "great" by God (1:15a), he will be set apart in the manner of an ascetic (1:15b),⁹¹ and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb (1:15c). These descriptors clearly distinguish John as a special agent of God. More specifically, they indicate that his role will be that of a prophet.

In the Septuagint, possession by God's spirit was the classic hallmark of a prophet; a person familiar with the Septuagint accounts of the prophets would have recognized this. At the same time, the concept of being filled with God's Spirit in utero would have been understood as a novel occurrence,⁹² leading the reader to infer that both John and his mission are exceptional in character. Verses 1:16–17e characterize John via a depiction of his future mission. In verse 1:16 the reader learns that John's mission is one of reversal and preparation, expressed in terms of "turning" people to God. Verses 1:17a–e flesh out the details of how this will be done.

⁹¹ Johnson, *Luke*, 33 n. 15; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 325–6. It is widely recognized that 1:15b is an allusion to the ascetic Nazirite life. Samson and Samuel, both conceived by barren women, were Nazirites.

⁹² Johnson, *Luke*, 33 n.15 states that Jeremiah is consecrated as a prophet from the womb (Sir 49:7; Jer 1:5), and that the description of John is consistent with this. However, Max Turner points out that there is no explicit mention of receiving the prophetic Spirit in utero [*Power From on High: The Spirit in Israel's Restoration and Witness in Luke-Acts* (JPTSS 9; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 151]. In Turner's opinion, this implies that John's role as prophet is distinguished from previous prophets.

In 1:17a and 1:17b, the reader is given crucial information to process: John will precede the Lord “in the spirit and power of Elijah.” The direct reference to Elijah invites the audience to draw associations between John and Elijah. Elijah’s story is recorded in the Deuteronomistic history in 1 & 2 Kings. The famous prophet defeated the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, raised the son of the widow of Zarephath, performed other powerful deeds and, ultimately, was taken to heaven in a chariot of fire. Certainly the “spirit and power of Elijah” would have provided a vivid picture for an audience to attach to John. However, the allusions to other Septuagint texts (LXX Malachi 4:5–6; Sir 48:10), in verse 17c–e, specify more clearly how John’s role is related to Elijah’s.⁹³ In Malachi 4:5 (LXX) Elijah is sent out “before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.” Both Malachi 4:6 (LXX) and Sir 48:10 speak of Elijah’s role as that of “turning hearts” before this appointed time. Therefore, the religio–temporal frame of reference for Elijah’s mission is clearly eschatological. Given the close association between these Septuagint texts and Luke 1:17c–e, one would have to assume that Luke would expect his earliest readers to be able to associate this image of Elijah with John. Overall, from the description of John in 1:16–17e, the audience would understand John to be the prophet sent by God before the day of God’s imminent judgment.

The eschatological nature of John’s mission is further confirmed when, after Zechariah’s question (Luke 1:18), the angel identifies himself as Gabriel, the name of the angel from the book of Daniel.⁹⁴ Gabriel appears to Daniel twice; both times he explains to Daniel events that will occur in God’s “appointed time.” In Gabriel’s second appearance (Daniel 9), he appears to Daniel at the hour of incense – a similarity shared with his appearance to Zechariah.⁹⁵ Of

⁹³ See Brown, *Birth*, 277, for the most thorough analysis of the parallelism between Luke’s text and these texts. Also Johnson, *Luke*, 33; Darr, *Character*, 64.

⁹⁴ In the book of Daniel 9:21, Gabriel also comes to Daniel at the hour of the offering of incense.

⁹⁵ Brown, *Birth*, 271.

particular importance is the fact that Daniel 9:24–25 speaks of a period of final preparation and conversion before the arrival of an “anointed prince” (Dan 9:25). Luke’s description of John’s role in 1:16–17e echoes these themes to the audience.

Another aspect of the text affecting the audience’s interpretation of this pericope is the author’s use of repetition. The repetition of significant words and their cognates serves to emphasize specific aspects of John’s ministry and character. Joy was considered to be a characteristic outcome of the anticipated eschatological reversal. In that sense, the repetition of the cognates χαρά and χαρήσονται (Luke 1:14a–b), together with the other indicators, would lead the reader to understand John’s birth in this type of context.⁹⁶ The Spirit’s relation to John and his ministry is emphasized through the repetition of πνεύματος (πνεύματος in verse 1:15c and πνεύματι in 1:17b).⁹⁷ A final significant point to note is the frequent repetition of words denoting God – forms of θεός (God) and the title κυρίος (Lord).⁹⁸ The numerous references suggest that God is controlling human history and events in accord with the divine plan, a plan in which John plays an essential role.

Before continuing our examination of the infancy narrative it is worthwhile summarizing our reader’s perceptions up to this point. In general, the reader has been transported to the world of Second Temple Judaism. From the most reliable of sources – the narrator and a heavenly messenger – the audience has learned that the God of the Israelites continues to guide salvation history. John will have an exemplary role in the fulfillment of that history. John comes from “excellent” Jewish lineage and his birth will be miraculous since God will overcome Elizabeth’s barrenness. John’s existence and mission will be unparalleled because he will be filled with the

⁹⁶ Johnson, *Luke*, 33.

⁹⁷ While verse 1:17b describes the “spirit and power of Elijah,” this spirit and power would have been understood as originating in God, not Elijah. Thus, the correlation of 1:15c and 1:17b seems appropriate.

⁹⁸ The word “God” is used 4 times and the word “Lord” is used 6 times in Luke 1:5–23.

Holy Spirit while still in the womb and will be “great” in God’s sight. Furthermore, his “possession” of the Spirit will enable him to accomplish the task assigned to him – that of preparing Israel before the great day of the coming of the Lord.

The characterization of John comes to a close at 1:17. The remainder of the pericope (1:18–23) recounts Zechariah’s unbelief, punishment, the public’s interpretation of this punishment and Zechariah’s departure. The account of John is followed by a brief transition, Luke 1:24–25, which serves to affirm the fulfillment of Gabriel’s oracle. As the angel foretold, Elizabeth has conceived a child. In 1:25 Elizabeth praises God for his favor. The story of Zechariah, Elizabeth and John, is interrupted and the reader is transported in time to the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy. The focus of the story shifts to another event being initiated by God.

Annunciation of Jesus’ birth (Luke 1:26-38)

Luke 1:26–30

The angel Gabriel appears again, but this time not in the center of Jewish cultic life. Gabriel is dispatched to the “insignificant Galilean hamlet” of Nazareth.⁹⁹

1:26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from
God to a city of Galilee known as Nazareth,

1:27 to a virgin betrothed to a man of the House of David
whose name was Joseph, and the virgin’s name was Mary.

The reader learns that Gabriel has been sent to visit a virgin named Mary. Mary’s status as a virgin is repeated twice (1:27), thereby emphasizing this to the reader. Mary is also described as betrothed to Joseph, a man of Davidic descent. Via the depiction of Joseph’s descent, the

⁹⁹ Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 343.

audience is clearly apprised of the fact that the couple is Jewish. The direct reference to the Davidic line could lead the audience to recall the promise made by God to David. At a minimum, the reference plants this seed in the readers' minds.

Aside from the mention of Mary's virginity, betrothal and Joseph's Davidic lineage, the author's introduction of these characters is rather nondescript. In contrast to the previous episode, no information is given regarding their observance of cultic or pious practices. Mary's lineage is not even mentioned. Rather, Mary's virginity is the central indicator of her character.¹⁰⁰ A wide range of associations could be made with respect to the term *παρθένος*.¹⁰¹ However, the narrative context guides the audience in making associations.¹⁰² Honor and purity

¹⁰⁰ Mary Foskett has drawn attention to Mary's virginity as character indicator. Mary Foskett, *A Virgin Conceived: Mary and Classical Representations of Virginit* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

¹⁰¹ For a comprehensive survey of the significance and meaning of *παρθένος* in Greco-Roman, Jewish and Christian literature of the first two centuries see Foskett, *A Virgin Conceived*.

¹⁰² For example, I cannot agree with Foskett (*A Virgin Conceived*, 118) when she suggests that the encounter between Gabriel and Mary could "conjure images of seduction, lust, and violence that both human and divine figures perpetrate against *parthenoi*." In Foskett's opinion, the fact that Gabriel is alone with Mary suggests that the audience would perceive a potential threat to Mary's virginity. She sees additional evidence of this in Mary's reaction to the angel's greeting. This question is pertinent to our discussion since the actions of Gabriel reflect on God's character. Subsequently the characterization of God, as Jesus' parent, reflects on Jesus' character.

While it is not possible to say with certainty that an individual reader would not interpret the scene as Foskett suggests, it is possible to assess the likelihood of this occurring. In assessing an audience's potential reactions, the narrative context must be given some priority. As Foskett herself recognizes, there is no mention of Mary's physical beauty in the scene, a common character indicator mentioned in virgin-violation stories. The fact that Gabriel has previously appeared in the narrative should be considered in assessing the likelihood of any conclusions reached by the audience. In his first appearance, Gabriel describes himself as one who is sent by God to speak and announce God's message (Luke 1:19). It would be logical for an audience to infer that Gabriel is sent again to announce a message from God.

Following the trajectory implied by Foskett's comment one could pose the question: Could the audience infer that the "favor" being announced is the sexual violation of her virginity? To answer this question, we must answer the following question: "What kind of reader would interpret Gabriel's announcement as alluding to the violation of Mary's virginity?" It would be highly improbable for a Jewish-Christian audience to draw this conclusion. The only instance of heavenly figures engaging in sexual activity with women is recounted in Genesis 6:4. Here, the "sons of God" take mortal women as wives before they procreate. The Hebrew/Jewish scriptures attest to a tradition of male heavenly figures appearing to women to announce impending births (Gen 16:7–12; Jdg 13:3; Jdg 13:9). Even though a Jewish-Christian might know some of the stories relating virgin-violation, that would not be the paradigm used to interpret the events of Luke 1:26–30. One could also consider whether a Gentile-Christian audience would entertain the connection suggested by Foskett. The answer to this question is dependent on what we assume influences the audience. Does knowledge of Jewish Scriptures and catechesis hold a privileged position as the reader interprets? If so, one would be hard-pressed to believe that the audience would read Luke 1:26–27 in the light of virgin-violation. It seems that there is only one type of reader that this conclusion would appeal to: an uncatechized, pagan, Gentile, first-time reader of Luke's gospel.

were two characteristics commonly ascribed to virgins.¹⁰³ The fact that Mary is a betrothed virgin emphasizes her fecundity. She is a young girl¹⁰⁴ preparing to cross the boundary into womanhood. While she bears these characteristics, in the view of a first-century audience, nothing divulged about Mary suggests that she is exceptional. In fact, from the perspective of both cult and society, she is among the lowest-ranking members.¹⁰⁵ This makes Gabriel's opening words to Mary especially surprising. The angel addresses the virgin with a declarative greeting (1:28b–28c):¹⁰⁶

1:28b Hail, O favored one, (Χαῖρε κεχαριτωμένη)

1:28c The Lord is with you!

1:29 Now she was startled at what he said and wondered what such a greeting might mean.

1:30 But the angel said to her: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor (χάρις) with God.

While χαῖρε was a commonly utilized greeting,¹⁰⁷ the alliteration of the two words in 1:28b would draw the attention of the audience.¹⁰⁸ The parallelism of the two parts of the greeting (1:28b and 1:28c) reinforces the angel's claim: Mary has received God's favor. The greeting is significant because it creates a situation of defamiliarization for the audience, especially in light of the preceding episode. Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous before God, had priestly lineage and, presumably, had prayed for God's benefaction.¹⁰⁹ None of these apply to Mary. The audience would not expect Mary to be a recipient of God's special favor. This perception is

¹⁰³ Foskett, *A Virgin Conceived*, 59.

¹⁰⁴ Joel B. Green, “The Social Status of Mary in Luke 1,5–2,52: A Plea for Methodological Integration,” *Biblica* 73 (1992): 458–471, here 464–65. According to the Jewish practice of the time, a female usually married before the age of 12 ½. Green also notes that contemporary Roman law established the minimum age for marriage at 12 and betrothal at 10.

¹⁰⁵ Johnson, *Luke*, 39. Green, “Social Status,” 465. The fact that her virginity ascribes honor to her does not suggest her status within society or cult were elevated beyond that of a young female.

¹⁰⁶ Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 346, points out that the greeting is declarative.

¹⁰⁷ Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 344.

¹⁰⁸ Johnson draws attention to the fact that “no translation can capture the alliteration of chaire kecharitōmenē” (*Luke*, 37).

