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An Exegesis of the Annunciation account in Luke

I promise that I read this paper out-loud to myself at least once all the way through and fixed every error and infelicity that I found.

## I. Introduction

“*Ecce ancilla Domini; fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum.*”<sup>1</sup> (Lk 1:38) With these words, Mary accepts the privilege and responsibility set before her by the Angel Gabriel, and, thereby sets in motion, from the human perspective, the action of the New Testament. Clearly, this moment is pivotal to the whole of salvation history; without a doubt, the Incarnation, which is most properly celebrated from this moment, is one of the central mysteries of Christianity, if not the most central. This short account in the first chapter of the Gospel according to Luke tells a great deal of the inner workings of that moment that can easily be overlooked by a cursory reading. This discussion will attempt to delve into three questions related to the conversation between Mary and Gabriel leading up to that moment to understand both what they mean in their historical moments, both that of Mary and that of the Evangelist, and their ramifications to the Christian Faith. First, this discussion will seek to understand the meaning of Gabriel’s initial greeting to Mary and why she was described as “perplexed”<sup>2</sup> (Lk 1:29) by it. Next, this discussion will address the so-called Riddle of the Annunciation, that is, why Mary, a betrothed woman, would be confused by the fact that she would, in the future, bear a son rather than the

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<sup>1</sup> *Nova Vulgata Bibliorum Sacrorum Editio*, Editio Typica Altera. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> Harold W. Attridge, Wayne A. Meeks, and Jouette M. Bassler, *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books* (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006). Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural references will come from this translation.

titles given her son by Gabriel.<sup>3</sup> Finally, this discussion will examine the titles given to Jesus by the angel. Once this discussion has reviewed several scholarly approaches to these questions, it will examine how Luke's account has been received in the living tradition of the Church.

## **II. What does Gabriel's greeting mean, and why is Mary "perplexed"?**

The first detail of interest is Gabriel's initial greeting to Mary and her reaction to it. The first aspect to be discussed is a translation inconsistency. Gabriel names Mary as *Kecharitōmenē*. This Greek term is variously translated as "Favored One" or "Full of Grace." It is important to note that, in the Gospel text, this is not a description of Mary as it appears in the *Ave Maria*. The Angel does not greet her as "Mary, full of grace [or favored one]" but rather grants her the name and title or name of "Favored One" or "[One who is] Full of Grace." This echoes the frequent renaming that occurs in Scripture when a person is given a new job by God; a reader can see this as parallel to the renaming of Abram to Abraham in Genesis or of Simon to Cephas or Peter in the Gospels. Mary is somehow uniquely "Full of Grace" or "Favored One" in such a way that she receives not only the description, but the name and title itself. Raymond Brown points out that, in granting her this title, Mary is named as being in some way especially graced in a manner unique in salvation history. The title reflects both the future grace that Mary will receive through her unique role in salvation and the grace she has already exemplified in her life.<sup>4</sup> The higher Mariology seen in Catholic tradition is not the only interpretation of this phrase, though. If it is rendered into English as "Favored One," it opens the door to an interpretation more palatable to the various protestant communities. Joseph Fitzmyer asserts that the greeting to Mary is best seen as an identification of her maternity of the savior as the "Lucan picture of Christian

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<sup>3</sup> Nathan Eubank, "The Annunciation Account in Luke," Lecture, SS 504 Synoptic Gospels and Acts (Notre Dame Seminary: New Orleans, LA, February 23, 2015). This is a paraphrase of the question as presented in this lecture.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Edward Brown, "The Annunciation to Mary, the Visitation, and the Magnificat (Luke 1 26-56)," *Worship* 62, no. 3 (May 1, 1988): 252.

discipleship.”<sup>5</sup> While this interpretation is certainly one aspect of the text, it is not convincing as the only interpretation or even the primary interpretation. This part of the exchange with the angel is Christological only insofar as all of Scripture is Christological. Imposing a solely Christological reading on Gabriel’s initial greeting and exchange with Mary is to ignore the text itself and avoid Luke’s clear focus on Mary’s role in contrast to the Matthean account which focuses on Joseph. R. Alan Culpepper and others observe a clear similarity between Gabriel’s words to Mary and Hannah’s prayer in the temple in 1 Samuel 1:18. Hannah prays, “Let your servant find favor in your sight.” Mary is called the one who has found favor in the sight of God.<sup>6</sup> This is certainly an important observation, but it does not exclude the conclusions that should be drawn from the “Full of Grace” translation of *Kecharitōmenē*. If anything, it seems that it would support a Mariological reading of the text since it highlights Mary as a parallel to Hannah rather than focusing the greeting solely on a Christological conclusion.

