The Arrival of Jesus as a Politically Subversive Event According to Luke 1–2

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The author's work

Of course, we do not know who actually wrote the Gospel of Luke and its companion volume, the Acts of the Apostles. It bears the name of a traveling companion of St. Paul who is mentioned three times in the letters attributed to the apostle (see Phlm v. 24, Col 4:14 and 2 Tim 4:11), but this character is not named anywhere in Luke or Acts.

Whoever he was—most assume the evangelist was male—he may well have had access to a collection of Paul's epistles and also to the writings of Josephus. The two volumes may have been produced in Rome, or in some other urban center in the Roman Empire such as Philippi.

Luke's version of the story of Jesus is based on at least two other documents. One is the Gospel of Mark, which most scholars think was written around 70 CE, when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem. Luke follows Mark's outline in most respects. Often Luke modifies Mark's anecdotes and frequently improves Mark's grammar. The other source—commonly referred to as "Q"—is a reconstructed collection of Jesus' sayings based on teachings that appear in Matthew and Luke, but not in Mark. Neither of these sources, however, are the basis for anything in the first two chapters of Luke. This "special Lukan material," as it is called, may have had its basis in other traditions, or it may be Luke's own composition.

In any event, the two-volume Lukan narrative is in well-written Greek and shares some of the qualities of ancient histories and biographies. In some places, it reads like a novella; that is, it preserves the significant events in the life of Jesus and the early Christian community in an edifying and entertaining way. The first two chapters have a "biblical" feel; that is, they imitate the language of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures which was widely used by first-century Christians.

Our Perspective

Interpreters may approach a biblical text from any number of perspectives to focus on:

- the original event that occurred at some point in history, or
- the oral tradition that preserved the memory of that event, or
- the occasion in which the tradition was reduced to writing, or
- the process by which the document was recognized as canonical, or
- the interpretations advanced by the church through the ages, or
- the application of the scriptural message to our lives today.

What was going on when Luke's gospel was first written? How might those who heard it read to them have reacted? How would they have understood it and interpreted it?

Often in our preaching and teaching we jump from the first to the last, from the biblical event "way back then" to our lives today in the "here and now." That's a leap of some 2,100 years! Suppose we were to take a different tack. Suppose we were to shorten the gap slightly and focus on the third perspective and ask: What was going on when Luke's gospel was first written? How might those who heard it read to them have reacted? How would they have understood it and interpreted it?

The way to answer such questions is to identify key themes and phrases in the document we are studying, and then to discover how those terms and ideas were used elsewhere in the social environment in which the document circulated.

For example, if we were to hear someone talk about "big-box retailers," would we think of stores shaped like big boxes, such as Kmart, Walmart, and Target? Or would we think of furniture and appliance stores that sell refrigerators and stoves or dining tables and sofas, items that come in big boxes? Theoretically, the term "big box" *could* apply to either one, but *realistically* we know it's the former, not the latter. And we could prove it by pointing to newspaper articles, urban environmental impact statements, TV ads, and the like, which all use "big box" to identify large square-shaped buildings, not packing containers.

Similarly, as we read the opening chapters of Luke's gospel, we will want to discover how terms such as "Kingdom of God," "Lord," "Savior," "gospel," "peace," and the like would have resonated with Luke's auditors. And when we do, we will discover that these are politically sensitive ideas, and these ideas will then shape

our own appropriation of these texts.

> One popular commentator on the third gospel put it this way: Proclaimers of the gospel have the opportunity to probe the resources of one of the most astute political writers represented in the pages of the Bible. His name is St. Luke, and his heroes are God and Jesus the Son of God. And his two-volume work is the story of a political power struggle. …
>
> Since political language dominates the pages of both the Hebrew and the Greek Scriptures, Luke does not apologize for his terminology. He makes use of the expression "Kingdom of God" at least thirty times. And no term could be more political.[1]

A set of well-crafted stories

The place to begin is with the layout of the stories in Luke 1–2. They are juxtaposed one next to another in a pleasingly symmetrical arrangement. After a brief prologue (A, 1:1–4), an angelic announcement to Zechariah of the birth of his son John to his wife Elizabeth (B, 1:5–25) is paired with an angel's announcement to Mary herself of the birth of her son Jesus (C, 1:26–38). This is followed by a meeting of the two expectant mothers (D, 1:39–56).

Then come the stories of the births of the two boys; first, John (E, 1:57–80); then, Jesus (F, 2:1–21). These are followed by a pair of stories that take place in the temple at Jerusalem. First, the baby Jesus is presented to Simeon and Anna (G, 2:22–40); then the 12-year-old Jesus meets with scholars (H, 2:41–51).

A – Preface	
B – Announcement of John's birth	C – Announcement of Jesus' birth
D – Meeting of mothers *	
E – Birth of John *	F – Birth of Jesus *
G – Presentation to Simeon & Anna *	H – Conversation with scholars

Four of these sections (*) include poetic psalm-like canticles:

- Mary's praise, the *Magnificat* (1:46–55),
- Zechariah's prophecy, the *Benedictus* (1:68–79),
- the angels' praise, the *Gloria in Excelsis* (2:14), and
- Simeon's prophecy, the *Nunc Dimittis* (2:29–32).