¹⁰⁹ I make this assumption based on Luke 1:13 when Gabriel announces to Zechariah that his prayer has been heard.

affirmed in Luke 1:29 when the narrator describes Mary's inner thoughts. Mary is startled by Gabriel's message and does not know what it means. Unlike Zechariah who was frightened by the angel's appearance, Mary is startled by what the angel has said.¹¹⁰ She would not expect to receive God's unrequested favor and does not understand what that favor entails. The audience's expectations continue to be challenged as Mary's encounter with Gabriel continues. In 1:30, for a second time, Gabriel tells Mary that she has found favor with God (1:30).

Defamiliarization challenges audience expectations and requires an adjustment of those expectations. What expectation is the audience being asked to adopt in light of Luke 1:26–30? The most obvious would be that God favors even those who are unimportant in the eyes of cult and society; thus, societal and cultic values do not necessarily reflect what God values. The prophecy that Gabriel delivers continues to challenge the audience's expectations.¹¹¹

Luke 1:31–35

- 1:31a And behold, you will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son,
- 1:31b and you will call his name Jesus.
- 1:32a He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High.
- 1:32b And the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David;
- 1:33a and he will be king over the House of Jacob forever,
- 1:33b and there will be no end to his kingdom.
- 1:34 However, Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have had no relations with a man?"
- 1:35a The angel responded,
- 1:35b "The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
- 1:35c and power from the Most High will overshadow you,

¹¹⁰ Lucien Legrand, *L'Annonce à Marie*, (Paris: Cerf, 1990), 74 and Mark Coleridge, *The Birth of the Lukan Narrative* (JSNTSup 88; Sheffield: JSOT Press 1993) reach similar conclusions (56–57).

¹¹¹ Indeed, the theme of God favoring those on the margins of society runs through the entire gospel.

1:35d Therefore, the child to be born will be called holy–
Son of God.”

Luke 1:31–34

Verse 1:31a cues the reader to understand the angel’s oracle as another annunciation of birth. Given the arrangement of the syncretism, the reader is led to compare this announcement with the preceding one. The contrast between the setting and characters of the previous pericope and those delineated now is reinforced in the mind of the audience.

This contrast continues as verses 1:32-33 begin to describe the role and identity of the child. The first term used to describe Jesus in line 1:32a is that he is “great.” Unlike the depiction of John (1:15a), there is no prepositional phrase qualifying Jesus’ greatness; Jesus is not “great before the Lord,” he is simply “great.”¹¹² In the Greco-Roman world, this attribution often was assigned to gods or rulers to indicate their power.¹¹³ The use of this term transcended religious boundaries, being utilized also in the Jewish scriptures. The Septuagint attests to the fact that the unqualified use of “great” is found only in reference to God;¹¹⁴ thus “great” speaks of a quality that is found in God alone. The use of this term in relation to Jesus would have resulted in the association of power and divinity with his character. The second half of 1:32a continues this association by attributing the title “Son of the Most High” to Jesus. Most High (ὕψιστος) is another title that was commonly utilized, in both Jewish and non-Jewish realms, as a title for a deity.¹¹⁵ The concept of a human being as “son” of the Most High would not have been foreign to a first-century audience. As indicated above, it was common in the Greco-Roman world to

¹¹² So also Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 325.

¹¹³ Walter Grundmann, “μεγας,” *TDNT* 4:529–44.

¹¹⁴ Bovon, *Luke*, 36. For example, Psalm 47:2 and Psalm 95:4.

¹¹⁵ The title ὕψιστος was used in the Septuagint as a translation for Hebrew and Aramaic equivalents (Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 347–8). In the Greco-Roman context it was often a title for Zeus, who was considered to be the chief god. Brown, *Birth*, 289, and Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 348, call attention to the fact that of all the New Testament writings, this title is most frequently found in Luke-Acts.

accord benefactors, especially rulers, divine filiation. However, the narrative setting of the text mandates that we consider Hebrew/Jewish aspects of this concept that might have influenced the audience's interpretation. In this tradition, the evidence suggests that "son" of the Most High would have indicated the king. One clear example of this is found in Nathan's oracle to David (2 Sam 7:14; 2 Kgdms 7:14 [LXX]).¹¹⁶ Here, Yahweh promises that, "I will be a father to him, and he will be to me a son," when speaking of David's offspring. Given the earlier reference to Davidic lineage it would be reasonable to expect the audience to connect the title "Son of the Most High" with Davidic kingship and David's anticipated heir. Thus, verse 1:32a, contributes a great deal to the reader's perception of Jesus. It suggests that God, power and Davidic kingship are all associated with Jesus.

The second half of verse 1:32b clarifies 1:32a. If the audience had missed the previous allusions linking the child to Davidic kingship, verse 1:32b would now make this association very clear. God – the God of Israel – will give Jesus the throne of his ancestor David. In other words, the Davidic kingship is being restored through Jesus. Verses 1:33a and 1:33b parallel one another, repeating the fact that Jesus will be king and adding a new aspect to this kingship: Jesus' reign and kingdom will be everlasting. The notion of an everlasting kingdom once again echoes a promise contained in the Davidic covenant (2 Kgdms 7:13, 16; 2 Sam 7:13, 16).¹¹⁷ Although the title Messiah has not yet been introduced into the narrative, the characterization of Jesus up to this point, along with the eschatological setting, indicates that Jesus is to be the anticipated Messiah.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, *Son of God: Divine, Human and Angelic Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 56–8. John Collins here provides evidence from the Septuagint royal psalms (LXX psalms 2, 44, 71, 88, 109) where the king is spoken of as Yahweh's son or begotten of Yahweh.

¹¹⁷ This idea is also expressed in Dan 7:14.

¹¹⁸ Collins and Collins, *Messiah and Son of God*, 71, observe that, "a successor to the Davidic throne in an eschatological context is by definition a messiah."

After verse 1:32, the description of Jesus comes to a temporary halt, as Mary asks Gabriel a question in 1:34: *How can this be since I have had no relations with a man?* While the posing of a question is a typical component of the annunciation of birth form, Mary's question serves an unusually important role here. Her question acts as a literary device,¹¹⁹ creating an opportunity for the author to make several important points. First, the question affirms her virginity, signaling to the audience that her honor and purity are intact. Mary's question also interprets Gabriel's initial message. Her question underscores the fact that she will conceive as a virgin before her marriage to Joseph.¹²⁰ The uniqueness of this event is also emphasized via the synchronism. The parallelism between the two annunciation pericopae draws the audience to compare Mary's conception to Elizabeth's. Mary's conception will occur in an atypical way; she will conceive without any human intervention. Although Mary and Zechariah both question the angel, the responses they receive are dramatically different. Zechariah is punished for asking his question. As Mark Coleridge points out, Zechariah exhibits a "failure of memory."¹²¹ He has forgotten Israel's history – God has overcome human barrenness before. In Mary's case, Gabriel responds positively. Mary has correctly assessed that God is acting in an unprecedented manner; her question is not out of place. From the audience's perspective, the unprecedented nature of Jesus' conception would indicate that his innate character is fundamentally unique. Mary's question opens the door for the audience to learn just how exceptional Jesus will be (Luke 1:35b–c).¹²²

¹¹⁹ Brown, *Birth*, 307; David Landry, "Narrative Logic in the Annunciation to Mary," *JBL* 114(1995): 65–79, 72.

¹²⁰ The earlier emphasis on Mary's virginity (1:27) provides a substantiating background for Mary's question.

¹²¹ Coleridge, *Birth of the Lukan Narrative*, 39. Landry also suggests that Zechariah has forgotten OT precedent ("Narrative Logic," 76).

¹²² Brown, *Birth*, 308.

Luke 1:35

Verse 1:35b and 1:35c are parallel statements describing God's action upon Mary. The action is portrayed as a "coming upon" and an "overshadowing" by the Holy Spirit. Verse 1:35c clarifies what the Holy Spirit is: it is the power that comes from God. This verse explicitly identifies the two.¹²³ In 1:35d it becomes clear that God's power will be the cause of Jesus' conception,¹²⁴ making the child holy and, literally, the son of God. It is quite obvious that the announcement in Luke 1:35 is the climax of this annunciation scene. From verse 1:26 to verse 1:35 the information given to the audience regarding Jesus' character and identity gradually escalates in importance. The pericope begins by introducing a very ordinary young woman and ends with the proclamation that she will conceive as a virgin and give birth to God's son. The specifics of this climatic verse are particularly complex from an audience-critical perspective and require further examination.

A number of elements are combined in this verse – a woman (virgin), the Spirit/power of the "Most High" acting on the woman (virgin), the conception of a child who is literally the "son of God." From the previous verses, we must also keep in mind that this child is to be the Davidic heir and king. In examining the Septuagint, some of these elements can be found in isolation. For example, two royal psalms, Psalm 2:7 and Psalm 88:27 (LXX), may be construed to hint at a literal understanding of the title "son of God" in reference to the king.¹²⁵ The idea of a virginal conception is also unique.¹²⁶ The Septuagint translation of Isaiah 7:14 speaks of a virgin giving birth but the child is not a king or a messiah.¹²⁷ Nor is there any mention of the Holy Spirit or an

¹²³ Lucien Legrand, "L'arrière-plan Néo-Testamentaire De Lc, I, 35," *RB* (1963): 161–92, 164.

¹²⁴ Legrand, "L'arrière-plan," 164; Brown, *Birth*, 291.

¹²⁵ Collins and Collins, *Son of God*, 56. As translated by John Collins, Psalm 2:7 reads, "You are my son; today I have begotten you." Psalm 88:27, "You are my firstborn, highest of the kings of the earth."

¹²⁶ Raymond E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973), 61.

¹²⁷ Collins and Collins, *Son of God*, 59.

extraordinary conception. Simply put, there are no direct parallels to be found in the Jewish scriptures.¹²⁸ Certainly, there are no accounts of God causing a conception without the involvement of a human male. The lack of precise parallels has caused some to suggest that this verse is better read against a Greco-Roman background.

Literature from the wider Greco-Roman context does provide parallels to some of the motifs that are expressed in verse 1:35. The use of the titles “Most High” and “son of God,” both commonly employed titles in the wider Greco-Roman milieu, may have caused the audience to associate Jesus with other figures accorded divine filiation.¹²⁹ Of particular importance is the motif suggesting that a hero is the offspring of a god and a human woman. A myriad of evidence attests to the fact that it was common to depict a hero or benefactor in this manner.¹³⁰ However, virginity is not a standard feature of these accounts.¹³¹ In addition, virtually all of the “miraculous conception” stories indicate some sexual contact or sexual desire occurring between the god and the woman. There is nothing in Luke 1:35 that suggests this.¹³² When compared with other Greco-Roman conception accounts, Luke 1:35 stands out because of the way Mary conceives the child – through the Holy Spirit. In his study of miraculous conceptions and births, Charles Talbert seeks to mitigate this difference. He cites two references in the writings of Plutarch that attest to the notion that a god could impregnate a woman via a divine spirit or divine power.¹³³ In Talbert’s opinion, this evidence diminishes the uniqueness of Luke 1:35 and

¹²⁸ Brown, *Birth*, 312.

¹²⁹ Collins and Collins, *Son of God*, 145.

¹³⁰ See n.61.

¹³¹ In some conception accounts, it is clear that the woman is a virgin. For example, Romulus and Remus were said to be conceived by the god Mars and a Vestal virgin. Citation in Talbert, “Miraculous Conceptions,” 80. Talbert is citing Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 1.76.3–4.

¹³² Talbert understands this to be the primary difference between Luke’s birth account and other Greco-Roman birth myths. Charles Talbert, “Jesus’ Birth in Luke and the Nature of Religious Language,” in *Reading Luke–Acts in Its Mediterranean Milieu* (NovTSup 107; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 88; repr. from *HeyJ* 3, no. 4 (October 1994): 391-400.

¹³³ Talbert, “Miraculous Conceptions,” 84. Talbert cites Plutarch *Num.4:1–4* as evidence that a divine spirit can impregnate a woman, as well as Plutarch “Table Talk VIII, 1.2” in *Mor.* IX. Talbert also cites Aeschylus’ *Suppliants*

aligns it with an established precedent. He concludes that the reader would recognize Luke 1:35 as fitting an established pattern for depicting the origins of an extraordinary person.¹³⁴

Raymond Brown, in response to Talbert's overall work, acknowledges the fact that a first-century reader might have read the text against the background of Greco-Roman biographical material, but argues that catechized believers would have discounted these stories.¹³⁵ The effect of these parallels on the audience's interpretation cannot be so readily dismissed. With respect to the *topos* of miraculous conception, many of the Greco-Roman accounts were very well known because they depicted the origins of the most famous and powerful people in history. For example, one would be hard-pressed to believe that inhabitants of the Roman Empire were not familiar with the story of Atia's conception of Augustus.¹³⁶ It is also unlikely that persons familiar with these stories would forget them once catechized. If a reader was aware of one or more of these accounts, how would this knowledge influence the interpretation of Luke 1:35?