It seems valuable to offer one more comment on the use of the word *Kecharitōmenē* as proposed by Brown. Indeed, Brown favors the translation as “Favored One” rather than the “Full of Grace” which it gained through the Latin. He goes so far as to reject “Full of Grace” as pushing the text too far; such a translation, in his estimation, does not reflect the text itself effectively. Brown notes that others choose to translate this as “Beautiful Woman” because of the assumption that one who is very graced by God would be appropriately described as graceful or beautiful. However, as Brown also notes, this inserts a discussion of Mary’s physical appearance that seems absolutely alien to the actual passage. Brown posits, instead, that the enigmatic Greek term connotes simply one who has been especially graced or gifted by God.

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, ed., *The Gospel According to Luke: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, 1st ed., The Anchor Bible v. 28-28A (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1981), 341.

<sup>6</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter’s Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books.*, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 51.

This reading has the added benefit of making sense of Mary's confusion at the greeting. If she has been particularly and uniquely graced, then it seems perfectly reasonable to wonder what such grace would be. Since the tradition speaks repeatedly of Mary's humility, it stands to reason that she would both be willing to accept and acknowledge such grace, but unwilling to claim it of her own accord. Brown takes this path and rejects the Latinized "Full of Grace" title in order to avoid reading too much into Luke's text at this point. The tradition makes it clear that either reading is theologically accurate, but, from a strictly exegetical perspective, Brown's conservative translation, which still supports the connotations carried in the tradition without going so far as to make them explicit in Luke's mind is both faithful to the text and consonant with the living tradition.<sup>7</sup>

A second Greek term that bears some scrutiny because of its unexpected use is the Angel's use of the Greek *Chaire*. In Luke's normal usage, it would have been expected to see Gabriel say "*eirēnē*" to reflect the Hebrew *shalom* since this scene was presumably a retelling in Greek of an exchange that took place in Aramaic. Hence, if Luke were to be expressing a customary greeting to Mary, Luke would likely have rendered the common Greek casting of the Hebrew greeting as he does elsewhere for such exchanges that are not original Greek exchanges. His use of "Rejoice" or "Hail" rather than "Peace" is significant, but it should not be carried too far on its own. Brown proposes several interpretations building on this word choice ranging from Luke's affinity for Greek to his reliance on a Greek source to an attempt to elevate the language because the event is of importance in the annunciation setting. At this point, several answers are possible, but a conservative interpretation seems warranted. In this case, we cannot say that Luke's word choice was accidental nor that he intended an extraordinarily deep Mariological

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<sup>7</sup> Raymond Edward Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*, 1st ed. (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1977), 326.

meaning. However, at the same time, it seems that Brown's conclusion that this is little more than Luke's reliance on a Greek source<sup>8</sup> underplays the evangelist's clear mastery of Greek found throughout his two books. Rather, it seems more plausible that Luke was aware that this greeting would, in a Jewish context, catch the eye of the reader and indicate some significant content, for example, the use of this word reflects the Septuagint greeting to "Daughter Zion" found in Zephaniah 3:14-17.<sup>9</sup> However, it would not, of itself, indicate any extended theological conclusions.

With Gabriel's greeting itself in mind, it is appropriate to consider why Mary is said to have been perplexed by his greeting. Above, it was already noted that one possible interpretation is simply that Mary was reflecting on the meaning of Gabriel's description of her as blessed or favored. This seems to be the most likely answer within the text itself; however, it seems useful to discuss other answers that have been proposed to indicate why they fall short of explaining this. First of all, it is notable that Mary is confused, and it should be noted that the text conveys something more than simple confusion. Rather, it could, perhaps, better be translated as "utterly confused" to translate *diatarassō* highlighting the distinction between Mary's confusion and that expressed by Zechariah in the previous chapter for which Luke uses the word *terassō*.<sup>10</sup> There are some translations that instead translate this word as "terrified," as a response to the angel going on to encourage Mary to not be afraid, but such a translation seems unfounded for two reasons. First, it is not the terrifying presence of a supernatural being to which Mary responds as was the case with Zechariah. Rather, it is the words that leave her *diatarassō*. Second, a response of terror to words that can be interpreted only as positive seems irreconcilable. Culpepper

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 322.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>10</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra pagina series v. 3 (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1991), 37.

proposes one interpretation that supports the idea of Mary being terrified. In this, he cites a story in Tobit of an “evil angel who appeared on a bride’s wedding night each time she married and killed her bridegroom.”<sup>11</sup> For the same reasons identified above, this interpretation can be rejected. Culpepper, it seems, uses this moment to denigrate the Apocrypha and show its lack of use as Scripture rather than to interpret the text as it is given.