Note how songs of praise alternate with prophetic liturgies.

Note also how the total effect has a pleasing and comprehensive feel to it, replete with a fascinating cast of characters—there are no villains—and a satisfying sense of wholeness and completion. But lurking just beneath the surface are not-so-subtle hints of tension and conflict.

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The preface

The hints start in **the preface, Luke 1:1–4**, which is a single carefully crafted sentence. It is composed in the style popularized by ancient historians.

Polybius, for example, wrote *The Histories* about 140 years BCE. In the preface to his work he argues that the "surest and indeed the only method of learning how to bear bravely the vicissitudes of fortune, is to recall the calamities of others." And then he asks, "Who is so worthless or indolent as not to wish to know by what means and under what system of polity the Romans in less than fifty-three years have succeeded in subjecting nearly the whole inhabited world to their sole government—a thing unique in history?"[2]

Although he was one of the first to suggest that unbiased, objective reporting should be the goal of historical works, we notice that his bias in favor of the Roman Republic is obvious. In other words, his work is politically slanted.

Again, Flavius Josephus (a younger contemporary of the author of Luke) wrote *The Wars of the Jews* just a few years after 70 CE. In his preface, he claims that his intention is to give a correct account of the conflicts, because "some men who were not concerned in the affairs themselves have gotten together vain and contradictory stories by hearsay, and have written them down after a sophisticated manner..."[3] Thus Josephus, too, exhibits his political bias, which amazingly is both pro-Roman and pro-Jewish.

We begin to get the idea that the opening lines of Luke's gospel are an imitation of the sort of prefaces that introduce historical works, which are by their very nature political writings. All are concerned with accuracy, of course, but all are also bent

1. Frederick W. Danker, "Politics of the New Age According to St. Luke," *Currents in Theology and Mission* (December 1985), 338. Richard Horsley (*The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context* [New York: Crossroad, 1989], 122) argues that "the infancy narratives in general and the Lucan canticles in particular deal with politico-economic as well as religious liberation and focus on the liberation of Israel [which] places them in conflict with commonly held views about the early Christian gospel in general and the thrust of Luke-Acts in particular."

2. Polybius, *Histories, Book I.* 1.2 & 5; LCL, vol. 128. The *Loeb Classical Library* (published by the Harvard University Press) is the standard source for Greek and Latin literary texts. Five readily available selections of Greco-Roman references are C. K. Barrett's *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956); Frederick W. Danker's *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1982); David R. Cartlide and David L. Dungan's *Documents for the Study of the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994); Neil Elliot and Mark Reasoner's *Documents and Images for the Study of Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011); and Mark Reasoner's *Roman Imperial Texts: A Source Book* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

3. Flavius Josephus, *Wars,* Preface, 1.2; LCL, vol. 203.

on telling their story with a certain bias. Luke acknowledges that he has investigated previous reports and wants to set the record straight. Interestingly, he calls his account a "narrative" (*diegesis* in Greek), not a "biography" (*bios*) or a "history" (*historia*) or even a "memorabilia" (*apomnemoneumata*).

Luke addresses his volume to "most excellent Theophilus." This may have been a real person, perhaps the patron who published the work. Alternatively, the name, which means "friend of God," may refer to any God-fearing reader. In either case, Luke is using conventional rhetoric to address someone who enjoys a degree of political stature. This, in turn, implies that Luke's auditors are the kind of people who would be aware of the political dimensions of his work.

Three canticles

One clue to discovering an author's bias is to look for passages that are not necessary for the story, such as poems or songs in the middle of a narrative. For example, we are all likely familiar with the 1939 movie *The Wizard of Oz*, where Dorothy, accompanied by her puppy Toto, plus a scarecrow, a tin man, and a cowardly lion, are all on a quest to return home, or to gain a brain, a heart, and some courage respectively. They are thwarted at every turn by the Wicked Witch of the West, as well as by the shenanigans of the wizard who rules the Emerald City.

But what most of us remember above all is Dorothy's song, "Over the Rainbow," a wistful yearning to attain to "a land that I've heard of once in a lullaby." Logically, this sentiment does not fit will with her actual hope to return to Kansas, and the route could well be *via* another tornado, not *via* a rainbow. She hopes to wake up in a place "where troubles melt like lemon drops." Lemon drops, of course, are hard, yellow candies which are not known to melt easily!

But such discrepancies between the song and the narrative do not trouble most movie-goers. In fact, they add another dimension to the story, a dimension that resonates with viewers' own longings.

If "Over the Rainbow" had been left on the cutting room floor, viewers would not miss the song, and Dorothy's adventures would continue until she finally awakes safely at home with Aunt Em. But the song *is* there, and it expresses the bias or sentiment of a nation that was praying for hope just as it was about to enter the struggles of the Second World War. Although somewhat unrelated to the events in the story, the song shapes the story's impact.