17–19, where Zeus is said to impregnate Io via his “on breathing.” Brown repudiates the “spirit conception” parallels in (*Virginal Conception*, 61–2, 62 n. 104).

¹³⁴ Talbert's conclusion assumes that the audience would have been well aware of the ideas depicted in Plutarch. This is impossible to know with absolute certainty because the precise social and geographical origins of Luke-Acts are not known. What can be said with certainty is that Plutarch's writings were widely known, perhaps by non-elite classes as well. More importantly, the ideas expressed by Plutarch have, at least in part, their source in Middle Platonism and Egyptian thought—two streams of thought which were widespread during the 1st century. Even if one does not agree with Talbert's conclusions aligning Mary's conception with other spirit-conception stories, the account of Jesus' conception still shares fundamental similarities with other Greco-Roman conception accounts.

¹³⁵ Brown, *Birth*, 579. Brown here is referring to Talbert's broader work on comparing the gospel of Luke to the Myth of the Immortals and Talbert's argument that the Gospel of Luke is a Greco-Roman biography. In *Birth*, 579, his assessment of how the audience would interpret the text is colored by his source-critical approach; he assesses the audience's interpretation largely on his belief that the gospel writers would never have drawn from Greco-Roman parallels. The question, from an audience-critical perspective, is not whether the author drew from Greco-Roman parallels. Rather, the question to be considered is the following: “Given that there are general parallels to Luke's account of conception (and infancy narrative in general), how would these parallels have affected the interpretation of Luke 1:35?”

¹³⁶ Atia conceives Augustus via the god Apollo. The story is recounted by Suetonius in *Aug.* 94.4. Suetonius cites Asclepius of Mendes' *Theologoumena* as his source for the account. The story is also recounted by Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 45.2–3. I make this assertion contra-Brown who doesn't concede that these stories were well-known by Christians (*Virginal Conception*, 61; *Birth*, 579).

An audience familiar with a number of miraculous conception accounts would likely have a good grasp of the underlying intent of these stories and respond appropriately. According to Talbert, the stories were a means of accounting for someone's exceptional character and life.¹³⁷ In essence, an account of a miraculous conception functioned as a signal to the reader that the person would be a great hero or benefactor. This function was the same regardless of whether such accounts were used in Greco-Roman or Christian literature. Therefore, an audience familiar with several of these stories would know how to interpret the account in Luke 1:35. That is, they would expect Jesus to display divine-like power, wisdom and actions during his life. A reader already familiar with the life and deeds of Jesus would understand his supernatural conception as the empowering cause. In that sense, an audience might understand Jesus to be comparable to other heroes and benefactors. However, the overall function of a genre or sub-genre is not the only determinant with respect to audience interpretation. While Talbert brings to light the overall purpose of the *topos* of miraculous conception and shows how Luke 1:35 fits its basic form, he ignores other aspects critical to audience criticism. His contextualized implied audience interprets Luke 1:35 purely in terms of the function of the *topos*. Talbert pays little attention to how the narrative context shapes the interpretation of Luke 1:35. He also fails to take into account how the distinctive details of Luke 1:35 might shape the reader's interpretation. Both of these are essential when applying audience-criticism and cannot be overlooked. With this in mind, we stop to consider some of these details.

While Luke 1:35 bears some resemblance to other "miraculous conception" accounts, the Jewish setting guides the audience to interpret the account through this Jewish/Christian lens. From the outset of the narrative, the author immerses the audience into the world of Judaism.

¹³⁷ Talbert, "Miraculous Conceptions," 79, 86. This is consistent with the common notion that the infancy narrative was composed retrospectively and, after reflection on the life of Jesus, the "christological moment" was moved back to his birth.

The text clearly guides readers to understand that Christian history begins in Jewish history. The temporal setting suggests that God is acting definitively in history to fulfill Jewish prophecy. Jesus' appearance fulfills Jewish messianic expectations and Jewish hopes for the reestablishment of Davidic kingship. The fact that the account of Jesus' conception is told as part of the history of a monotheistic people dramatically distinguishes it from the typical Greco-Roman stories. In its narrative setting, Luke 1:35 is implicitly making an exclusive claim: Jesus is the 'son of God' of the *only* God. This would be an inescapable conclusion for any catechized audience since monotheism was a central tenet of the faith.¹³⁸ So, although the audience may understand one aspect of the story to be like that of other Greco-Roman birth stories, its context modifies it to make it quite unique and atypical.

Because of the syncretic arrangement of the text, it is also essential to read Luke 1:35 in light of any corresponding verses in Luke 1:5–17e. Verse 1:15c shares a common motif with 1:35: the depiction of the Holy Spirit's relationship to each child. This shared motif invites the audience to read these verses against one another and compare John and Jesus. John is *filled with* the Holy Spirit while in the womb, but Jesus *is brought into existence* by the Holy Spirit. This comparison reveals to the audience a qualitative difference in the character of the two men. Because of the difference in their innate characters, their roles in Jewish history differ. It also emphasizes that the *pneuma* and *dynamis* that brings Jesus into existence is the same spirit and power that inspired the prophets of Israel. That is, it reinforces that this is the God of the Hebrews, Jews and Christians at work.

¹³⁸ Even an uncatechized audience might reach this conclusion since worship of only one God distinguished Jews and Christians from the polytheistic practices of the wider Greco-Roman environment.

Luke 1:36–38

- 1:36 And behold, your relative Elizabeth, despite her old age, has also conceived a son; indeed, this is the sixth month for a woman who was deemed barren.
- 1:37 Nothing said by God can be impossible.”
- 1:38 Mary answered, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord, Let it happen to me according to your word.” Then the angel went away, leaving her.

After the stunning revelation regarding Jesus’ conception, Gabriel gives Mary a sign to assure her: her elderly relative Elizabeth has conceived (Luke 1:36). This sign has various functions within the narrative. First, the sign emphasizes that the events foretold by God’s messenger do come to fruition. The fact that Elizabeth has conceived as foretold lends further credibility to Gabriel’s announcement to Mary. Secondly, it highlights the omnipotence of Israel’s God. Gabriel overtly declares this in Luke 1:37. The Greek text reads: ὅτι οὐκ ἄδυνατήσῃ παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ πᾶν ῥήμα. A very literal translation for this would be “For every word (thing) from God will not be without power (impossible).” The episode ends when Mary characterizes herself as God’s handmaid, and consents to God’s control of her life.¹³⁹

These closing verses characterize Jesus only in an indirect manner. Since Jesus is the issue of God’s action and Mary’s consent, the audience would expect his character to reflect the qualities found in both. Based on 1:36–38, the audience would expect Jesus’ “word” to also have power. An audience familiar with Jesus’ deeds and works would have little trouble making this connection. From 1:38, the audience might connect Mary’s willingness to comply with God’s word (i.e. divine plan) to Jesus’ willingness to comply with God’s word in his life, death and resurrection.

¹³⁹ This feature also varies distinguishes Luke’s account from its Greco-Roman counterparts. In the Greco-Roman conception stories, the God does as he pleases; the woman has no choice in the matter.

Summary

In Luke 1:26–38, the characterization of Jesus begins. The back-to-back arrangement of the annunciations of John and Jesus encourages the audience to compare the two figures. The annunciations are miraculous events marking God’s intervention in behalf of the Jewish people. The miraculous nature of the annunciations conveys to the audience the importance of each of the characters. The temporal setting is the same for both annunciations; Gabriel’s announcements occur on the cusp of God’s definitive intervention in Jewish history. Both characters are Jewish but each has a different role to fulfill in God’s plan. Jesus’ role will be greater. This is expressed through various character indicators: parentage, conception, *antonomasia* and their future roles (deeds). John’s parents are both human while Jesus is the son of the Jewish God and a humble Jewish virgin. John’s conception will be miraculous because God will overcome his mother’s barrenness. Jesus’ conception is miraculous but unparalleled in Jewish history because a human father will play no role in his conception; God’s power/Spirit conceives the child in the virgin’s womb. The description of John is rather limited: he will be “great in God’s sight,” will be set apart for God’s work, and, ultimately, his role is that of the eschatological prophet. In comparison, a myriad of titles are used to characterize Jesus. He is called great, Son of the Most High, Son of God, and holy. These titles align him with God, power and kingship. Through Jesus, God will restore the Davidic kingship; Jesus’s kingdom will be everlasting.

Mary visits Elizabeth (Luke 1:39–56)

Luke 1:39–45: Mary's arrival

The next bit of information the reader receives concerning John and Jesus is found in the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth. The meeting of the two women is significant for this study because it is the first human attestation of Jesus' existence.¹⁴⁰ The scene unfolds as Mary travels to the outskirts of Jerusalem, enters Zechariah's house and greets Elizabeth. Mary's exact words are not revealed, placing the focus of the account upon the reactions to her greeting and her presence. Upon hearing Mary's greeting, a spontaneous series of events occur. John leaps in the womb of Elizabeth, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and then Elizabeth makes a Spirit-inspired proclamation. The fact that Elizabeth makes her proclamation under the influence of the Spirit indicates to the audience that what she proclaims is true.

1:42a Elizabeth proclaimed with a loud cry:

- b "Blessed are you among women,
- c and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

1:43a Who am I

- b that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

1:44a For behold the moment your greeting sounded in my ears,

- b the baby in my womb jumped with gladness.

1:45a Fortunate is she who believed

- b that the Lord's words to her would find fulfillment."

¹⁴⁰ C. Kavin Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology: The Lord in the Gospel of Luke*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 42–43. Coleridge, however, argues that there is not enough evidence in the pericope to know, with any certainty, that Mary is already pregnant (*Birth of the Lukan Narrative*, 76–79). Coleridge reads the episode purely in light of reactions to Mary and to her acceptance of God's word. He also asserts that John's leap is in praise of Mary, and not in recognition of her pregnancy. However, one could question whether such a reaction would be merited if she had not yet conceived the child. Additionally, Luke 1:42b–c and 1:43 seem to indicate that Mary is already a mother.

The prophecy reveals that Elizabeth is aware of Mary's state. As Mary Foskett notes, "Elizabeth prophesies what could only have been revealed to her, that the virgin's body is a site of divine blessing."¹⁴¹ Elizabeth first confirms Mary's pregnancy for the audience (1:42b–c), and then discloses a key piece of information that further colors the characterization of Jesus – she refers to Mary as the "mother of my *Lord*." For the ancient audience, a number of possible associations could have been drawn from the application of the title *kyrios* to Jesus.

Luke 1:43: Jesus as *kyrios*

On a very general level, the title *kyrios* bore connotations of authority and power.¹⁴² The association of these qualities with the figure of Jesus builds upon a theme initiated in Gabriel's announcement to Mary. The audience would expect someone characterized as king and son of God to have authority and power. That a character depicted as a faithful, righteous Jew utters the title reinforces the fact that Jesus is to be understood as having authority and power over the Jewish people.

The antonomastic use of *kyrios* in relation to Jesus signifies a transition in the usage of the term within the narrative. Up to this point, *kyrios* has been attributed only to God.¹⁴³ Indeed, earlier in the narrative even Elizabeth has used this title for God. This raises the following questions: How is the reader to understand Jesus as Lord vis-à-vis God as Lord? The text of Luke 1:32–35 provides a basis for the reader to interpret the application of the title and

¹⁴¹ Foskett, *A Virgin Conceived*, 126. Brown echoes a similar thought (*Luke*, 333).

¹⁴² Ben Witherington III, "Lord," *DJG* 484. The term had both secular and religious applications. In the secular sphere it was used in reference to owners of property, people or businesses (485). For both Jews and non-Jews, the title often bore religious connotations (484–85).

¹⁴³ Prior to Luke 1:43, *kyrios* has been used ten times in reference to God (i.e. Yahweh). Three of the references are qualified and speak of God as κύριος ὁ θεός (Luke 1:16; 1:32c; 1:37–8). Elizabeth refers to God as "Lord" in 1:25.

incorporate it into a cohesive understanding of Jesus' character.¹⁴⁴ In 1:32–33 the narrative makes explicit the fact that God will give Jesus dominion over the house of Jacob in his capacity as Davidic king and Messiah. Based on this information, the audience would understand Jesus to be Lord because the *Lord God* bestows everlasting power and authority upon him. Given that Luke 1:35 depicts Jesus as having divine parentage, it is also likely that the audience would interpret *kyrios* as affirming Jesus' divinity. The possibility also exists that Greco-Roman usage of the title *kyrios* could have informed the audience's interpretation here. Sometimes *kyrios* was used in connection with figures ascribed divine filiation, namely, Roman emperors.¹⁴⁵ Witherington has argued that this usage of the title implied that the individual was "more than merely human."¹⁴⁶ Therefore, the title clearly points to Jesus being divine but, in the end, provides little clarification beyond what was previously indicated in the narrative.