If Mary’s confusion is taken to reflect nothing more than the proper interpretation of and reaction to the Angel’s greeting, which seems most likely, the Angel’s answer to her confusion can be simply interpreted. Gabriel’s exhortation and statements in verses 30 and 31 are then meant to provide an interpretive lens for his initial greeting in verse 28. His title for Mary as *kecharitōmenē* is interpreted with “you have found favor (*charis*) with God.” “The Lord is with you” is explained by the task that is called for her, “You will conceive in your womb.”<sup>12</sup> If these two parts of the angel’s message are seen as parallelism to one another with the latter further illuminating the first, much of the confusion is clarified. It also makes sense of the Angel’s statements as a response to Mary’s apparent confusion at his initial greeting. Hence, the exegete’s role is simplified because the angel interprets his own greeting to Mary for the reader.

### **III. Why was Mary confused that she, a betrothed woman, would bear a son?**

With the initial exchange between Mary and the Angel resolved, this discussion now turns its attention to the central point of the Annunciation passage, the announcement of Christ, and Mary’s confusion at this pronouncement. To truly understand that scriptural passage, it is necessary to discuss the possible reasons for what has been called The Riddle of the Annunciation, that is, why a girl who is betrothed to be married and, presumably, understands

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<sup>11</sup> Culpepper, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 9:51.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 321.

the origin of children, questions how the Angel's announcement could pertain to her. The simplest explanation to this question is also the least satisfying. This is that, for some reason, Mary is ignorant of the way children are conceived. This does not seem to fit any reasonable reading of the text or the culture, so this discussion does not consider it a viable solution to this puzzle. The remaining interpretations generally fall into two categories; they are either literary solutions or psychological solutions. The literary interpretations assume that this dialog is not a historical account of any aspect of the annunciation event, but rather a literary tool used by the evangelist to introduce the doctrine of the Virgin Birth to the reader. The psychological solutions attempt to ascertain why Mary would be unable to understand how she should conceive a child.<sup>13</sup>

The literary solution is discussed in some depth by David Landry. He points out that the annunciation format itself generally requires an objecting question. This could partially explain Zechariah's objection in the previous story in Luke which this is designed to parallel. However, Landry goes on to note that such a clunky and unreasonable objection does not seem to fit. Elsewhere, Luke does not hold himself so slavishly to formal patterns that he damages the flow of his story. It seems that if Luke were slavishly following the formal pattern for an annunciation, he would have picked an objection that would not be so confusing or even indecipherable to his reader.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Landry asserts with Schaberg that those who immediately jump to Luke simply slavishly following the annunciation format "have given up too soon on the logic of the story."<sup>15</sup> This discussion agrees with that conclusion; the literary solution ignores Luke's actual text and simply takes the easy solution to sidestep rather than address this question. A rejection of the literary solution to the riddle is further supported elsewhere in Luke's own

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 303.

<sup>14</sup> David T. Landry, "Narrative Logic in the Annunciation to Mary (luke 1:26-38)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114, no. 1 (March 1, 1995): 70.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Gospel, and these will be discussed later within the discussion of solutions that reject historicity of the virgin birth itself.

The psychological solution can be more or less divided into three categories. First, it could reflect a misunderstanding from Mary in which she believes that Gabriel's announcement indicates that she is already pregnant. Second, it could reflect some expectation that the pregnancy is not already the case, but it will still take place before she enters into her husband's household. Finally, the interpretation frequently assumed in the Church's tradition, Mary could have previously undertaken a vow of virginity, either privately or publicly, such that her impending marriage is a practical solution to give her the protection of a husband in a society that did not have a method of caring for women who had undertaken such a vow. Each of these solutions will be discussed in turn.

The first solution seems to be frequently adopted by those who read the text at a very superficial level. Gabriel announces to Mary that she will become pregnant. For some reason, Mary interprets this as a *fait accompli*. She is, therefore, confused that such a thing could be possible since she is a virgin. While this is a very simple reading of the story, it does not fit the text as it was set down by the evangelist. The angel's announcement is clearly in the future tense, Mary *will* conceive. This reading not only ignores the grammar of the Angel's message, but it assumes that Mary did not identify the tense and ignores that such an error would likely have been corrected by the angel rather than an explanation of how a virgin will bear a child at all. It seems implausible as a solution to the riddle.