Similarly, if the three longer canticles were to be taken out of Luke's story, we would not miss them. They do not further the plot or the action of the characters, and in some instances, they seem almost unrelated to the events in which they occur. Thus, they are clues to the author's bias, which, as we will see, has a politically subversive bent.

The first of the three, **the song of Mary, Luke 1:46–55,** occurs at the beginning of her three-month visit with her "kinswoman" Elizabeth. It is not at all clear how Mary (presumably of the tribe of Judah) and Elizabeth (of a priestly family in the tribe of Levi) could be "kinswomen." What unites them in Luke's narrative is

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the fact that they are both unexpectedly pregnant—Elizabeth in her old age, and Mary in her virginity. Remarkably, however, their miraculous pregnancies are never even mentioned in Mary's song!

Her *Magnificat* shares some themes with the prayer of Hannah in 1 Sam 2:1–10. There Hannah, who was thought to be barren, gives thanks to God after the birth of her son Samuel (which may account for the fact that some ancient manuscripts claim that this is Elizabeth's song). Mary's opening lines (1:46–50), not addressed *to* God, but a poem *about* God, can be interpreted as an expression of her soon-to-be-favored position as the mother of Jesus, although it is difficult to determine why her station in life would be described as "the lowliness of his maidservant."

But the second half of the poem (1:51–55) is entirely unrelated to anything that has occurred in the narrative up to this point. Rather, it summarizes the Lord's interaction with the people of Israel over the centuries—fighting with a strong arm, deposing powerful rulers and exalting the lower-classes, reversing the roles of the poor and the wealthy—in short, keeping faith with his ancestral promises to Abraham. In other words, the *Magnificat* introduces strong political themes into the narrative at a crucial juncture where Luke's "matriarchs" collaborate.

Much the same is true for the second canticle, **the prophecy of Zechariah, Luke 1:67–79**. The closing lines are addressed to his 8-day-old son, John (1:76–79), who is destined to become one of God's prophets, one who will prepare a way for the Lord's arrival, and who will dispense salvation and forgiveness. These predictions, of course, come to fruition later in the gospel in the ministry of John the Baptizer.

But the opening lines of the *Benedictus* (1:68–75) sound like a *barakah*, that is, a blessing that praises God for sending "a mighty Savior" from "the house of David." Obviously, these verses refer to the arrival of Jesus, who, however, has not even been born yet! More significantly, the descriptions which unpack this yet-to-be arrival speak of it as an act of "redemption," in which the people will be "saved" and "rescued" from their "enemies" and from "all who hate" them. And all this is the result of the "covenant" God made with their ancestors, especially Abraham.

These lines reflect national aspirations and anticipate another Exodus-like event, in which God's people will be liberated from bondage and freed to serve God "in holiness and righteous-ness." In this context words like "redeem," "savior," "mercy," "rescue,"

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and "peace" must be heard not merely as personal benefits but more importantly as political blessings.

The third canticle near the end of these chapters, is **the prophecy of Simeon, Luke 2:29–32**, who was anticipating "the Lord's Christ"—a royal and therefore political title. Overtly political themes are hard to detect in the *Nunc Dimittis* itself, except perhaps for passing references to "peace" and "salvation." What is of interest, however, is that these blessings are for "all peoples"—Gentiles as well as Israelites—which is a reversal of normal nationalistic aspirations. Instead of the normal "us *versus* them" attitude, Simeon's poem promotes a "both of us together" approach. But more about the political rhetoric in this passage when we consider the entire story.

For now, it is enough to recognize that the canticles that interrupt Luke's narrative betray the author's bias, and that bias has a strong political flavor that promises to inaugurate a new age and to undermine many of the values that otherwise shape the present culture in which this gospel first circulated.[4]

Around 40 BCE the Roman historian and poet Publius Virgilius Maro, or Virgil for short, wrote a poem, his *Fourth Eclogue,* which anticipated a new era of peace and prosperity. Some maintain that Virgil was referring to the marriage of Mark Antony and Octavia, or even Antony and Cleopatra. In that case, Virgil was suggesting that with the birth of a son their dynasty would inaugurate the promised new age. If so, he was proven wrong, of course. The children born to Antony and Octavia were daughters, not sons. And both Antony and Cleopatra committed suicide following the battle of Actium in 31 BCE where their forces were defeated by Octavian, who later became the first Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus.