In summary, Elizabeth's attribution of the title Lord in 1:43 can be understood as consistent with the characterization of Jesus in Luke 1:32–35. For the audience, it concretizes the fact that Jesus' role includes having dominion and authority over the Jewish people and, subsequently, Christians. It also alludes to Jesus' divine status. Like the descriptors presented in Luke 1:32–35, the assignation of the title Lord in 1:43 foreshadows who Jesus will show himself to be as the narrative progresses. For the audience that had already acknowledged and accepted Jesus as "Lord," the words of Elizabeth would have strengthened their assurance in this belief.

¹⁴⁴ Some commentators suggest that Luke 1:43 should be read in light of Psalm 110:1 (LXX). The verse reads: "The Lord said to *my Lord*, sit at my right hand." "My Lord" here refers to the Davidic messiah. This certainly may have been Luke's source for Elizabeth's words. However, one may justifiably ask whether the audience could be expected to make this connection. The verse is directly quoted in Luke 20:42 and Acts 2:3, suggesting that this was a significant point of reflection within the community.

¹⁴⁵ Witherington, "Lord," 484.

¹⁴⁶ Witherington, "Lord," 484. A notable example of this is the Emperor Augustus. The Oxyrynchus papyrus 1143, dating to 1 AD, speaks of sacrifices offered to Augustus the "God and Lord Emperor." Another inscription, dating to 12 BC, refers to Augustus as "God and Lord" (484). As pointed out earlier, Augustus was also called "son of god." It is probable that a first-century reader would make a connection between Jesus – as son of God, ruler and Lord – with the Emperor Augustus. Although the narrative setting remains thoroughly Jewish, the shared language points to the likelihood of the ancient audience perceiving some parallelism between the two figures.

Luke 1:44–45

Elizabeth's speech continues in Luke 1:44 as she interprets the sign of John's movement within her womb. The fact that Elizabeth draws attention to John's movement causes the audience to do so as well. In verse 1:41, John's movement had been described using the verb σκιρτάω. The same verb is used in 1:44 but the reason for the movement is clarified as well. John leaps *from gladness* the moment Mary's voice is heard. The theme of eschatological joy and gladness, introduced in the annunciation to Zechariah, is taken up again here.¹⁴⁷ John rejoices because the anticipated eschatological events are coming to fruition – the arrival of the messiah is imminent. The seemingly common event of a fetus moving in a womb is a sign that not only attests to the conception of both children, and to the arrival of the eschaton, but also reemphasizes the relative status of John and Jesus. It is John who reacts to the presence of Jesus, not vice versa. Elizabeth's message draws to a conclusion as she praises Mary for having believed God's word.

Luke 1:46–56: Mary praises God

Mary's own song of praise immediately follows Elizabeth's prophecy. The focus of Mary's canticle is clearly on God's action and amounts to an extended praise of God. The hymn does not reveal any information that directly characterizes Jesus. Therefore, it will not be examined in great detail.

The hymn can be broken into two segments that are rich in Old Testament/Septuagint allusions.¹⁴⁸ The first portion of the canticle expresses what God has done for Mary (Luke 1:46–

¹⁴⁷ Johnson, *Luke*, 41.

¹⁴⁸ It is widely acknowledged that Mary's Magnificat contains echoes of Hannah's song (1 Sam 2:1–10) and various Psalms. It reflects a cento style of composition. For details on the possible allusions and echoes associated with Luke 1:46–55, see Brown, *Birth*, 358–60.

49). Mary refers to God as her “savior” (Luke 1:47) and the mighty one (ὁ δυνατός; Luke 1:48). Mary describes God’s action in her behalf in terms of reversal. She who was a humble servant will now be considered blessed by all future generations. The second part of the canticle (1:50–55) interprets the broader effects of God’s action with respect to the Israelite people. In Luke 1:50–55 God is characterized as merciful,¹⁴⁹ faithful¹⁵⁰ and powerful.¹⁵¹ His actions are portrayed in terms of reversals accomplished in behalf of those who are faithful, humble, lowly and hungry. Mary’s hymn closes by professing God’s fidelity to the Abrahamic covenant. The canticle serves as a characterization of God and indicates to the reader that “the day of the Lord” has arrived. Although direct reference to Jesus is never made, the narrative context suggests that Jesus is related to the events proclaimed by Mary. Fitzmyer aptly describes this as follows: “On the lips of Mary, the great deeds of Yahweh, manifested for his people of old, are now seen to be manifested in a new form in the conception of the child to be born to her.”¹⁵² Therefore, in an indirect manner, the canticle leads the audience to associate Jesus’ existence with a new realization of these reversals.

John’s Birth and Circumcision (1:57-80)

After Mary’s canticle closes, the focus of the narrative shifts to Elizabeth and the birth of John. The scenes of John’s birth and circumcision further contribute to the characterization of both John and Jesus. As announced by the angel earlier in verse 1:14, Elizabeth gives birth and

¹⁴⁹ Luke 1:50; 1:54.

¹⁵⁰ Luke 1:54–55.

¹⁵¹ The descriptors are as follows: Luke 1:51– God performs a mighty deed (κράτος) and scatters; Luke 1:52– God brings down rulers/the powerful (δυναστας) from their thrones.

¹⁵² Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 361.

her neighbors rejoice with her. On the day of John's naming and circumcision, astonishing events surrounding John's naming (1:59–65), and the subsequent loosening of Zechariah's tongue, inspire fear and amazement among those witnessing the events. All those hearing about the events affirm to the gospel's audience that John will have a special role and relationship with God:

1:66 All stored up what they heard in their hearts,
wondering, "What then is this child going to be?"
For the hand of the Lord was with him.

This attestation is immediately followed by a prophecy inspired by the Holy Spirit and uttered by Zechariah. Given that Zechariah is the speaker and the Holy Spirit inspires his words, the reader is assured that the information Zechariah divulges reveals truth. Zechariah's prophecy is cast in the genre of a hymn of praise and composed in cento style.¹⁵³ The most pertinent portions of the text, for this study, are the description of John's role (Luke 1:76–77) and two metaphors that are used to depict Jesus (Luke 1:69; Luke 78–79). We will address these items in the order they appear in the narrative. Hence, we begin with Luke 1:69.

Luke 1:69

The first metaphor used to describe Jesus is found in Luke 1:69. God is described as having "visited and accomplished the redemption of His people" (Luke 1:68) by having raised a "horn of salvation in the House of David His servant." The word κέρας, when used in a religious sense, symbolized strength, power and might.¹⁵⁴ Considering the previous allusions that

¹⁵³ See Brown, *Birth*, 386–89 and Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 374–75, for a list of Old Testament/Septuagint echoes and allusions that correspond to the canticle's verses.

¹⁵⁴ Werner Foerster, "κέρας," *TDNT* 3:669. The word was used throughout the Greek-speaking world in reference to deities; the reader would have understood the meaning even without knowledge of its use in the Jewish scriptures. However, the image is used in the Septuagint in reference to God and to individuals that God anoints as agents of

connect Jesus to Davidic lineage, the fact that the “horn” is raised in the “House of David” indicates to the audience that Jesus is κέρας. Here, for the first time in the narrative, salvation is explicitly predicated of Jesus – he is the horn of *salvation*. Luke 1:71 and 1:73 describe what this salvation entails: the fulfillment of God’s promise to deliver Israel from its enemies and oppressors. The result of this deliverance is unending freedom to serve God (Luke 1:73). The effect of Luke 1:69 on the audience is manifold. Qualities previously attributed to Jesus – power and kingship – are reemphasized. In addition, Jesus’ power is clearly identified as salvific power that brings to fruition the fulfillment of God’s covenant promise to restore Israel and deliver her from enemies. Therefore, the “horn of salvation” from the “house of David” depicts an image of a powerful ruler who defeats the enemies of Israel to procure Israel’s salvation.

However, another level of interpretation is possible. The audience could also read this metaphor as a foreshadowing of Jesus’ resurrection, and the accomplishment of salvation via that act. The verb used to describe the raising of the “horn of salvation” is ἐγείρω. While in the wider Greek context, the verb meant “to awaken” or “to raise,”¹⁵⁵ it bore special significance for early Christianity being the verb utilized to depict resurrection from the dead.¹⁵⁶ Therefore, while the narrative context anticipates the impending deeds of Mary’s unborn child, the Christian audience could also associate the raising of the “horn of salvation” with Jesus’ resurrection.

Luke 1:76–77

salvation. For examples, see Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 383. Two of these references, 1 Sam 2:10 and Ps 132:17 can be understood as prefiguring the Davidic messiah. If the reader were able to connect either reference to 1:68, it would further confirm Jesus’ role as the anticipated Jewish messiah. It is likely that the audience was familiar with at least 1 Sam 2:10, given the number of allusions to that text in the narrative so far. In addition, Daniel 7–8 uses *keras* to symbolize kings and kingdoms. Thus, the reader familiar with this text might also understand the term as symbolizing kingship.

¹⁵⁵ Albrecht Oepke, “ἐγείρω,” *TDNT* 2.333–37, here 333.

¹⁵⁶ This can be said of Luke’s community since the verb is employed in that sense in the gospel. For example, see Luke 7:22; 9:7; 9:22.

In verses 1:76-1:77 Zechariah proclaims the following regarding his son:

- 1:76a But you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
 1:76b for you will go before the Lord to make ready His ways,
 1:77a to grant to His people knowledge of salvation
 1:77b in the forgiveness of their sins.

Zechariah's prophecy repeats the essential elements of the oracle given by Gabriel earlier in the narrative. In Luke 1:15–17 John's role was depicted as that of a prophet sent to prepare the people for the day of the Lord. Here, his father's oracle confirms this role. John's task is clearly cast as preparatory and, therefore, one that anticipates the arrival of "the Lord." Given that the title *kyrios* has been applied previously to both Jesus and God, the reader could interpret this title as a reference to either figure.¹⁵⁷ Verse 1:76c, clarifies how John will "make ready" God's people – by proclaiming salvation through the forgiveness of sins. In contrast to Zechariah's earlier words that depicted salvation in terms of deliverance from enemies with quasi-military imagery, salvation is now depicted in a very different manner.¹⁵⁸ Likewise, the description of Jesus' role is immediately altered to reflect this transition. This is accomplished through the use of a second metaphor.

Luke 1:78–9

In Luke 1:78 Jesus is described as the ἐπισκέψεται ἡμᾶς ἀνατολή ἐξ ὕψους – a rising [light] from on high that will visit us. Again, Jesus' appearance is clearly tied to the work of God since the "tender mercies" of God precipitate Jesus' visitation. In addition, Jesus appears ἐξ

¹⁵⁷ That is, it could be interpreted in light of the earlier allusions to "the day of the Lord" or in light of the coming of Jesus. It would be plausible that the audience could understand *kyrios* as referring to both Jesus and God. What is crucial here is not who *kyrios* refers to but, instead, John's role as preparer of the *kyrios*' people. The author seems to be referring to God, since 1:76a and 176b are parallel statements and 1:76a makes reference to "the Most High."

¹⁵⁸ Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 386; Johnson, *Luke*, 48.

ὑψους. Ἐξ ὑψους was a means of depicting God's heavenly dwelling.¹⁵⁹ In non-Jewish Hellenistic writings, ἀνατολή was a technical term with two related, dominant meanings: dawn and east.¹⁶⁰ Obviously, both of these meanings are associated with the rising of the sun and with light. As Gathercole observes, the majority of the references in the Septuagint and Hellenistic Jewish writings employ the word in this same sense.¹⁶¹ Therefore, even the reader without significant exposure to the Septuagint would understand the metaphor as describing a dawning light with heavenly origins.¹⁶² Jesus' divine origin is also doubly emphasized through the use of the verb ἐπισκέπτομαι¹⁶³ – a verb already utilized in 1:68 in relation to God raising the horn of salvation. This verb was commonly used to describe a god's act of watching over or looking down upon humankind.¹⁶⁴ In the LXX, it was sometimes used to depict God's visitation – the act of God drawing close to and intervening in human history.¹⁶⁵ Thus, not only does ἐξ ὑψους convey that the ἀνατολή originates in the divine milieu, but the use of ἐπισκέπτομαι further draws the audience to associate the ἀνατολή with divinity.