The second solution is a much more plausible explanation, but it still requires some assumptions that are not offered in the text and require a larger leap from the text than the third. In this interpretation, Mary correctly identifies that the angel is announcing something to happen

in the future, but, for some reason, she does not assume that the child will be the result of natural processes. Fitzmyer observes that Bultmann points out that “Mary’s question...is absurd for a bride”<sup>16</sup> who will have a husband and, presumably, future children. Fitzmyer adds, however, that such a statement is not absurd since Mary has not yet come to live with her husband; she is only engaged.<sup>17</sup> Without additional text, however, it seems that Bultmann is correct. A future conception would lead most to assume that it simply indicates some event after the young bride-to-be engages in the marital act with her husband. Fitzmyer seems to agree with Schaberg in this,<sup>18</sup> but he effectively sidesteps the question by pointing out that the passage is meant to be Christological, Christ will be from man and God with only a secondary Mariological meaning.<sup>19</sup> Shaberg, as quoted in Landry, asserts that Mary’s confusion is based on her understanding of the angel that the conception will take place almost immediately. He notes that, in this understanding, she turns out to, in fact, be correct.<sup>20</sup> While this reading has the advantage of reflecting how the events in the narrative unfolded after the annunciation, it does not explain Mary’s question effectively within the context of the annunciation event itself. Within that context, Shaberg’s solution leaves Mary asking a somewhat silly question since nothing in the Angel’s announcement reasonably leads one to assume an immediate fulfillment. This problem is compounded if one looks at the prophetic utterances in Scripture as a whole since many of them from hundreds of years prior were not fulfilled in a complete way until the coming of Christ.

The final and best solution is the third: Mary had undertaken, either privately or publicly a perpetual vow of virginity. This solution certainly has several objections that can be posed

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<sup>16</sup> Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 337.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.; Landry, “Narrative Logic in the Annunciation to Mary (Luke 1,” 75.

<sup>19</sup> Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 337.

<sup>20</sup> Landry, “Narrative Logic in the Annunciation to Mary (Luke 1,” 74.

against it, but, within the narrative itself, it does the best job of covering the facts available. The earliest attestation of this theory is from Gregory of Nyssa in AD 386 in the East and brought to the West with the support of Ambrose and Augustine.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the most compelling, albeit not conclusive, argument against Mary having taken such a vow is its seeming inconsistency to the Palestinian Jewish culture of the time. Brown seems adamant that this idea was the result of reading later Christian asceticism and monastic movements back into the scriptural account rather than an idea that would have been either familiar or even reasonable in the narrative itself. Granted, such a vow was, at the very least, uncommon in the time, but it was not unheard of. The Essenes are known to have placed a high value on such a vow, and, even if it was not universal as Brown observes,<sup>22</sup> it was, at least, reasonable in the societal context; such vows can be said to have existed at some level at the time of the annunciation. Furthermore, the unusual nature of such a vow is, at some level, attested by the fact that Mary was getting married so that, at least at a social level, she would enjoy the appropriate protection and support of a husband. This solution finds some support in the claim in the Protoevangelion of James in which Joseph is said to already have children of his own to carry on his paternal line. Brown also rejects one interpretation of this solution which claims that Mary's question is in direct relationship to Isaiah 7:14. That is, Gabriel's initial announcement brought this to mind, and she asked the question as a way of clarifying how a virgin birth was possible since she had taken such a vow. Brown rightly notes that such a claim requires some mental contortions that do not seem to fit the context since the text of Isaiah does not necessarily require this interpretation.<sup>23</sup> However, Brown's objection itself is predicated on the assumption that Mary's perpetual vow was impossible, so he is forced to seek another adaptation of that theory which is even weaker than

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<sup>21</sup> Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 304.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 305.

the initial proposal. It seems far more plausible to identify Mary as having assumed a rare, but not entirely alien, perpetual vow of virginity. In that case, her impending marriage to Joseph was, as previously stated, a practical solution to the very real social and even survival concerns that such a vow would raise. This resolves the objection raised by Walter Bowie to question such a conclusion.<sup>24</sup>