> Now is come the last age of Cumean [i.e., *prophetic*] song; the great line of the centuries begins anew. Now [*Athena*?] the Virgin returns, the reign of Saturn returns; now a new generation descends from heaven on high. Only do you, pure Lucina [*goddess of childbirth*], smile on the birth of the child, under whom the iron brood shall at last cease and a golden race spring up throughout the world! Your own Apollo now is king!
>
> And in your consulship, Pollio, yes, yours, shall this glorious age begin, and the mighty months commence their march; under your sway any lingering traces of our guilt shall become void and release the earth from its continual dread.
>
> He shall have the gift of divine life, shall see heroes mingled with gods, and shall himself be seen by them, and shall rule the world to which his father's prowess brought peace.
>
> "Ages so blessed, glide on!" cried the Fates to their spindles, voicing in unison the fixed will of Destiny.
>
> O enter upon your high honors—the hour will soon be here—dear offspring of the gods, mighty seed of a Jupiter to be! See how the world bows with its massive dome—earth and expanse of sea and heaven's depth! See how all things rejoice in the age that is at hand!
>
> I pray that the twilight of a long life may then be vouchsafed me, and inspiration enough to hymn your deeds!
>
> Begin, baby boy, to recognize your mother with a smile: ten months have brought your mother long travail. Begin, baby boy! The child who has not won a smile from his parents, no god ever honored with his table, no goddess with her bed![5]

Ancient political poetry like Virgil's *Eclogue* anticipates that the birth of a divinely sent child will inaugurate a new age of peace and prosperity, an age which will replace the old order of civil wars that racked Italy for a century. Similarly, educated readers of Luke's canticles would likely have heard them as poetic predictions of a new political era that will subvert the sway of the old regimes. (Later Christian authors, writing after 300 CE, even referred to Virgil's work—with its references to "the Virgin" and a baby who is the son of a god—as his *"Messianic" Eclogue*.)

A pair of annunciations, and a visitation

Luke's narrative begins with two stories about an angel who announces the miraculous conceptions of two baby boys. The first appearance is to **a priest named Zechariah, Luke 1:5–25**, as he burns incense and offers prayers in the temple. Both Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, are of proper priestly lineage and morally upright, but they are also aged and sterile. Readers familiar with the biblical narratives would remember the stories of other barren mothers who gave birth to Isaac, Samson, and Samuel, all sons who shaped the political fortunes of the ancient ancestors of the Jewish nation.

The "religious" themes of prayer and temple color important events in Luke's gospel. Luke mentions prayer more often than

4. For further discussion of the canticles see: Stephen Farris, *The Hymns of Luke's Infancy Narratives: Their Origin, Meaning and Significance* (University of Sheffield, England, 1985), and Richard J. Dillon, *The Hymns of St. Luke: Lyricism and Narrative Strategy in Luke 1–2* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2013).

5. Virgil, *Fourth Eclogue,* ll. 5–17, 46–54, 60–64; LCL, vol. 63; Elliott and Reasoner, *Document and Images,* no. 82; Cartlide and Dungan, *Documents for…the Gospels,* 175.

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the other three gospels combined. Both his gospel and Acts begin with events in the temple, and the entire gospel as well as these two introductory chapters concludes with scenes in the temple. Proper religious piety is a significant feature of Luke's narrative and a valued commodity in the Roman Empire.

Luke's opening words, however, place this event in its political context: "There was in the days of Herod, King of the Jews, a certain priest named Zechariah…." In 40 BCE the Roman senate awarded Herod the title "King of the Jews." In 37 BCE, with the backing of Mark Antony, Herod's forces took Jerusalem from Antigonus (a puppet of the Parthians, Rome's enemies on the empire's eastern front), and from then on he ruled all of Palestine—Galilee in the north, Samaria in the center, and Judea in the south—until his death in 4 BCE. Later known as "Herod the Great," he is the one who initiated a massive remodeling of the temple in Jerusalem, and who undertook several other large-scale building projects throughout his territory.

Gabriel not only promises the birth of a son to the elderly couple, but also names the boy "John," and stipulates that he "will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God" and "turn fathers' hearts to their children, and the disobedient to the thinking of the righteous." In other words, John will inaugurate significant social reform. As a powerful Spirit-filled prophet like Elijah, and as one who will not imbibe intoxicating drink like a priest or a Nazarite, he will obviously be an agent of social and political influence.

Gabriel's second appearance is to **a girl named Mary, Luke 1:26–38**, who is twice called a "virgin," that is, a young woman of marriageable age, perhaps 12 to 14 years old. Apparently, she is legally engaged to Joseph, but she cannot understand how she can become pregnant since, as she says, "I do not know a man," that is, she has not had intercourse with her husband. The angel assures her that she will be overcome by God's holy spirit, and therefore her child will also be holy, a child of God.

The explanation of Mary's miraculous conception serves to bracket and highlight the mission of her child, who is to be named "Jesus" or "Joshua," a not uncommon name for Jewish boys, based on the figure of the ancient hero who led the Israelite forces when they first conquered the land of Canaan. Mary's Jesus will also be great, the Son of the Most High, and he will occupy the ancestral throne of King David, and rule his kingdom forever. Royal expectations such as these are obviously political in nature.

Mary's pre-marital conception and Elizabeth's post-menopausal conception are linked by the fact that they are both within the realm of divine possibilities, says Gabriel. So the next event is a meeting of the two expectant mothers, **Luke 1:39–56**. Mary leaves Galilee and travels to Judea, and apparently stays with Elizabeth until just before the latter gives birth.