The effects on the audience of this characterization are two-fold. First, it harmonizes with the information previously disclosed to the reader, namely, the idea that Jesus has divine origins. However, by recasting those origins in terms that are purely related to divine images and associations, Jesus' divinity is brought to the reader's attention. Secondly, the unique characterization attributes a new "function" to the person of Jesus – that of illumination. The ultimate result of this illumination is described in Luke 1:79: Jesus' light reveals the path to

¹⁵⁹ Simon Gathercole, "The Heavenly ἀνατολή (Luke 1:78–9)" *JTS* 56, 2 (October 2005): 471–88, here 476–7; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 387.

¹⁶⁰ Gathercole, "Heavenly ἀνατολή," 484–5.

¹⁶¹ Gathercole, "Heavenly ἀνατολή," 485.

¹⁶² It is also feasible that the use of ἀνατολή could be interpreted as an allusion to Mal 4:2 (LXX): "for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings." The fact that Malachi 4 (LXX) was an important reference at the outset of the narrative supports the assertion that the reader would know this text.

¹⁶³ Gathercole, "Heavenly ἀνατολή," 474–5.

¹⁶⁴ H. W. Beyer, "ἐπισκεπτομαι," *TDNT* 2:600.

¹⁶⁵ Beyer, "ἐπισκεπτομαι," *TDNT* 2:601.

peace. This last aspect of Jesus' role would have borne great significance for the first-century Mediterranean audience.

In the Greco-Roman world, peace implied more than just a freedom from war; it indicated a sense of well-being, prosperity and, sometimes, a state of redemption or restoration.¹⁶⁶ First-century Jewish eschatology and messianic expectations understood peace as a fundamental aspect of salvation. Greco-Roman society placed great importance on peace as well. One need only look to the many lauds conferred on Emperor Augustus or Virgil's description of the idyllic "Golden Age" to find attestation of this.¹⁶⁷ The desire for peace was universal and associated with idealized existence. Therefore, the first-century reader would attribute great significance to one who could "guide" others to peace.

One alternative understanding of the term ἀνατολή deserves attention. While ἀνατολή, in Jewish and non-Jewish literature, usually refers to "dawn" or "east," there are some notable variances in the word's meaning. In particular, three of the occurrences of ἀνατολή in the Septuagint refer to the Davidic heir in a messianic sense.¹⁶⁸ There is abundant evidence that ἀνατολή was interpreted as a messianic title in Christian and Jewish writings roughly contemporaneous with Luke's gospel.¹⁶⁹ Assuming the audience's familiarity with this tradition of interpretation, or with the Septuagint references themselves, the term ἀνατολή would have been understood as a messianic title for Jesus. This would facilitate the reader's connection of Jesus with the term ἀνατολή.

¹⁶⁶ Werner Foerster, "εἰρήνη," *TDNT* 2:400. Foerster notes that during the reign of Augustus, peace was sometimes associated with the notion of redemption even outside the spheres of Judaism and Christianity.

¹⁶⁷ The *Ara Pacis Augustae* monument speaks to both the importance of peace in the Roman civil religion but also the to the honors conferred on Augustus for procuring peace. Virgil's well-known Fourth Eclogue can be found at <http://classics.mit.edu/Virgil/eclogue.4.iv.html>. Here I refer to v. 17.

¹⁶⁸ For references and comments, see Brown, *Birth*, 373–74; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 387 but especially Gathercole, "Heavenly ἀνατολή," 480–1. The three references in question all imply that the ἀνατολή is the Davidic shoot or scion, rising up.

¹⁶⁹ Gathercole, "Heavenly ἀνατολή," 481; 481 n.36.

Luke 1:80

Zechariah's canticle is followed by a single verse that closes out the childhood description of John. Luke 1:80 summarizes the progression of John during his childhood.

1:80 And as the child grew up, he became strong in spirit.¹⁷⁰
 He stayed in the desert until the day of his public appearance
 to Israel.

Here, Luke tells the audience that John grows in both a physical sense and “in spirit.” The phrase “in spirit” – “πνεύματι” – could have been interpreted in two primary ways. As Brown has noted, it could have been understood as further confirmation of the close association between John the Baptist and the Holy Spirit, thus indicating a fulfillment of the predictions found in Luke 1:15; 1:17. The progymnastic *topoi* and Greco-Roman biographical conventions suggest that the audience could have interpreted “ἐκκρατοιοῦτο πνεύματι” as a general indicator of his physical and mental development.¹⁷¹ Finally, John is taken “off-stage” by the author, to the desert,¹⁷² until the appointed time of his public ministry.

The Birth of Jesus (2:1-20)

The story of Jesus' birth immediately follows the young Baptist's departure into the desert. Verses 2:1-2 again mention rulers and their realms, indicating to the audience that a new

¹⁷⁰ Unlike Brown, I have not capitalized Spirit here to reflect the different connotations that “πνεύματι” may have taken on. Given the lack of an article and the lack of the adjective “holy,” it is uncertain whether the audience would interpret “πνεύματι” as a reference to the Holy Spirit. Brown, while acknowledging the difficulty in interpreting this reference to “spirit,” suggests that it is appropriate to understand “πνεύματι” as a reference to the Holy Spirit (*Birth*, 374). He bases this assertion on the strong association between the Spirit and John the Baptist (1:15,41,67).

¹⁷¹ Martin classifies it as a description of John's “nurture and training” as opposed to describing growth of “body” or “mind.” The distinction, in the case of Luke 1:80, is not significant.

¹⁷² Again, there is the sense of earlier predictions being fulfilled – specifically, the characterization of John as an ascetic in verse 1:15b.

chapter in history is being narrated, and grounding the events to a “concrete” period in time.¹⁷³ The setting changes once again and the story begins in the wider context of a worldwide imperial census – a census mandated by the Emperor Caesar Augustus. Although other rulers have been mentioned in the narrative, Augustus is distinguished by the fact that an action is attributed to him. Within the narrative, this action is depicted as affecting all of human history. Bovon points out that a census was a “power claim...by which a ruler wished to certify the number of his subjects in order to have them better in his grasp...”¹⁷⁴ Brent asserts that the census possessed a religious aspect as well; after the census was taken, a *lustrum* was performed for the purification of those counted.¹⁷⁵ Our ancient reader, having familiarity with the workings of the Roman Empire, would have understood the claim to power underlying Augustus’s edict as well the religious connotations associated with the census. Additionally, the explicit mention of a census under Quirinius draws attention to the conflict between Judaism and Roman imperial power that, ultimately, resulted in the destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 CE.¹⁷⁶ In light of the many times “power” is ascribed to God and Jesus in Luke 1:5–80, the attention placed on Roman imperial power directs the audience to begin contemplating the relationship between the power of God/Jesus and Roman imperial power.

As the narrative continues the setting becomes more specific; the reader is taken from the wider context of the Roman Empire, to a city within that empire, Bethlehem. Joseph and Mary, who are still betrothed, are re-introduced. In response to the mandated census, the couple is heading to the city of David’s birth, Bethlehem, because Joseph is of the house of David (Luke

¹⁷³ While there are historical discrepancies regarding the reigns of Augustus, Quirinius and the occurrence of a worldwide census, those issues are not central to this discussion. For brief treatment of this matter, see Brown, *Birth*, 412–418; 547–555. Bovon, *Luke*, 83, succinctly summarizes the situation, “Luke is mistaken in literal terms, but he does correctly capture the historical tendency of the time . . .”

¹⁷⁴ Bovon, *Luke*, 83. In addition, a census was used for taxation.

¹⁷⁵ Allen Brent, “Luke–Acts in Asia Minor,” *JTS* 48, no. 2 (1997): 411–438, 430.

¹⁷⁶ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.355; 18.1–4, documents the census under Quirinius and the ensuing revolt incited by Judas the Galilean.

2:4). The double reference to David in Luke 2:4 continues to remind the reader that Mary's child is the anticipated Davidic king. In addition, for the reader familiar with the expectations expressed in Micah 5:2–5 (LXX), the mention of Bethlehem would have further accentuated Jesus' role as Jewish messiah. Micah 5:2–5 (LXX) is a messianic text that describes the emergence of a ruler from Bethlehem who is destined to bring peace to Israel.

In verses 2:6–7, the circumstances of Jesus' birth are recounted. The narration of this event accomplishes two things with respect to the audience. First, it indicates the fulfillment of the prophecy given in 1:31 by the angel Gabriel, again affirming the reliability of God and his word. Secondly, as Coleridge observes, the depiction of the birth creates a situation of defamiliarization for the audience.¹⁷⁷ Mary gives birth, performs the common maternal task of wrapping her child in cloth bands,¹⁷⁸ and then places the infant in a feeding trough. This depiction of Jesus' birth fits neither his identity as “son of the Most High/son of God” nor his role as Davidic king and ruler.¹⁷⁹ As a consequence, the reader must stop and resolve the discrepancy. Earlier in the narrative, the reader was presented with a similar situation when God chose Mary for the task of bearing the “son of the Most High.” In that instance, the reader was guided to conclude that God associates with and favors the lowly; social circumstances present no obstacle to acquiring God's favor or to the realization of God's plan. That conclusion was corroborated in Mary's hymn. Here, the audience is led to interpret this situation in a similar manner, thereby reemphasizing that theme.

The text does not linger over the depiction of the child's birth. Rather, the attention of the audience is shifted to the annunciation of Jesus' birth to the shepherds. A variety of suggestions

¹⁷⁷ Coleridge, *Birth of the Lukan Narrative*, 136 n.2.

¹⁷⁸ Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 408.

¹⁷⁹ Coleridge, *Birth of the Lukan Narrative*, 136.

have been proposed regarding the significance of the shepherds.¹⁸⁰ Given the overt references to David and Bethlehem, the audience could certainly connect the shepherds to David, who was a shepherd before becoming king. In general, shepherds were of lower social rank.¹⁸¹ Given that the shepherds are the recipients of the heavenly announcement of Jesus' birth, the audience is again made to realize that God values those whom society deems to be insignificant.

Luke 2:8–14

Like the previous annunciations found in Luke 1, the announcement made to the shepherds follows the basic form of the Old Testament annunciation of birth.¹⁸² Its structure can be outlined as follows:

- | | |
|--|------------|
| A. Shepherds watching over flocks at night | (2:8) |
| B. Angel and glory of Lord appear | (2:9) |
| C. Shepherds filled with fear | (2:9) |
| D. Angel allays fears – “Do not fear” | (2:10a) |
| E. Announcement | (2:10b–11) |
| Good news, great joy for all the people | |
| Savior born today who is Messiah and Lord | |
| D'. Sign given - Baby in manger | (2:12) |
| C'. Heavenly Army proclaims peace | (2:13–14) |
| B'. Heavenly beings depart | |
| A'. Shepherds depart to see the sign | |

Given that this is the third angelophany in the narrative, it can be assumed that the appearance of the angel would have triggered a familiar response on the part of the reader – the anticipation of a divine announcement of birth. The heavenly portents accompanying this announcement are greater than those of the previous annunciations and heighten the significance of the angel's proclamation. Not only does an angel of the Lord appear to the shepherds, but the δόξα of the

¹⁸⁰ A comprehensive discussion is found in Brown, *Birth*, 420–4.

¹⁸¹ Johnson notes that, “Perhaps the shepherds are not to be assessed as ‘sinners’ as they are in later rabbinic materials. . . but they are certainly among the lowest-esteemed laborers (*Luke*, 52).”

¹⁸² There are distinct differences in this annunciation: it is not addressed to a parent, there is no question posed by the shepherds and the heavenly host appears.

Lord – the visible divine radiance of God’s being – is also made present and lights the nighttime scene.¹⁸³ The portents reflect the significance of Jesus’ birth and being. The imagery of the scene contrasts light and darkness; the darkness of the night is lit by the heavenly radiance. This contrasting imagery would have been fresh in the mind of the reader/auditor since Zechariah’s canticle ends with the prophecy that God would cause a light from “on high” to appear to those “in darkness” (1:78–79). Through this symbolic realization of Zechariah’s prophecy, the reader perceives that God’s word continues to be fulfilled;¹⁸⁴ the anticipated light has arrived.

The central focus of this scene is the message delivered by the angel in 2:10b–11:

2:10b For behold, I announce to you good news of great joy
which will be for all the people:
2:11 To you this day there is born in the city of David
a Savior who is Messiah and Lord.

Although the shepherds are the direct recipients of the angel’s message, it is clearly targeted to a broader audience – “all the people.” Scholars overwhelmingly agree that Luke’s use of λαός throughout his two-volume work indicates that “παντὶ τῷ λαῷ” probably refers to the Jewish people.¹⁸⁵ However, for an auditor or reader already familiar with Jesus as redeemer of both Jew and Gentile, the mention of “all the people” might have been understood in a broader sense. One cannot preclude the possibility that a Gentile Christian may have understood the term as foreshadowing the fact that the Jewish Messiah would be the savior for Jew and Gentile alike.¹⁸⁶ The delivery of the message “παντὶ τῷ λαῷ” is described using the verb εὐαγγελίζομαι.