Landry points out and rejects a threefold objection raised by Geweiss.<sup>25</sup> Geweiss' first objection is to the tense of Mary's objection. However, this objection seems to fail on two ways. Landry points out that the present tense, in this use, is as likely a durative present, and so indicates a future condition as well as present. Additionally, to support this claim, elsewhere in Scripture when this assertion is made, it is always in past tense. Hence, if Mary were merely questioning the Angel's message because she is, to date, a virgin, she would have said, "I have not known man" rather than, "I do not know man."<sup>26</sup> Second, Geweiss asserts that the tense of the angel's message does not demand an immediate fulfillment. Landry rebuts that such an immediate fulfillment is a necessary reading, but, as has been noted above, that is not at all the case with prophetic utterances even if other annunciations are usually immediate. Perhaps such an expectation of a necessary immediate fulfillment is further refuted by the observation that no timeline is given by Gabriel as was by the visitor to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis; instead, he simply makes a statement about the future. Finally, Geweiss observes that the angel's statement does not necessarily demand fulfillment before marriage. This seems a restatement of his second point, and, as noted above, on this matter, Geweiss seems correct. There is no indication of timeline in the Angel's message.

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<sup>24</sup> Walter Russell Bowie, *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Scriptures King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exigesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, vol. 8 (New York;Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952), 139.

<sup>25</sup> Landry, "Narrative Logic in the Annunciation to Mary (Luke 1)," 75.

<sup>26</sup> Eubank, "The Annunciation Account in Luke."

Another possible solution has been proposed in various sources that warrants consideration if only to identify it as insufficient to the text. This solution, in its various forms, seems built on an underlying principle that a miraculous birth is impossible, so it should be rejected in favor of more naturalistic solutions. In short, this solution, while it takes various forms, is predicated on the assertion that the virgin birth itself is a literary device or a pious belief, but it does not reflect the actual conception of Jesus. Andrew Lincoln posits that, since in Luke's account there is no indication of sexual impropriety, it would only make sense to interpret the angel's announcement as one of the role of her future child who would be the result of a normal union between Mary and Joseph to make her forthcoming son a child of David's line.<sup>27</sup> Brown implies, based on his research into this passage compared to Matthew's, that this approach is merely a nod to the pre-Gospel expectation of the divine sonship of the Messiah.<sup>28</sup> However, as with other claims in this vein, they seem to make too little of the actual assertions made in the text. Additionally, there are other observations that make the rejection of the virgin birth implausible at best in Luke's intentions. First of all, in Luke 3:23, the evangelist refers to Jesus as the supposed son of Joseph. Lincoln notes that this does not necessarily indicate that the supposition was incorrect,<sup>29</sup> but it would be an absurd gloss to include solely to confuse the issue. He does go on to observe that, even if this gloss does not indicate that Joseph is not the natural father of Jesus, Joseph is his legal father, and that is no less real to the evangelist.<sup>30</sup> In this case, the same could be said for the inverse, that is, that Jesus is son of God only by adoption. It does not seem a reasonable conclusion that such a talented storyteller as Luke would needlessly confuse his own narrative. Lincoln has three additional arguments to support his rejection of the

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<sup>27</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, "Luke and Jesus' Conception: A Case of Double Paternity?," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 132, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 642–643.

<sup>28</sup> Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 308–309.

<sup>29</sup> Lincoln, "Luke and Jesus' Conception," 646.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 648.

virgin birth based on Luke. First of all, he observes that the virgin birth appears absent from the earliest manuscripts of Luke.<sup>31</sup> However, it seems that this could be as credibly explained as an addition to clarify confusion in the early Church. Furthermore, he observes that, in the Greco-Roman culture, Son of God is a literal title for many mythical figures.<sup>32</sup> However, in these accounts, the story indicates a god from the respective pantheon engaging in sexual relations with the mother; therefore, this is not a parallel example. Finally, Lincoln observes that such Jewish accounts frequently focus only on the mother and ignore paternity.<sup>33</sup> This objection, however, is predicated on either Mary's question being a mere literary device or a later addition to Luke's text,<sup>34</sup> and it does not take into account Matthew's clear indication that Jesus was born of a virgin.

Schaberg, cited by Landry takes this argument a step further. He indicates that Mary's question was not a question of a virgin birth, but rather a question of how the Son of God, an exalted position, could be born as an illegitimate child.