However, as soon as she arrives, Elizabeth gives her an effusive greeting. Her own unborn child "leaps for joy" in her womb; she addresses Mary as "the mother of my lord," and twice calls her "blessed." Mary is clearly an exceptional woman, a figure to be honored, if not venerated.

Divinely blessed women were not a rarity in the ancient world. One of the best known was the Egyptian goddess Isis, who raised her husband and brother, Osiris, from death as part of the annual rituals associated with the falling and rising of the Nile. Her cult throughout the Mediterranean world was so popular it could not be eliminated until the mid-500s CE, well into the Christian era. Typical of the devotion of her followers is this doxology penned by Apuleius (c. 125–c. 180 CE) near the end of his bawdy novel *Metamorphosis*:

> O holy and abiding Savior of the human race! Ever bountiful in your kindness to mortals, you bring a tender mother's love to those who brave adversity. There passes not a single day, a restful night, nor one brief moment that is bereft of your beneficence.
> On land and sea you guard humanity. With saving hand outstretched you still the storms of life. You separate the tightly intertwining threads of fate. You still the stormy blasts of Fortune and curb the bane-filled movements of the stars. The gods above hold you in honor, and the deities below revere you.[6]

By also picturing Mary in similarly exalted, nearly divine, terms Luke signals that even the revered gods and goddesses in the Greco-Roman world may be challenged and replaced by the arrival of the son who will be born to this special woman.

A pair of temple stories

A pair of annunciations plus a visitation begins Luke's narrative; the sequence concludes with a pair of stories about the child Jesus, both located in the temple at Jerusalem. The temple, of course, had been destroyed twenty to forty years before this gospel was written. So it is significant that it not only begins with these stories set in the temple, but also that when it ends Jesus' disciples are "continually in the temple blessing God" (Luke 24:53).

Every city of any size in the Mediterranean world had one or more temples. Usually they were not overly large, about 30 yards long by 15 yards wide, although a few could be the size of a football

6. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses,* bk. 11, par. 1345; LCL, vol. 453; see also Barrett, *NT Background,* no. 94; Danker, *Benefactor,* nos. 26 & 29; Cartlide and Dungan, *Documents for…the Gospels,* 168; and Elliott and Reasoner, *Documents and Images,* no. 71.

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field. The temple in Jerusalem, however, was probably the largest in the Roman Empire, with outer courtyards measuring 300 to 500 yards on all four sides. It was not only the religious center but also the political heart of the Jewish people.

Around 40 CE, when Philo Judaeus tried to convince Emperor Caligula not to infringe on Jewish traditions and institutions, especially those associated with the temple in Jerusalem, he insisted that "the Jews would willingly endure to die not once but a thousand times, if it were possible, rather than allow any prohibited actions to be committed" in the temple. Then he added:

> Still more abounding and peculiar is the zeal of them all for the temple, and the strongest proof of this is that death without appeal is the sentence against those of other races who penetrate into its inner confines. For the outer are open to everyone wherever they come from."[7]

So by anchoring Jesus' story with anecdotes set in the temple Luke not only emphasizes the holy family's religious piety, but also injects a politically sensitive motif into the narrative.

The first of these stories occurs **forty days after Jesus' birth**, **Luke 2:22–40**. Joseph and Mary are there to offer a sacrifice for "their" (i.e., not "her") purification. Apparently, Luke has combined two ancient rituals. According to Exod 13:1–2, every first-born child must be "consecrated" to the Lord. Also, according to Lev 12:1–8, the mother of a boy child shall be "unclean" for forty days after giving birth (eighty days if it's a girl) and then she shall offer a lamb and a pigeon—or two pigeons if she cannot afford a lamb—for her "purification."

In addition to the infant and his parents, the story features two devout elderly people, Simeon and Anna. One normally expects to encounter priests in a temple, especially when the purpose of the visit is to offer a sacrifice. But Luke's interest here is not on religious ritual as much as on political hopes.

Simeon, described as righteous, devout, and Spirit-led, anticipates "the Lord's Christ," "salvation" and the "consolation of Israel"—all expressions of governmental relief. What his canticle, the *Nunc Dimittis*, only hinted at, his blessing of the baby's parents (not the baby itself!) makes clear: Their boy will cause trouble! He will demote some in the nation and promote others, and, as a result, be roundly vilified. And as for Mary, a *romphiah*, that is, a large battle sword, will cause her great pain.

Anna is called a "prophet." Only four other women are called prophets in the Jewish Scriptures: Miriam, who led the singing after the Israelites escaped from slavery in Egypt (Exod 15:20); Deborah, who directed a military campaign against Israel's Canaanite enemies (Judg 4:4); Huldah, who affirmed for King Josiah that his nation would be destroyed (2 Kgs 22:14); and Noadiah, who opposed the rebuilding of the temple (Neh 6:14). In other words, Luke puts Anna in the company of Israel's female political leaders.

If she was approximately fourteen years old when she married, lived with her husband for seven years, and as a widow for an *additional* eighty-four years (not "until she was eighty-four," as most translations misinterpret the text), she would have been 105 when she saw Jesus. That is the same age attained by the apocryphal Judith, who rescued the Israelites from the Assyrians when she cut off their general's head (Judith 16:18–25). In other words, Luke puts Anna in the company of Israel's political saviors.