From an audience-critical perspective, very specific and significant associations would have been

¹⁸³ Gerhard Kittel, “δόξα,” *TDNT* 2:248. The meaning of the word δόξα, as used in this instance, is exclusively related to its use in the Septuagint and not to secular Greek usage.

¹⁸⁴ Johnson, *Luke*, 50 n. 9 and Coleridge, *Birth of the Lukan Narrative*, 138, see this as the fulfillment of Zechariah’s prophecy. It is really a symbolic fulfillment since the ἀνατολή is not directly present on the scene.

¹⁸⁵ For example, Brown, *Birth*, 402; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 409; Johnson, *Luke*, 50.

¹⁸⁶ The argument is made based on the use of λαός in the singular. The discussion in Coleridge, *Birth of the Lukan Narrative*, 139 n. 2, sheds light on both sides of the issue.

made with a message depicted as an “announcement of good news.” According to Brown, the reader is presented with a message “cast in the manner of an imperial proclamation.”¹⁸⁷

The concept of “good news” (εὐαγγέλιον) was part of the “established repertoire of the imperial cult” and was applied to various significant events in the emperor’s life.¹⁸⁸ The imperial cult was a pervasive feature of the empire and familiar to all its inhabitants. In the eastern part of the Roman Empire, where most believe the Gospel of Luke was written,¹⁸⁹ the cult flourished.¹⁹⁰ The term “good news” and the verb “to announce good news,” used in reference to the emperor, can be found even in the writings of Jewish authors.¹⁹¹ For example, Josephus uses it in reference to the Emperor Vespasian.¹⁹² Given these facts, along with the previous mention of Caesar Augustus, it is quite likely that Luke’s reader would have recognized the angel’s proclamation of “good news” and drawn a connection to the emperor.

Another piece of evidence corroborating this conclusion is the fact that Luke’s announcement of “good news” finds its origins in the birth of a child. The Priene inscription¹⁹³ speaks of the significance of Augustus’s birth as follows: “the birthday of the god [Augustus] meant for the world the beginning of the message of the good tidings (εὐαγγέλιον) which has him as its author...”¹⁹⁴ Thus, the two texts share a common feature: the connection of the birth of a divinely-affiliated individual to the genesis of “good news” for a people. As will be discussed

¹⁸⁷ Brown, *Birth*, 424.

¹⁸⁸ Klauck, *Religious Context*, 298, “Good news” was used in connection with “the emperor’s birthday, his coming of age, his ascent to the throne and his recovery of health.” See also Adolf Deissmann, *A Light from the Ancient East* (trans. Lionel Strachen; Grand Rapids: Baker 1978), 366–7.

¹⁸⁹ For example Brown, *Birth*, 415; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 53. Billings, “‘At the Age of Twelve’,” 70, 75.

¹⁹⁰ Billings, “‘At the Age of Twelve’,” 77.

¹⁹¹ Gerhard Friedrich, “εὐαγγελίζομαι, εὐαγγέλιον...” *TDNT* 2:706–37. Εὐαγγέλιον is not found in Philo but is used by Josephus (725). Both Philo and Josephus use the verb εὐαγγελίζομαι. The verb is also used in the Septuagint to describe the “glad tidings” of God’s reign. See LXX 52:7.

¹⁹² Craig A. Evans, “Mark’s Incipit and the Priene Calendar Inscription: From Jewish Gospel to Greco-Roman Gospel,” *JGRChJ* 1 (2000): 68–81.

¹⁹³ This well-known text dates to 9 BC and can be found in W. Dittenberger, *Orientalis Graecae Inscriptiones Selectae* (2 vols., Hildesheim: Olms, 1960) 2.48–60.

¹⁹⁴ Translation Evans, “Mark’s Incipit,” 69.

immediately, the Gospel's text continues to lead the audience along the path of relating the birth and role of Jesus to that of the emperor.

In verse 2:11 the angel describes the content of the good news that brings eschatological joy. This is done via the attribution of three titles to Jesus. The first of these, not yet explicitly applied to Jesus, is the title σωτήρ, or savior.¹⁹⁵ Earlier in Luke's narrative, Mary referred to God as her savior (1:47). Now the reader learns that Jesus is a savior. Once again the audience encounters a situation where a title previously applied to God is applied to Jesus. This further substantiates the conclusion that Jesus' character is fundamentally identified with divinity. Extratextual knowledge of the use of σωτήρ also could have informed the reader's interpretation. Within the Septuagint σωτήρ, when used as a title, is most frequently applied to God.¹⁹⁶ On rare occasion, it is applied to a human being commissioned and empowered by God to save the people from harm,¹⁹⁷ but it is never directly predicated of the messiah. Thus, knowledge of the Septuagint's use of the term σωτήρ does not really advance the interpretation of Jesus' character beyond what has already been established in the narrative.

However, σωτήρ was a very commonly used title in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean during the first century CE.¹⁹⁸ It was ascribed to gods and humans alike in response to acts of healing, deliverance or rescue.¹⁹⁹ Of particular significance, considering the narrative backdrop, is the fact that the title was used in relation to the Roman emperor. The title "savior" was

¹⁹⁵ In Zechariah's canticle (1:69), Jesus is referred to as the "horn of salvation" raised up from the house of David, but not explicitly as "savior." This is also noted by Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 409.

¹⁹⁶ Bovon, *Luke*, 88. Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 204. Generally, σωτήρ is a rather rare title in the Greek Septuagint. Of the references in the Septuagint, the overwhelming majority of the occurrences apply the title to God. Those references include : 1 Sam 10:19; Isa 45:15, 21; Wisd 16:7, 1 Macc 4:30; Sir 51:1. See Werner Foerster and Georg Fohrer, "σωτήρ" *TDNT* 7:1002–21.

¹⁹⁷ This occurs only in Judg 3:9, 15 [Fohrer, *TDNT* 7:1013].

¹⁹⁸ Foerster, *TDNT* 7:1010, states that the use of the title increased during the Roman Imperial period.

¹⁹⁹ For example, it was ascribed to physicians, statesmen, philosophers and rulers [Foerster, *TDNT* 7:1009].

accorded to emperors both prior to and after the reign of Augustus.²⁰⁰ Earlier in our discussion of the Greco-Roman religious milieu, we noted a famous inscription from Halicarnassus that lauded Augustus as the “savior of the human race.” The title σωτήρ would have captured the attention of the reader, reinforcing the comparison between the child born in the manger and Augustus. As the narrative continues, other points of contrast and comparison between these two figures arise.

Immediately following the attribution of σωτήρ to Jesus, the reader is presented with two other titles that clarify and embellish this title. Jesus will be the savior who is also “Χριστὸς κύριος” – Messiah and Lord.²⁰¹ Although alluded to previously, this is the first time in the narrative that Jesus is explicitly named Messiah.²⁰² The overt use of this distinctively Jewish title affirms conclusions already deduced by the reader during the characterization of Jesus in Luke 1. Its use also qualifies the audience’s interpretation of the title σωτήρ; Jesus’ role as savior is defined in terms of Jewish messianic expectations. The third title, κύριος, already predicated of Jesus in Luke 1:43, signifies his power and authority over “all the people.” From the reader’s point of view, the concentration of these three titles in verse 2:11 synthesizes what has already been revealed regarding Jesus’ character.

After the angel delivers the birth announcement, the shepherds are given a sign that will verify what has been proclaimed to them. Before they are able to depart, a heavenly army suddenly enters the scene and supplements the angel’s proclamation. They praise God’s action and announce peace to those favored by God (Luke 2:13–14).²⁰³ In essence, the heavenly host announces the ultimate effect of the birth event – the establishment of eschatological peace. The

²⁰⁰ Brown, *Birth*, 415 n. 21.

²⁰¹ On the possible translations of “Χριστὸς κύριος” see Brown, *Birth*, 402–3; Rowe, *Early*, 49–51. I have chosen to follow the dominant consensus and translate the words as two titles.

²⁰² It is alluded to most directly in Luke 1:32b–33.

²⁰³ See Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 411–12, for a clear explanation of why εὐδοκίας in 2:14 should be translated as “of God’s good pleasure/favor” and not “men of goodwill” or “good will toward men.”

reference to peace establishes another connection with Zechariah's prophecy. Looking back to this prophecy the audience understands that the peace associated with the arrival of the ἀνατολή is being realized through the arrival of the child. The fact that God's heavenly host proclaims this peace assures the audience that the message reveals truth.

For the Gentile convert, the reference to peace would have triggered extra-narrative cultural associations as well. As mentioned previously, peace was strongly valued even outside the Jewish and Christian spheres. The Emperor Augustus, even long after his reign, was viewed as the preeminent procurer of peace.²⁰⁴ The religious reformation that accompanied Augustus's reign included an increased focus on the emperor as the source and embodiment of cultic divine virtues.²⁰⁵ That is, the emperor was understood as the sphere through which the personified, divine Virtue operated.²⁰⁶ *Pax* was one of the central virtues associated with Augustus and subsequent emperors.²⁰⁷ Given this cultural background, it is unlikely that the audience would not draw a connection between Jesus as mediator of peace (Luke 1:79 and 2:14) and the emperor as mediator of peace. The paralleling of this highly valued role fortifies the previous points of similarity between Jesus and Augustus. Although the comparison between Jesus and Augustus is not accomplished overtly through syncretism, the audience is repeatedly cued to compare the two

²⁰⁴ During his reign, the Roman Empire experienced an era of expansion and relative peace.

²⁰⁵ Brent, "Luke-Acts in Asia Minor," 416-8; Rufus Fears, "The Cult of Virtues and Roman Imperial Ideology," *ANWR* 17.2: 827-948, here 873-4.

²⁰⁶ Fears describes it as follows, ". . . the Virtues were 'personalized,' bound to the charismatic personage of the princeps. Through his intermediation and actions, the Virtues received their earthly expression and exercised their beneficent influence upon the Roman commonwealth and the human race" ("Cult of Virtues," 874).

²⁰⁷ Coinage minted even through the reign of Domitian reflects the intimate link between the emperor and *Pax*, the latter being represented in the form of a personified image. Thus, we can assume that *Pax* would have been a prominent concept in society during the writing of Luke's gospel. The scholarly consensus regarding the dating of Luke-Acts suggests that it was written during the reign of the Flavians (69 CE - 96 CE).

figures;²⁰⁸ Jesus' identity and character are clarified through this juxtaposition. The crucial task now is to assess the conclusions the reader would make based on this comparison.

The points of commonality between Jesus and Augustus are numerous but the distinctions are significant. Both men were said to have divine parentage, both were accorded the titles of σωτήρ and κύριος. Both men also have their births announced as “good news.” The birth announcements allude to the societal changes that will be effected by the two men, namely, the establishment of peace. However, the audience would have perceived a distinction in this regard. Augustus was credited with establishing peace and lauded for procuring the earthly benefits that came with freedom from war. In essence, it was a peace that could be destroyed since it was subject to the actions of future emperors²⁰⁹ and to the unpredictable whims of the gods. In contrast to this, the peace associated with Jesus' rule is identified with only one god – a god that has been portrayed as faithful and reliable.²¹⁰ Jesus' appearance into human history is repeatedly cast as having been preordained in the ancient Jewish Scriptures and, as such, a mark of the fidelity and reliability of God. While the declaration in Luke 2:11 proleptically indicates that Jesus will establish peace, the Christian audience would have embraced Jesus' resurrection and ascension as signs that the eschaton, and Jesus' reign, were in the process of coming to fruition. As indicated in Luke 1:33, the audience would have anticipated that Jesus' reign, and the peace established therein, would be everlasting.²¹¹ Thus, while the audience would have perceived some superficial similarities between Jesus and Augustus, Jesus is portrayed as offering a more authentic and lasting peace.

²⁰⁸ Brown, *Birth*, 414-5; 424 and Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 393-94 both acknowledge that Luke seeks to associate Jesus and Augustus in order to compare the two.

²⁰⁹ It is likely that the audience would have been aware of the misdeeds of some of the emperors who followed Augustus.

²¹⁰ Throughout Luke 1:5–2:20, God is portrayed as reliable – he is faithful to promises made and his “word,” invariably, is realized.

²¹¹ The eschatological narrative setting and the direct declaration (Luke 1:33) that Jesus' rule and kingdom would be everlasting clearly reveal this.

