

REIMAGINING THE LUCAN ANNUNCIATION NARRATIVE: AN IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF SACREDNESS, AGENCY, AND MARGINALIZATION

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Abstract:

This paper delves into the Lucan Annunciation narrative, focusing on the angelic proclamation of Jesus' birth to Mary. Departing from conventional biblical narratives, Luke's unique portrayal elevates Mary as a symbol of courage, agency, and profound significance, setting the stage for scholarly inquiry and spiritual reflection. Through a multidimensional analysis, this study unravels the theological and cultural complexities embedded in Mary's encounter with the Angel Gabriel, particularly emphasizing her questioning ("the How question of Mary") and its implications within the narrative. This research aims to illuminate Mary's transformative journey from a marginalized individual to a favoured one, challenging established norms and broadening the concept of sacredness. The narrative serves as a lens through which themes of empowerment, inclusivity, and decolonization are examined, thus inviting readers on a scholarly journey to unearth buried facts and enduring truths encapsulated in this pivotal moment. Ultimately, this study contributes to contemporary theological discourse by shedding light on the narrative's timeless relevance and implications for understanding divine encounters, the role of marginalized individuals, and the disruptive power of agency in shaping spiritual narratives.

Keywords: Mariology, sacredness, social hierarchy, agency, patriarchal disruption, decolonization

Introduction

The annunciation of Jesus' birth to Mary by the Angel Gabriel stands as a pivotal moment in biblical narratives, rich with complexities and implications that continue to intrigue scholars and spiritual seekers alike. Luke's account of this extraordinary event diverges from traditional expectations, presenting Mary as a figure of courage, agency, and profound significance. The Lucan Annunciation narrative not only unveils the divine plan for the birth of Jesus but also challenges established norms, broadens the concept of sacredness, reveals women's agencies, and uplifts the marginalized.

Within the context of biblical annunciation narratives, Luke's portrayal of Mary's encounter with the Angel Gabriel exhibits distinctive features that set it apart from its counterparts. Mary's questioning of the divine message, her status as a virgin, and her humble background serve as focal points for scholarly debate and interpretation. The interaction between Mary's inquiry ("the How question of Mary") and the Angel's response reveals nuances in the narrative and triggers discussions on the theological and cultural implications of Mary's role in this divine revelation.

As we delve into the depths of the Lucan Annunciation narrative, we encounter a story that transcends mere Christological significance. It intertwines elements of Mariology, presenting Mary not just as a vessel for Jesus' birth but as a revolutionary figure who challenges traditional notions of womanhood, sacredness, and social hierarchy. Through Mary's acceptance of her divine calling, God's embrace extends beyond societal boundaries, encompassing the poor, the marginalized, and those traditionally excluded from divine encounters.

In this text, we will explore how Mary's encounter with the angel is unique in many ways. However, before that, it is worth highlighting Joseph Ratzinger's insight in *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* (2012). In his analysis of the annunciation narrative, Ratzinger notes that the angel greets Mary with the Greek salutation *chaire* (rejoice!) instead of the usual Hebrew *shalom*, peace be with you (2012, p. 28). According to Ratzinger, this exclamation from the angel marks the true beginning of the New Testament, as it opens the door to the peoples of the world and makes the universality of the Christian message evident (2012, pp. 28, 29).

This article navigates the diverse dimensions of the Lucan Annunciation narrative, exploring themes of sacred space, agency, and patriarchal disruption embedded within this profound account. By examining Mary's transformative journey from a marginalized woman to a favoured vessel of divine grace, we endeavour to unravel the intricate threads of decolonization, empowerment, and inclusivity woven into this foundational moment in the Christian tradition. This paper invites readers to a scholarly odyssey as the hidden truths and transformative power encapsulated in the Lucan Annunciation narrative are unveiled, shedding light on its enduring relevance and significance in contemporary theological discourse.

Lucan Narrative in Context

In his *Principles of Christian Theology*, John MacQuarrie made an important observation that might help better to understand the literary and genre analysis of Luke 1:26-38. He observed that those reading or writing with theological and literary interests should never forget that the appearance of God in any form reveals something about God as well as the format in which God appears (Macquarrie, 1966). The annunciation narrative is an excellent example of such a moment where a passage reveals God and the form of God's appearance.

The narrative reveals a God who visits his people and the form he takes in Jesus, the incarnate Word. As a result, it is complicated to classify the annunciation narrative. It is also because 'narrative plays a liminal and mediating position between ordinary discourse and mystery' (Kort, 1988). Therefore, in every biblical narrative, the author speaks to a given audience in a language they understand, inspired by the sociocultural heritage of their time, while remaining faithful to the entire soteriological narrative of their religious tradition. On this note, the Lucan annunciation narrative plays the functions of standing between ordinary discourse and the sacred, ordinary discourse and Israelite's structure of beliefs (1988, p. 22). So, though Luke 1:26-38 might be considered as a historical narrative (Brown, 1993, p. 238), the entire infancy narrative (1:5-2:52) has been identified to be a 'strong Hebraic tone' (Stulmueller, 1968), and navigates between 'midrash' and 'Haggadah' (Bea, 1968, p. 121). Therefore, these multiple features of the Lucan narrative make classifying the annunciation narrative a hectic and complex task (Isaacs, 1975).