In short, the story of Jesus' presentation in the temple breaks barriers of race, ethnicity, gender, and age—all socio-political issues. Its conclusion locates the family back at Nazareth in Galilee where Jesus gains physical strength and mental acuity, as the next incident demonstrates.

The second temple story occurs **a dozen years later**, **Luke 2:41–52**, when Jesus—who is still a "boy" (*pais*, 2:43), a "child" (*teknon*, 2:48)—accompanies his parents to the annual seven-day Passover "freedom festival" in Jerusalem. Assuming the trip from Galilee took two days each way and that his parents spent three days searching after losing him on the return trip, the entire affair lasted over two weeks.

Compare this with the one week he will spend during another Passover-related visit at the end of his career. This time he is a child prodigy: He listens to the teachers, asks and answers questions, and demonstrates an amazing degree of understanding in "my Father's house." The next time he will confound the teachers and desecrate the temple precincts, which have become "a den of robbers" (Luke 19:45–47).

A pair of nativities

The Luke's gospel starts with a pair of annunciations and ends with a pair of temple stories. Sandwiched in between are a pair of nativities, of John and of Jesus. In both cases, we learn the birthing, the circumcising and the naming of the two infant boys. For John, the focus is on his name; for Jesus, the focus is on his birth. In neither case is the emphasis on their circumcision, perhaps because Greco-Roman auditors considered the Jewish practice akin to mutilation.

The story of **the naming of John**, **Luke 1:57–66**, is told in a straightforward fashion: Elizabeth's seclusion ends when her child is born, and her relatives celebrate with her because, given her age,

7. Philo, *On the Embassy to Gaius*, par. 209 and 212; LCL, vol. 379. For an inscription from the temple site warning against intrusion by non-Jews, see Barrett, *NT Documents,* no. 47.

it is obvious that it is the Lord who has shown mercy toward her.

Then comes the controversy over the child's name. Her family and friends want to call the boy "Zechariah," after his father. But his mother insists, in the future tense, that "he *will be* called John." And his father concurs, writing in the present tense, that "his name *is* John." It is not clear why they have to signal Zechariah; he was mute, not deaf. But as soon as he gives his reply, his punishment is over and he can speak again.

The gossip that spreads is tinged with fear as people speculate about "what will become of this child." Zechariah's prophetic canticle, as noted previously, predicts that his son will prepare the setting for an era of "salvation," "forgiveness," "mercy," and "peace." In our churchly circles, we tend to hear these as spiritual or religious benefactions. In the Greco-Roman world, however, they may have been understood in more social or political terms: deliverance from enemies, abrogation of debts or taxes, judicial clemency, and the *Pax Romana*.

In 8 CE the Latin poet Ovid celebrated the day in which the goddess Peace (or *Pax*) was to be worshiped, in these lines:

> The song now has brought us to the very altar of Peace.
> Its day will be the penultimate day of the month.…
> O Peace, be near and stay gentle in the whole world….
> So now may there be no enemies and no occasion for victory parade….
> O priests, join incense to the peace-flames….
> that this country, which guarantees peace, may endure in peace,
> ask the favorable gods with devout prayers.[8]

In other words, for Luke's audience promises of peace and deliverance associated with the birth of John the Baptizer were more about the kind of prosperity that comes with the absence of war than about one's personal well-being and an absence of anxiety and tension.

The more important of Luke's two birth stories, of course, is **the nativity of Jesus**, **Luke 2:1–21**. The story of Mary and Joseph, the angels and sheepherders, and the infant birthed at Bethlehem is the centerpiece of our annual Christmastide festivities. In our holiday setting, it is an attractive, even charming tale: an expectant mother and her chaperone travel to his inhospitable hometown; rustic herdsmen are surprised by heavenly hosts; a newborn is swaddled and bedded in a manger.

Our imaginations fill in the details: How gruff and mean was the owner of the caravansary who turned away the holy family? Which animals served as Jesus' first playmates in the stable? How sleepy were the peasant shepherds who huddled around their campfire? Was it spring time when the ewes were dropping their lambs? What grand melodies were the angels singing as they hymned their glories on high?

Our imaginations, however, alter Luke's account, which says nothing about inhospitable Bethlehemites, nothing about barnyard animals, or whether the birth took place in a stable or a cave or elsewhere. In fact, it is not clear that Joseph and Mary could not rent a room "in the inn." Luke obviously knows the term for "inn," *pandocheion* (see Luke 10:34); here the term is *kataluma*, a lodging or guest room, presumably in the home of one of Joseph's relatives.

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Furthermore, Luke says nothing about why the sheep were out in the field rather than in sheepfolds, and nothing about any singing. In fact, nowhere in the Old or New Testaments is there a single example of an angel ever singing a note (the TEV rendition of Luke 2:13 and the NRSV of Revelation 5:1 notwithstanding)!