Luke 2:15–20

After the departure of the heavenly beings, the narrative moves on to describe the shepherds' visit to the manger, the verification of the sign given to them, and their witness to others. Luke 2:15–19 does not yield new information about Jesus' character but, instead, focuses on the reactions of others to the shepherds' story. The pericope ends with the shepherds “. . . glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told to them” (Luke 2:20).

Luke 2:21–40: Circumcision, Naming and Presentation in the Temple

The departure of the shepherds is followed by events that depict the faithful fulfillment of the Jewish Law by Jesus' parents. Circumcision, purification and sacrifice are all mentioned in the first four verses. The word “law” is repeated three times in verses 22–24: verse 22 mentions the “law of Moses”; verses 23 and 24 each mention the “law of the Lord” once.²¹² Additionally, the prophetic words of Simeon and Anna (vss. 28–38) are bracketed by verses describing Mary and Joseph as faithfully observing the Jewish law; they do what is “customary” (2:27) and “required” (Luke 2:39) under the Law. The very movement of the parents is tied to the fulfillment of Jewish custom and law, signaled by the author's repeated use of the verb *πλερώω* (2:21, 2:22, 2:39). This emphasis would not be missed by the audience and would highlight the fact that Jesus is raised in the Jewish tradition.

²¹² So also Coleridge, *Birth*, 158.

The first events narrated are the circumcision and naming of Jesus, recounted in a single verse. In essence, it is the narrator's means of affirming for the audience that the child is given the name earlier revealed by Gabriel. Once again, God's word has come to fruition. In contrast to the birth and naming of John, there is no lingering here. Rather, the reader is moved systematically to the next critical event: the family's journey to Jerusalem for the child's presentation in the Temple. It is in the Temple that the next revelatory words regarding Jesus are delivered by Simeon.

Luke 2:25–39

Simeon is introduced in Luke 2:25 and is portrayed to the audience as a character that can speak reliably on God's behalf. The author uses a hendiadys²¹³ to describe Simeon; he is righteous and devout. He is also described as awaiting the “παράκλησιν τοῦ Ἰσραήλ.” “The consolation of the Israel,” has its roots in the book of Isaiah²¹⁴ and was a means of describing the eschatological restoration of Israel.²¹⁵ Thus, Simeon is waiting for the moment of God's definitive intervention in behalf of Israel.

Most importantly, the text indicates that Simeon's relationship with God is privileged. God's Holy Spirit is upon him revealing important information to him and guiding him. In three successive verses (Luke 2:25; 2:26 and 2:27) the Spirit is associated with Simeon. While the text

²¹³ García Serrano, *The Presentation*, 153.

²¹⁴ It is widely recognized that Isaiah 40:1 (LXX) stands as the probable source for this concept. Brown discusses the various references to consolation—as—redemption in Isaiah (*Birth*, 453–54; 458), although his references are drawn from the Hebrew and not the Septuagint. In some cases, the Septuagint translation alters the meaning to something other than comfort/consolation (see n. 230 below). Brown also notes that Simeon's canticle echoes themes repeated throughout Isa 40-55 and Isa 56-66.

²¹⁵ Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 427. Fitzmyer also points out that the term was used in later Rabbinic literature as a title for the Messiah.

falls short of calling Simeon a prophet,²¹⁶ it is likely that the audience would understand Simeon to be a prophet. The reader is also informed of the fact that he has been promised, by God, that he would see the Lord's Messiah before his death (Luke 2:26). “Τὸν Χριστὸν κυρίου” parallels “παράκλησιν τοῦ Ἰσραήλ,” making it clear to the audience that Simeon is waiting for the appearance of the promised messiah.

The narrative continues as the Spirit guides Simeon into the Temple. When the parents enter the Temple with Jesus, Simeon immediately realizes that God's word to him has been fulfilled (2:29). He takes the child and then addresses God in a prayer/oracle. This prayer discloses new information about the child's role:

- 2:29 Master, now you may let your servant depart
in peace, according to your word.
2:30 For my eyes have seen this salvation
2:31 that you have made ready in the sight of all peoples:
2:32a a light to be a revelation to the Gentiles
2:32b and to be a glory for your people Israel.

In verse 2:30, Jesus is described as “salvation,” a concept with which he has already been associated.²¹⁷ The specific term used in verse 2:30 is σωτήριον. According to García Serrano, this term indicates “an apparatus fitted to save.”²¹⁸ This adds a subtle, new aspect to Jesus' role. He will be savior *but also the specific means of salvation*.²¹⁹ Σωτήριον is also connected with the anticipated “consolation of Israel” in Isaiah 40:5 (LXX).²²⁰ Therefore, the audience's perception that Jesus is the fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy is strengthened.

²¹⁶ García Serrano points this out as well (*The Presentation*, 172).

²¹⁷ He is the “horn of salvation” in Luke 1:69 and “savior” in 2:11.

²¹⁸ García Serrano, *The Presentation*, 177.

²¹⁹ This could be interpreted as an allusion to Jesus' death and resurrection.

²²⁰ Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 428.

Simeon's words in verse 2:31 mark the crossing of a significant threshold. His words unambiguously express to the reader that Jesus' role extends beyond the confines of the people of Israel. This is indicated by the use of "all peoples." This term is further clarified in Luke 2:32 – "all peoples" includes both the Gentiles and Israel.²²¹ Thus, any previous inclinations to interpret Jesus' role in universal terms are now clearly affirmed. His relation to the two groups is described via the metaphors of light, revelation and glory.²²² Jesus will be a "light" that will be revelation to the Gentiles and will be glory for Israel.²²³ That is, through Jesus, truth will be revealed to the Gentiles and God's glory will be present to the people of Israel.²²⁴ For the audience, the reference to light would bring to mind the image of Jesus as ἀνατολή in verse 1:78. In Luke 1:79, the function of the ἀνατολή was described in terms of illumination. Additionally, the previous pericope associated the appearance of God's illuminative "glory" with the announcement of Jesus' birth. Thus, while phrased differently, light, revelation and glory have all been associated with Jesus previously in the narrative. Therefore, in this portion of Simeon's prophecy, the element that would stand out for the reader would be the idea of Jesus as universal savior. The proclamation made by Simeon explicitly states what was indirectly suggested in Luke 2:1–20 via the comparison of Jesus with Augustus: Jesus is the true savior of all the peoples.

²²¹ Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 422;

²²² These metaphors are echoes of Isaian texts – in particular, texts that reflect the theme of salvation extended to Gentiles. See Brown, *Birth*, 458, for specific references.

²²³ I agree with Brown that "light" should be understood in apposition to "salvation." Therefore, "revelation" and "glory" are two aspects of Jesus' function as light (*Birth*, 440).

²²⁴ Some interpret "glory for your people Israel" as suggesting that Israel is glorified via the appearance of Jesus [García Serrano, *The Presentation*, 181]. However, glory should be understood in terms of Jesus' salvific role. Jesus brings the "presence and splendor" of God [Johnson, *Luke*, 55].

Simeon's prophecy pauses briefly and the audience is told that Mary and Joseph react with astonishment to the message Simeon has revealed. He then continues, addressing the remainder of his words directly to Mary:²²⁵

2:34c Behold, he is set for the fall and rise of many in Israel

2:34d and for a sign to be contradicted

2:35a indeed, a sword will pass through your own soul

2:35b so that the inmost thoughts of many may be revealed.

Despite being cast as a personal prophecy to Mary, Simeon's words foretell Israel's response to Jesus. Jesus will be a "sign." His appearance as a sign will cause contradiction. That is, many will resist or oppose Jesus.²²⁶ Therefore, some within Israel will "fall." Those accepting Jesus will rise. The meaning of Luke 2:35a has been the subject of much consternation and debate. From a very superficial perspective, we can say that the text implies that Mary will also be affected by the "contradiction" that surrounds her son.²²⁷ Luke 2:35b builds on both what is expressed in 2:34c–2:35a and on the theme of Jesus' revelatory function. Jesus' appearance will cause the secret negative thoughts (καρδιῶν διαλογισμοί) to be revealed.²²⁸ It is quite obvious that this oracle presents the negative repercussions of Jesus' appearance. But, what significance would the Gentile Christian audience attribute to these words? I would suggest that the reader of Luke 2:34c–2:35b would understand this oracle as foreshadowing the response Jesus receives later in the Gospel, and also as an accurate reflection of their community's experience.

Luke 2:36–40

²²⁵ It is universally recognized that these verses are particularly difficult to translate and interpret. I treat these on a relatively superficial level. The basic negative thrust of the verses can be judged readily.

²²⁶ Johnson, *Luke*, 57.

²²⁷ Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 441.

²²⁸ Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 430.

Immediately after the prophecy ends, the narrative moves on to describe a new character's reaction to Jesus' presence in the Temple. The character is a prophetess named Anna. She is described in details that portray her as a prophet, an honorable woman, a pious and faithful Jew and, therefore, a very reliable witness.²²⁹ The text directly identifies her as a prophetess and provides details of her Jewish lineage, her advanced age, the length of her marriage and the length of her widowhood. She is also cast in a manner that depicts her single-hearted devotion to God and Israel: she never leaves the Temple and worships "day and night with fasting and prayer."

Anna appears on the scene rather abruptly. No details are given regarding her interaction with Simeon, Jesus, Mary or Joseph. Rather, she spontaneously arrives, "at that very hour." No words are directly attributed to Anna, but the reader is told that she openly begins praising God and then shares her news about the child with "all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem." The prophetess's reactions signal two things to the audience: that God has acted benevolently (inspiring praise), and that the child is connected to the "redemption of Jerusalem."

Once again, the audience perceives that Jewish expectations of salvation are being fulfilled through Jesus. Jesus is the "ἀλύτρωσιν Ἰερουσαλήμ." This descriptor parallels one used earlier in Luke 2:25 when Simeon was portrayed as awaiting "the consolation of Israel."²³⁰ The

²²⁹ García Serrano also notes that Anna is characterized as a reliable witness (*The Presentation*, 178).

²³⁰ Brown, *Birth*, 442; García Serrano, *The Presentation*, 179; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 432. All of these commentators see the paralleling of the two expressions based on their appearance together in Isa 52:9 of the Hebrew OT. The NRSV translation of this text reads as follows: Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem, *for the LORD has comforted his people*, he has redeemed Jerusalem. However, the Septuagint reads quite differently: Let the desolate places of Jerusalem break forth together in joy, because the LORD *has had mercy on her*, and has delivered Jerusalem. The Septuagint translates the Hebrew text using the verb for mercy, not the verb for comfort. Thus, while Luke's source may have drawn from the Hebrew text of Isa 52:9, Luke's Greek-speaking audience would not have connected the two phrases based on Isa 52:9 (LXX). However, God's deliverance and redemption are connected with God's comfort of Israel/Jerusalem/Zion throughout Isaiah LXX (Isa 40; 41; 49; 51; 53, 57, 61, 66). For example, Isa 51:3 (LXX) states, "And I will comfort you now, Zion; I comforted all her desolate places, and I will make her desolate place like the garden of the Lord, in her they will find joy and gladness, confession and the voice of praise." This verse shares the motif of "desolate places" and rejoicing with Isa 52:9 (LXX). This shared language enables the reader/auditor of these Isaian passages to connect the concept of the "comfort" Jerusalem with the

message of Anna and Simeon form a type of double attestation of Jesus' role, lending more credibility to the account. However, Simeon's message advances the role of Jesus beyond what was previously divulged. Jesus will be savior to Gentile and Jew alike, but some within Judaism will reject him.

The pericope closes with a description of the departure of the parents and child after they complete all of the requirements of the "Law of the Lord." They return to Nazareth. The final verse is another summary growth statement that serves as a transition and indicates the passage of time. Jesus' growth is expressed in terms of three categories typical to ancient biographical literature: physical, mental (growth in a virtue), and nurture/training.²³¹ He is described as strong, filled with wisdom, and under God's favor. Although the synchrony between Jesus and John has been relegated to the background, the result of comparing John's growth statement (1:80) with 2:40 yields a conclusion consistent with the theme that Jesus is the greater of the two men.²³²

Luke 2:41–52: The Child Jesus in the Temple

Before examining the specific textual items related to the characterization of Jesus, the relation of this pericope to the genre of ancient biography merits discussion. It was not unusual for Hellenistic biographical material to include accounts depicting the amazing childhood feats

redemption of Jerusalem. Therefore, Luke's audience, having heard the texts of Isaiah LXX read aloud, would not miss the parallelism between the "consolation of Israel" and "deliverance of Jerusalem."

²³¹ These are again progymnasmata categories. See Martin, "Progymnastic Topic Lists," 22.