Mary's objection does not at all question the physical impossibility of a virgin giving birth; rather it questions the possibility of the son of God being born illegitimately to a lowly, humiliated woman who has been made pregnant by a man who is not her husband. Seizing upon the ambiguity of the language of Mary's question, Schaberg dissents from the sense usually seen by interpreters here of the question connoting "How can...this be, since I have not had sexual relations with any man...?" instead translating this phrase: "How will this be, since I do not have sexual relations with my husband?" In Schaberg's view, the translation "how will this be" is preferable because "it does not prejudice the reader to think immediately of an event that is considered physically impossible." The

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 650.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 653.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 652.

<sup>34</sup> While I did not conduct an exhaustive study of the original texts and manuscripts, I did not locate a significant scholarly claim that the later addition, if indeed this was the case, was an illegitimate addition or added by anyone other than the evangelist himself. Based on what I have been able to discern without study of the original texts and manuscripts, the first two chapters of Luke stylistically and linguistically fit with the rest of Luke-Acts, so I have no reason to conclude that these should be ignored as part of his Gospel account. Brown supports this claim as, in his estimation, conclusively shown by Taylor and discussed in the footnote on p. 309 of Brown's *Birth of the Messiah*.

translation...as "husband" is preferable because the reader is thus "alerted to the possibility that the conception will be by someone other than Mary's husband."<sup>35</sup>

Schaberg, in his attempt to avoid prejudicing the reader, produces a translation geared to supporting his own theory. Schaberg goes on to argue that he sees evidence of this in both Mary's haste to visit Elizabeth and the text of the Magnificat. He also recasts the usual parallelism between the birth of John the Baptist and that of Jesus, which seeks to show Jesus as the superior miracle and greatness, is built not on a more impressive birth miracle, but rather the greater humiliation is overcome in Jesus' birth, that is, the humiliation of rape or infidelity versus that of barrenness.<sup>36</sup> Brown rejects this conclusion,<sup>37</sup> but he seems to do so primarily on doctrinal grounds rather than scholarly grounds. Landry provides a much more compelling cause for rejection in two observations. First, the angel's assurance that nothing is impossible with God is nonsensical if nothing humanly impossible is proposed. Second, Mary's *fiat* is equally meaningless in the case of rape since a woman, especially in this social order, could not or would not be seen to be able to give free consent to rape or seduction.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, this argument again fails to take into account Matthew's parallel narrative, and Mary is twice specifically identified as a virgin.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, even though the argument is made that Luke does not address *virginitatis in partu* (virgin during birth) or *virginitatis post partum* (perpetual virginity), but only *virginitatis ante partum* (virgin birth).<sup>40</sup> This is equally unconvincing on two fronts. First, it makes the thought behind Mary's question again indecipherable. Second, no New Testament authors seem

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<sup>35</sup> Landry, "Narrative Logic in the Annunciation to Mary (Luke 1)," 68.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>37</sup> Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 289.

<sup>38</sup> Landry, "Narrative Logic in the Annunciation to Mary (Luke 1)," 77.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 72; Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 298.

<sup>40</sup> Charles H Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 19.

directly interested in Mary's virginity apart from clearly asserting that Jesus was born of a virgin.<sup>41</sup>

In the end, it seems clear that Luke's intention in this passage is to assert that Mary, a virgin, will conceive and bear a son while a virgin. The question of Mary's perpetual virginity is a second question outside the scope of this discussion. Mary's confusion seems best explained by a previous vow of perpetual virginity, despite the objections that can be raised by this theory, it is the most consonant with the text as written by the evangelist and the purpose of Gospel accounts in general.

#### **IV. What are the meanings of the titles given to Jesus by Gabriel?**

Finally, this discussion turns to the implications of the titles for Jesus that Gabriel gives to Mary in the Annunciation account. One overly simplistic temptation would be to simply explain away the titles as part of the strict form of an annunciation, and, therefore, a reader should not seek to derive much meaning from them. But, as Brown points out, these cannot be completely explained away by the annunciation format.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, to treat the titles like this would be to again ignore the text, an approach that does justice neither to Luke nor to the scriptural text. The treatment in this section of the discussion will necessarily be shorter than previous sections since it is not necessary to resolve a significant debate, but rather to elucidate the titles themselves.