Our Christmas-time piety "hears" the story of Jesus' birth in ways which promote family values and "tidings of comfort and joy." But how would second-century auditors have "heard" this story? Likely with more social and political overtones. For starters, Luke does not position the story locally in its obvious Jewish setting, but internationally in the context of the Roman Empire, when Augustus is Caesar and Quirinius is governing Syria and a world-wide census is underway to ensure taxes will be raised and forwarded to the capital.

Historians today find it challenging to coordinate the dates with any reliability, and conclude that a census of the entire empire requiring residents to register in their ancestral home town is entirely improbable. But Luke's first auditors knew about Augustus and the Caesars and all that is implied when they are mentioned.

For example, in 48 BCE the citizens of Ephesus erected a monument in honor of Julius Caesar after he took pity on their territory and reduced their tax burden by one third. The inscription reads like this:

> The cities in Asia and the [townships] and the tribal districts
> honor Gaius Julius Caesar, son of Gaius,
> Pontifex, Imperator, and Consul for the second time,
> descendant of Ares and Aphrodite,
> our God manifest,
> and Common Savor of all human life.[9]

Caesar is described in exalted "religious" terms, not just as emperor, but also as the son of the god and goddess of war and love, as a deity himself, and as the ultimate deliverer or rescuer

8. Ovid, *Fasti,* 1.709–722; LCL vol. 253; translated by Reasoner in *Documents and Images,* no. 89, and in *Roman Imperial Texts*, no. 9.

9. Danker, *Benefactor*, no. 32.

of humanity.

Forty years later Julius Caesar's grandnephew and adopted son, Octavian. was ruling as emperor with the name and title of Augustus Caesar. Around 7 BCE the Provincial Assembly of Asia decided to reconfigure their calendar in order to make his birthday the start of their new year.

> It is subject to question whether the birthday of our divine Caesar spells more of joy or blessing, this being a date that we could probably without fear of contradiction equate with the beginning of all things…seeing that he restored stability, when everything was collapsing and falling into disarray, and gave a new look to the entire world….Therefore people might justly assume that his birthday spells the beginning of life and real living and marks the end and boundary of any regret that they had themselves been born….with the result that the birthday of our God signaled the beginning of Good News for the world because of him…[therefore] the Greeks in Asia decreed that the New Year begin for all the cities on September 23, which is the birthday of Augustus….[10]

Here the birth of a divine ruler is clearly a piece of "gospel" or "good news." This type of rhetorical extravagance serves as the background for hearing Luke's message about the birth of a child, which is billed as "good news of great joy for all the people."

Again, during Augustus' reign a white marble inscription, likely originally part of a temple dedicated to the worship of the emperor, was placed in Pergamum. It reads:

> Emperor Caesar, god Augustus, son of god.
> The people Amisos and the fellow members of the corporate body of Romans
> honored their own savior and founder.[11]

"God," "son of god," "savior"—all are chiefly political terms placed in a religious setting.

Near the end of his reign Augustus produced a thirty-five paragraph summary of all his accomplishments as the supreme benefactor of the Roman people. They were inscribed on bronze plaques and positioned on his mausoleum. They were subsequently inscribed at various locations throughout the empire. Known today as the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (or the *Deeds Accomplished by the Divine Augustus*) they contain dozens of claims:

> I always let those [conquered] citizens who asked for pardon live. (par. 3)
>
> In a few days I rescued the people with my own funds from the dread and danger [of famine] they were experiencing. (par. 5)
>
> I was high priest. (par. 7)
>
> All citizens…consistently sought the gods for my welfare. (par. 9)
>
> I paid for the grain dole from my personal resources. (par. 15.1)
>
> I rebuilt the capitol building…the courses of the aqueducts…[and] eighty-two temples of the gods. (par. 20.1.2.4)
>
> I brought peace to the sea from pirates. (par. 25)
>
> I put down the civil war. (par. 34.1)
>
> I was called "Augustus" by decree of the Senate. (par. 34.2)
>
> The whole Roman people named me "father of the fatherland." (par. 35)[12]

By intentionally setting the story of Jesus' birth in the context of the reign of Caesar Augustus, Luke clearly signals that this is a social-political-religious narrative.

In short, citizens of the empire were well acquainted with the kind of rhetoric which deifies emperors in terms which are more political than religious.

Examples such as these could be multiplied several times over. The point is that by intentionally setting the story of Jesus' birth in the context of the reign of Caesar Augustus, Luke clearly signals that this is a social-political-religious narrative.

Against that background, the details in the story of Jesus' birth take on greater significance. Joseph is a genuine Davidide, that is, of royal descent; he takes his pregnant wife on a dangerous journey southward from a nondescript village in Galilee, not to the traditional capital but to another minor village. Jerusalem was considered "David's city," but here Luke transfers that title to Bethlehem.

When their firstborn child (that is, the son with the right of inheritance) is born, he is swaddled and placed "in a manger," a detail which is mentioned three times. One gets the impression that something counterintuitive is going on here. Mangers, of course, are not appropriate cribs for royal children.