²³² John's progress is also reported according to similar categories but is not as impressive as Jesus' progression. The text states he "grew up," "became strong in spirit," and "lived in the desert."

of the subject.²³³ The inclusion of this pericope would not have been perceived as unusual or out-of-place. The person with an extraordinary nature would be expected to exhibit extraordinary traits even in childhood. Having progressed through the text of Luke 1:5–2:40, the reader would certainly have recognized that Jesus was being portrayed as an extraordinary person. A reading of Luke 2:41–52 would have been interpreted as further proof of Jesus’ extraordinary character. However, the interpretation of this pericope cannot be limited to the interpretation of its function within the overall genre. It is in the details of the pericope that the reader acquires specific information regarding Jesus’ fundamental character.

The pericope begins with a description of the narrative setting and the activity of the family. In keeping with their annual custom, Jesus’ parents have gone to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Jesus, who is twelve, has accompanied them. The reference to Jesus’ age is significant from an audience-critical perspective. Luke’s audience would have considered Jesus to be a child, not yet fully mature from a physical or intellectual perspective.²³⁴ The narrative discloses that, unbeknown to his parents, the boy Jesus remains in Jerusalem after the end of the festival. Realizing that he is missing, the parents return to Jerusalem to search for him.

2:46 Finally, after three days, they found him in the Temple precincts,
seated in the midst of the teachers,
both listening to them and asking them questions.

2:47 All who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers.

2:48 When his parents saw Jesus, they were amazed.

²³³ For example, Suetonius records that Emperor Augustus delivered an impressive eulogy at the age of twelve (*Aug.*, 8.1). Additional examples can be found in Henk J. De Jonge, “Sonship, Wisdom, Infancy: Luke II. 41-51a,” *NTS* 24: 317-54.

²³⁴ In his study of this pericope, Henk J. De Jonge examined Jewish, Greek and Roman traditions to assess the significance of Jesus’ age. De Jonge’s analysis revealed that twelve was not considered to be a critical age for males in any of the traditions. Rather, he found that the age of fourteen was considered to be an age of demarcation in both Greco-Roman and Jewish thought; it was the age that marked a male’s transition from childhood to adolescence. Additionally, De Jonge found that authors often depicted individuals at the age of twelve specifically to emphasize that they are still children.

“Child,” his mother said to him, “why have you done this to us?
Behold, your father and I have been so worried looking for you.”

- 2:49a “Why were you looking for me?” he said to them.
b “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

2:50 But they did not understand what he said to them.²³⁵

The search for the child heightens the anticipation of the audience. The readers, like Jesus’ parents, want to know where he is. He is found in an unlikely circumstance – in the Temple engaged in discussion with the teachers. The reaction of those present is significant because it reveals the extraordinary quality that is being highlighted in the narrative. *All* the people present are astounded by Jesus’ extraordinary manifestation of *synesis* (Luke 2:47). Generally, *synesis* was used to indicate that a person had the ability to correctly perceive or understand something, especially information delivered orally.²³⁶ There is abundant attestation that it was formally classified as a virtue in Hebrew and Jewish traditions, as well as Greco-Roman traditions.²³⁷ Thus, through the description of Jesus in Luke 2:47, the reader would conclude that Jesus possesses this virtue. Furthermore, *synesis* was often connected to another virtue, the virtue of *sophia*.²³⁸ Looking back to Luke 2:40, the audience would conclude that Jesus possesses both of these related virtues. In essence, Jesus’ manifestation of *synesis* verifies what was stated in Luke 2:40 – that Jesus is “growing in *sophia*.”²³⁹ A final point requiring attention is the Septuagint’s use of *synesis* and *sophia*. Isaiah 11:2 (LXX), part of a larger messianic text, speaks of the messiah as possessing a “spirit of *wisdom* and *understanding*.” Hence, for the reader familiar

²³⁵ This is my translation of verse 2:25. Brown translates τὸ ῥήμα as “the event” which renders an awkward translation of this verse and does not correspond with the meaning of τὸ ῥήμα as used throughout Luke 1:5–2:52.

²³⁶ Conzelmann, “συνίημι, σύνεσις. . .” *TDNT* 7:888–96.

²³⁷ Conzelmann, *TDNT* 7:889 n. 13. Conzelmann notes that the virtue was often associated with gods, heroes and rulers.

²³⁸ Conzelmann, *TDNT* 7:889, 889 n. 12. *Sophia* and *synesis* are paired in some notable Greek writings but also in the Hebrew Old Testament, the Septuagint, and other Hellenistic Jewish writings.

²³⁹ So also Brown, *Birth*, 475.

with this text, Luke 2:47 would also function as another indication that Jewish messianic expectations were being fulfilled.

The narrative continues as Jesus' parents react to the events that have transpired with astonishment and shock. Mary then questions the child to determine why he has caused them undue anxiety and grief. While Mary's words would not be considered unusual in light of the circumstances, there is one aspect that stands out. De Jonge, among others, has noted that the word order in the phrase "your father and I" is unusual.²⁴⁰ According to De Jonge, when the word ἐγώ appears with another word in a compound subject, ἐγώ typically appears first. However, in Luke 2:48, that is not the case – ὁ πατήρ σου has the primacy of place in the compound subject. The inversion of ἐγώ and ὁ πατήρ purposefully draws the audience's attention to the words ὁ πατήρ. The goal of this purposeful inversion becomes obvious in Luke 2:49.

Verse 2:49 crosses a threshold as Jesus speaks for the first time in the narrative. His words offer the reader another glimpse into his character. Jesus' response to his parents comes in the form of two questions. In Luke 2:49a, Jesus poses his first question; he expresses surprise at the fact that his parents were searching for him. Of course, this would seem to be an inappropriate response on Jesus' part since cultural expectations of the time would have mandated obedience and honor to be accorded parents. However, Jesus' second question offers an explanation for what has transpired. The question reveals why he is surprised – Jesus assumed that his parents were aware of the obligations he needed to fulfill. Luke 2:49b emphasizes several facets of Jesus' character. First, it distinguishes him as one who has understanding beyond that of his parents.²⁴¹ This is affirmed for the audience by the use of the verb συνίημι to

²⁴⁰ De Jonge, "Sonship, Wisdom, Infancy," 330, 330 n. 3.

²⁴¹ Brown, *Birth*, 477.

describe their lack of comprehension (Luke 2:50). Hence, it provides further attestation that Jesus possesses the virtue of *synesis*. Third, it indicates that Jesus' understanding is specifically related to "τοῖς τοῦ πατρός μου." Finally, through the use of the word πατρός, it calls attention to Jesus' relationship with God. In Luke 2:48, the use of πατρός already drew the attention of the reader. Its repetition in Luke 2:49b juxtaposes the two "fathers" of Jesus. Jesus' question clearly alludes to his divine sonship. It expresses his recognition that God is his father and, therefore, God's plan for him will hold priority over the plans of Joseph and Mary. Through Jesus' acknowledgment of God's fatherhood, the audience is reminded of Gabriel's oracle to Mary. Thus, what was predicted of Jesus in Luke 1:32 and Luke 1:35, is verified by him in verse 2:49b.

The pericope closes with the return of the family to Nazareth (2:51) and a summary growth statement (2:52). Lest the audience think that Jesus is wont to dishonoring his parents, a culturally unacceptable behavior and a violation of Jewish law, the audience is told that Jesus returns to Nazareth and remains obedient to them. The growth statement in Luke 2:52 closes the infancy narrative. It represents an extension beyond any of previous growth statements, whether the statement made of John in Luke 1:80, or the statement describing Jesus in 2:40.²⁴²

2:52 And Jesus was increasing in wisdom, stature and favor
before God and human beings.

The growth statement is rather straight-forward, repeating the essential elements of 2:40 and adding one new item. Jesus is depicted as growing in the favor of human beings. Thus, the

²⁴² Brown, *Birth*, 494.

audience is clearly apprised of the fact that Jesus is progressing into adulthood; his public appearance as an adult is imminent.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this essay was to understand, from an audience-critical perspective, the characterization of Jesus as depicted in Luke 1:5–2:52. The author's decision to organize the beginning of his narrative according to the genre of an infancy narrative would have triggered certain conclusions on the part of the audience. Specifically, a first-century audience would have understood that Jesus was being portrayed as an extraordinary individual endowed with some type of divinely-sourced qualities. While the genre suggests to the reader that Jesus belongs among the ranks of significant and extraordinary figures, the details of the narrative convey the most important points of Jesus' character.

Throughout Luke 1:5–2:52, the reader's perception of Jesus is guided by the author's use of character descriptors and narrative techniques. With the exception of the last pericope, Jesus' character is revealed through either the direct words of divine messengers, or by characters that are empowered to prophesy through God's Holy Spirit. The religio-temporal setting established in Gabriel's annunciation to Zechariah provides a background for interpreting the claims made regarding Jesus; the events narrated are correlated with the anticipated "day of the Lord."

The depiction of Jesus in the first chapter focuses on his role as Davidic messiah and "son of God," using images, allusions and titles that accord him authority and power. For the audience, Luke 1:26-38 comprises the initial phase of Jesus' characterization. Parents and family lineage were considered significant with respect to character. The narrative depicts Mary as

insignificant from societal and cultic perspectives, but her honor and purity are intact. Jesus' parents are identified as Jewish and, overall, are portrayed as rather ordinary. Given these facts Gabriel's appearance and message to Mary are rather surprising. Equally surprising are the titles and adjectives used to characterize Jesus. He will be great, Son of the Most High, and everlasting king. These titles suggest Jesus will be powerful but do not explicitly suggest he is a god. However, the titles do associate him with divine power. The religio-temporal setting indicates that Jesus is to be the anticipated Jewish messiah.

Of particular importance from an audience-critical point of view is the description of how Jesus will be conceived. Mary's conception via the Holy Spirit would be understood as an unprecedented event within Israelite history. However, the concept of a hero being the issue of a god and human woman was well-known in the Greco-Roman world. Thus, the manner of Jesus' conception likens him to other figures that were said to have divine filiation. The attribution of the title "Son of God" also reinforces this point. Distinguishing Jesus from other "sons of god" is his association with the monotheistic tradition of Judaism. There is a subtle claim of exclusivity implicit in his status as "son of God" since he is the "son of God" of the only, Most High, God. Jesus' conception occurs via the "power of the Most High," suggesting that his character will reflect the power of God's Spirit in a superlative manner.

Generally, the remainder of Luke 1 reinforces the depiction set forth in Luke 1:26–38. The title Lord is attributed to Jesus, there are additional allusions to his identity as the Davidic messiah and he is repeatedly associated with God's salvific actions in behalf of Israel. Luke 1:78–79 adds a dimension to Jesus persona that would have been especially significant to the Gentile reader: Jesus is depicted as one who will illuminate the way to peace. The reader would

not only understand this as a messianic allusion, but would potentially compare Jesus to Augustus, the person recognized as the preeminent procurer of peace.

The use of syncretism in Luke 1 also has the effect of elevating Jesus' status. By comparing Jesus to John the Baptist through syncretism, it is made quite clear to the reader that Jesus is superior to John. Jesus, then, is elevated to a status above the great end-time prophet who possesses the Holy Spirit from the womb.

Luke 2 leads the reader to consider Jesus' status on the greater worldwide stage. The narrative setting remains Jewish – Bethel and the Temple are the geographic settings of the pericopae – and Jesus is explicitly referred to as the Messiah. However, other textual references and allusions draw the audience to consider Jesus' role within a wider context. The annunciation to the shepherds guides the reader to consider, more thoroughly, Jesus' role as savior, Lord, and bringer of peace vis-à-vis Augustus's role as such. This is partially accomplished by the attribution of titles to Jesus that the reader would certainly have associated with Augustus. Further encouraging this comparison is the use of terminology, in Luke 2:10b–2:11, commonly associated with the emperor. At a minimum, the annunciation scene leaves the audience with the impression that Jesus' status is similar to Augustus's. Clarification of Jesus' status comes in the form of Simeon's prophetic words.

Simeon's attestation in the Temple explicitly identifies Jesus as the savior of Jew and Gentile alike. The authenticity of his words is corroborated by the description of his relationship with God via the Holy Spirit. Simeon's attestation is followed by the prophetess Anna's confirmation that Jesus is the "redemption of Israel." Her words are both a reprisal of previous themes and a reminder that the savior of the world is, fundamentally, the savior of the Jews.

The infancy narrative closes with a childhood scene that affirms Jesus' extraordinary nature and his identity as the son of the Jewish God.

The Gentile Christian audience listening to and interpreting the text of Luke 1:5–2:52, would conclude that Jesus is not “son of god” in the same sense as other extraordinary figures. Rather, they would clearly understand the author to be claiming that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, who has come to be Savior and Lord for all peoples.

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