First of all, the various titles accorded to Jesus seem to reveal several parallels to Old Testament texts, mostly prophetic writings. The titles clearly mean to express the expected fulfillment of 2 Samuel 7, the dynasty promised to David. Each of the titles recall the style and

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<sup>41</sup> Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 306.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

wording even though they do not repeat it verbatim. Nathan promises David a “great name” (2 Sam 7:9)<sup>43</sup> and Gabriel announces that Jesus “will be great.” (Luke 1:32) Nathan says refers to the “throne of his kingdom,” (2 Sam 7:13) and Gabriel expects the oracle’s fulfillment by promising that Jesus will take the “throne of his father David,” (Luke 1:32) a much more explicit fulfillment. David is promised that “he will be my son,” (2 Sam 7:14) and Gabriel describes Jesus as “Son of the Most High.” (Luke 1:32) Finally to fulfill the prophecy that David’s line will rule “your house and your kingdom,” (2 Sam 7:16) Gabriel promises that Mary’s son will be “king over the house of Jacob forever.”(Luke 1:33) While these titles clearly reflect the promises of dynasty made to David, they reflect a post-exilic understanding of those promises.<sup>44</sup> They cannot be rightly read with the assumption that the promises were fulfilled in the way understood at the time of David or the early kingdoms, especially considering the unexpected way Jesus was to finally fulfill his kingship and messiahship. Brown also observes that this is echoed in the coronation psalms and other Old Testament texts. There was, he proposes, a tradition before either Matthew or Luke that led to this understanding that the Messiah would fulfill the promises to David, perhaps even in the Jewish custom of the time. He finds support for this in texts from the Qumran community.<sup>45</sup> These conclusions seem perfectly reasonable and satisfying.

The titles given to Jesus not only reflect Old Testament prophecy of the Messiah, but they also build upon themselves, that is, when Gabriel offers his second list of titles, they extend and illuminate the first set. Furthermore, the second list of titles is prefixed with the indication that the second set is a direct result of Jesus’ conception by a direct creative act of God, the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. Gabriel says “Therefore the child to be born will [also] be...”

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<sup>43</sup> This set of quotes uses the translations from Fitzmyer in *The Anchor Bible*.

<sup>44</sup> Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 338; Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 310; Bowie, *The Interpreter’s Bible: The Holy Scriptures King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exigesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, 8:38.

<sup>45</sup> Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 310–311.

(Luke 1:35)<sup>46</sup> Brown also rejects the claim that is sometimes made to soften the meaning of angel to simply indicate titles that will be given him rather than titles proper to the child.<sup>47</sup> Such a rejection seems warranted based on the text. The most obvious increase of title is found as the parallel of the greatness of Jesus. He will not only be “great,” an adjective that could be asserted of many other leaders or historical figures, but he will also be “holy,” a word pertaining for more directly to God. The title “Son of the Most High” is replaced with “Son of God.” While these may not seem to immediately build upon one another, and some would say that the second is weaker since it is a common ancient title for any king, it serves a second purpose. Bowie proposes that this purpose reflects the former as a title that God would only confer on Jesus as the Messiah, while the latter indicates a physical or metaphysical relationship to God.<sup>48</sup> A better solution to this pair seems to be that the title “Son of the Most High” indicates a Palestinian Christology and “Son of God” indicates a Hellenistic Christology.<sup>49</sup> While Fitzmyer seems to reject this as a plausible interpretation, it seems to fit the text. Furthermore, an additional exegetical inference can be made if it is read with the understanding that Christianity did not remain solely a Jewish sect, but rather spread to the gentiles, a fact of which Luke was aware at the time of his writing since it is a major element of Acts. With that in mind, these two titles could indicate that Jesus would be the Son of God both to the Children of Israel and to the rest of the world, at the time, a Greco-Roman world. It seems important to note that some would indicate that the title “Son of God” is not a title for the Messiah in pre-Christian Judaism.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, Luke Johnson notes “Son of the Most High” is a title for the Messiah in the texts

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<sup>46</sup> Eubank, “The Annunciation Account in Luke”; Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 291. This adjustment to the translation was made using individual conversation immediately following this lecture.

<sup>47</sup> Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 291.

<sup>48</sup> Bowie, *The Interpreter’s Bible: The Holy Scriptures King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exigesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, 8:39.

<sup>49</sup> Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 339.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

from Qumran.<sup>51</sup> This fact seems to lend credence to the two titles providing some indication of the scope of Jesus' later acceptance as not only the Jewish Messiah, but as the savior of Mankind, Jew and Gentile alike.