However, Roman citizens would remember their founding myth about Romulus and Remus. The twin boys were fathered by the god Mars and born from a Vestal Virgin. After their birth they were abandoned on the Tiber, but were eventually rescued and nursed by a she-wolf. Subsequently they were raised to manhood by a shepherd and his wife. Perhaps a manger and a den of wolves are not inappropriate locals for potential rulers, especially those

10. Danker, *Benefactor,* no. 33; Reasoner, *Roman Imperial Texts,* no. 4.

11. Reasoner, *Roman Imperial Texts,* no. 107.

12. Barrett, *NT Background,* no. 1; Danker, *Benefactor*, no. 43; Elliott & Reasoner, *Documents and Images,* no. 92; Reasoner, *Roman Imperial Texts,* no. 1.

conceived by a god, born of a virgin, and welcomed by shepherds!

So for the third time in these chapters, an "angel of the Lord" puts in an appearance, and divine glory appears, not to the new family, but to some sheepherders. These are not romanticized as pastoral shepherds, nor are they denigrated as untrustworthy scoundrels; they are simply low-born non-privileged peasants. Their "great fear" contrasts with the "great joy" which the messenger proclaims. "Good news," "David's city," "Savor," "the Lord's Christ"—all are royal political references. This is confirmed by a regiment of heavenly soldiers—not an "angelic choir"!—announcing (a^1) glory (b^1) in the heights (c^1) to God, and (a^2) peace (b^2) on earth (c^2) to people.

The reaction to these events is rather colorless. After a pause the sheepherders race into town, inspect the scene at the manger, and report what they have seen on the way back to their flocks. It is not clear exactly who would have been awake to be amazed by the news. And then the story concludes by mentioning the child's circumcision a week later, where the focus is on the fact that his name was called "Jesus" (a.k.a. "Joshua" the conqueror) even before he was conceived, rather than on the religious significance of this covenantal ritual.

Luke names two reactions to Jesus' birth: Mary ponders the events; the shepherds tell of the events. We suspect this is a hint for all who read this story: We are to think deeply about what this means, and then we are to share our conclusions with others.

Our response

Two things are evident. On the one hand, the first two chapters of Luke's gospel are not merely "religious" or "spiritual." The ten Greco-Roman texts sampled here—their number could be increased a hundredfold—show that the language and imagery of Luke 1–2 are powerfully "social" and "political." The story's historical setting during the reigns of King Herod and Emperor Augustus; the royal and imperial titles—Christ, Lord, Savior, Son of God; the military overtones—fighting, heavenly soldiers, war sword; the political benefactions—redemption, salvation, peace, eternal kingdom, good news: all combine to shape these chapters into an effective piece of political rhetoric. Every literate person in the Roman Empire knew how to interpret stories like these.

On the other hand, the stories are also subversive. Luke's account is not blatant, to be sure, but neither is it thinly disguised. His first audience would have known they were reading a political manifesto couched in the rhetoric of traditional images. In all likelihood, they would have heard it as a subversive political tract. It calls for reversing the roles of the mighty and the lowly, switching the positions of the rich and hungry, and making obscure villages the scene of a royal birth; it promises rescue from one's enemies and peace among the nations on the earth.

In other words, Luke used the conventions of Roman propaganda to announce the arrival on the world scene not of an imperial Caesar but of a Lord of a different stripe. It's not as though Jesus will be a competitor for Caesar's office within the normal categories of political power. Rather, it more than suggests his presence and praxis will challenge—and ultimately undermine—the values which undergird the business of politics as usual. We are to understand that the birth of Jesus undermines the sway of all human institutions—whether social or political, educational or ecclesiastical—and that he promotes a surprisingly superior set of values for our lives and our histories.

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Reading Luke 1–2 in this way may prove awkward, even offensive, for many Americans today. For we live in a nation which has the greatest "imperial" reach and power in the modern world. Our military presence—or the threat of it—on several continents enrages insurgent groups who call for our destruction. Our buying power, trade agreements, and domestic markets impact the economic climate of all regions. The CEOs of many of our larger businesses receive compensation packages hundreds of times greater than their minimum-wage employees. Allegations of CIA-sponsored torture techniques used during erstwhile anti-terrorist efforts prove embarrassing. Comparisons between the United States and the Roman Empire are uncomfortably easy to produce.

Such difficult comparisons, however, are countered by more positive evidence. The governmental structure of America today is at its core a democratic republic, chosen by its citizens; it is not an autocratic arrangement like ancient Rome, in which political advantage was gained by assassination and competing military factions. World-wide humanitarian programs, disaster aid efforts, and billions of dollars in foreign aid grants clearly mitigate (mis) perceptions that Americans are domineering expansionists.

If Luke's account of the arrival of Jesus would have sounded like a politically subversive message to its original readers, we today may also find it both challenging and encouraging—challenging to the degree that it makes us more aware of the dangers of domination, and encouraging insofar as it enables us to follow the example of the one whose advent signaled the dawn of a new age of hope-filled peace.