Finally, if the interpretation that the Annunciation to Mary is meant to be superior in every way to that to Zechariah, it stands to reason that the titles and expectations of her child will be greater than those of John the Baptist. If that is the case, it makes sense to compare the promise that "Johns will go before the Lord 'in the spirit and power of Elijah' (v. 17), Jesus will 'reign over the house of Jacob forever' (vss. 32-33) as the Davidic king"<sup>52</sup>

## V. The Living Tradition

The importance of this passage both to Christology and to the Christian identity itself has provided significant commentary in the living tradition of the Church. This will focus on the discussion given to Mary's question to the angel, the riddle of the Annunciation that was discussed previously from an academic standpoint. As was observed above, Gregory of Nyssa proposed that Mary had taken a perpetual vow to remain a virgin. This idea was brought to the Western Church by Ambrose and Augustine.<sup>53</sup>

Ambrose introduced the idea in his *Oratio in Diem Natalem Christi* as attested by Thomas Aquinas.<sup>54</sup> Augustine takes this as an obvious conclusion in his treatise *On Holy Virginity*. He goes so far to observe that, contrary to the claims of some contemporary scholars, her question could not make sense in any circumstance except that she had vowed herself to

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<sup>51</sup> Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 37.

<sup>52</sup> Talbert, *Reading Luke*, 19.

<sup>53</sup> Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 304.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers: St. Luke*, ed. John Henry Newman, vol. 3 (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1843), 32.

perpetual virginity.<sup>55</sup> Granted, Augustine does not consider the possibility that such a vow would be alien to the Palestinian Jewish culture in which Mary lives, but it seems likely that he would not have been ignorant of such a challenge, but rather considered it insufficient to reject this solution to the question. Furthermore, it could have been seen as a further example of Mary's unique purity and sinlessness that was later dogmatized in the Catholic Church. Finally, it seems telling that, although he is still writing in the diaspora, Philo would have mentioned this in defense of Jewish practice and against Christian teaching if indeed such a vow would have been alien to Jewish culture. Instead, he speaks of the virtue of virginal purity.

Women...are virgins in respect of their purity...but out of an admiration for and love of wisdom, with which they are desirous to pass their lives, on account of which they are indifferent to the pleasures of the body, desiring not a mortal but an immortal offspring, which the soul that is attached to God is alone able to produce by itself and from itself, the Father having sown in it rays of light appreciable only by the intellect, by means of which it will be able to perceive the doctrines of wisdom.<sup>56</sup>

It seems that so glowing a report of virginity would have been impossible in a culture in which virginity was so alien as has been often asserted by the contemporary academy. Even more, if Philo's text is read in a Christian context, the birth of Jesus could be seen as the preeminent example of "an immortal offspring" produced by God alone.<sup>57</sup> Jerome unquestionably supports this same line of reasoning. In his characteristic caustic style, he bemoans the errors of Helvidius in assuming that Mary would have been preparing to enter a regular marriage with Joseph.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Philip Schaff, ed., *St. Augustin: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises*, trans. C. L. Cornish, vol. 3, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 418.

<sup>56</sup> Charles Duke Yonge and Philo of Alexandria, *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 704.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Jerome. "The Perpetual Virginity of Blessed Mary, against Helvidius." In Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, trans. W. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis, and W. G. Martley, vol. 6, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church 2 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1893), 335–336.

While the Church considers Mary's perpetual virginity to be an article of faith, she does not consider this interpretation an absolute necessity. That is to say, one can be a Catholic accepting the revealed Truths of faith while attributing Mary's perpetual virginity to some other cause, perhaps an awareness of her role as the Mother of God that brought her to embrace a life of continence after the birth of Jesus. Ecclesiastical authors and Church documents after the patristic period seem to avoid making claims to a specific interpretation of this text even though it is frequently discussed in those first centuries. This leads to one of two conclusions: either the Church presupposes this to be a settled issue, or she desires to avoid the question of why Mary remained perpetually a virgin distracting from the more central Truths that Christ was born of a virgin and his mother remained perpetually so after his birth.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Based on the evidence contained in Luke's narrative of the Annunciation and the Synoptic Gospel accounts, few concrete and clear claims can be made from a strictly academic perspective. The titles given to Mary in Gabriel's greeting provide their own interpretation. In the favor she finds with God, and the grace with which she is filled, God has prepared a unique task for her in salvation history. It seems clear that the text indicates that Jesus was to be born of a virgin, even if it is unclear in Mary's initial question as some scholars maintain. Even then, however, Mary's question seems best explained by a perpetual vow of virginity taken either publicly or privately prior to her betrothal. Despite some challenges to this interpretation, it remains the most consistent with the text itself, the scriptural texts as a whole, and Christian tradition. Finally, the titles given Jesus in the text serve both to identify him as the Messiah, to reveal his divine nature, and build on the annunciation of John the Baptist.

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