Nevertheless, a careful observation of the character of Mary provides us with a few details that have yet to be observed in other biblical birth annunciations. First, when Mary questioned the message of the Angel, she was neither reproached nor reprobated like in the case of Sarah (Gen. 6:13) and Zachariah (Luke 1:20) (Brown 1993 :302). Secondly, Mary is presented as a virgin in this annunciation narrative, unlike in the other cases of birth annunciation narratives. What makes this second observation curious is that virginity was not even considered to possess such a positive value among the Jews, who had high esteem for marriage and childbearing in the time of Mary (Landry 1995 :73). So, why did Luke make these few exceptions?

The answer might not be far-fetched as it is a unique circumstance in biblical history, but its implication complicates this Lucan narrative. For example, the uniqueness of this narrative has created much debate among biblical scholars. The most notable discussions on this topic have been those between Joseph A. Fitzmyer/Raymond Brown and Jane Schaberg (Reilly, 2005). Their prominent bone of contention has been the relationship between the "the How question of Mary" (Lk 1:34) and the Angel's answer (Lk 1:35). The debate was often articulated around the role of Mary's question in the entire narrative.

So, while Fitzmyer (1998), as well as Brown (1974), argued that Mary's response is a Lucan figurative device meant to serve as an introduction to Jesus' unique relationship with God (Landry 1995 : 67), Schaberg saw it as a piece that questions the legitimacy of Christ's conception and birth (Schaberg 1987). For her, there is no reason a betrothed woman would object to a message that she would become pregnant, except if there are other ulterior motives (Landry 1995 :68). Unfortunately, she came to this dilemma using a psychological technique in her analysis of the annunciation narrative.

Annunciation as a Mariological Narrative

It is important to note that while speaking about the Annunciation, one should remember that though the narrative is Christological, the Lucan Annunciation is as well both Mariological and revolutionary. The story is about the announcement of the birth of Jesus and God's choice of a poor woman with no significant historical background to fulfil one of the most extraordinary divine projects ever imagined. Understanding these facts is necessary to appreciate this narrative's complex nature and see the extent to which God went to make it happen.

Another vital aspect of this narrative is Mary's social status. She belonged neither to the elite, the priestly class nor to the class of the nobles, which explains why, by answering this call, she opened the door for God to embrace all humanity, regardless of their social background. As we shall see, her new status as the new Eve made her the new symbol of womanhood and proof that God holds the poor in high esteem.

Ratzinger's *The Infancy Narrative* (2012) is a masterpiece in this aspect. Through the examination of the prophecy of Zephaniah, namely Rejoice, daughter of Zion; shout, Israel, for the King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst (Zeph 3:15,17), and the passage of Exodus, which speaks of God dwelling in the ark of the Covenant as dwelling "in Israel's womb" (Ex 33:3 and 34:9), he concluded that Mary is the true dwelling place of the Lord (2012, p. 29).

The Violation of the Traditional Notion of Sacredness

Initially, I considered reflecting on the Annunciation as Luke's exegetical violation of the traditional notion of sacredness. However, upon further reflection, I decided to approach it from the perspective of broadening the notion of sacredness and including the poor in God's plan. Two reasons justify the choice of broadening the notion of sacredness and including the poor in God's plan. While the first is spatial, the second is related to the identity of the protagonist of this Lucan narrative.

However, it is imperative to explore some important facts before we delve into this reflection. During the Annunciation of the Lord, Mary encountered the Angel in a way that disregarded the traditional boundaries of God's manifestation. Furthermore, unlike in other narratives where the spatial aspect of God's manifestation is consequential, Luke did not find it necessary to do so in his narrative. Nevertheless, in many other narratives, the authors ensured that the spaces where God appeared to the human agents were significant. Likewise, when geographical places did not convey the message, a reenactment of them through a ritual meal or a sacrificial offering was evoked. According to Sunhem Kim (2014), the models of sacred space used in the biblical texts reflect the manifestation of the specific worldview that is governed by the particular concepts of God and the concept of holiness in space, time, and person, which is based on the principle of separation (2014, p. 12). This principle of separation, which excludes the profane from the sacred, becomes more intriguing when one considers that Mary, being a woman, is excluded on the grounds of being, at least to some degree, inherently unclean (Kim, 2014, p. 4).

Furthermore, Mary's meeting with the Angel brings to mind Estés Clarissa Pinkola's *La Loba*, a wolf woman who collects bones and resurrects the wild spirit of life from the Underworld depths (Estés, 1997). Though from a humble background, Mary's *fiat* opens a moment for the entire womanhood by espousing a new dimension of divine manifestation and a new category of sacredness. Like *La Loba*, who gathers bones and sings life into them, Mary's song of the Joy of the Lord, who looks at the lowliness of his servants, who were generally considered unclean, brings life to the downtrodden.

Through the Magnificat, a manifestation of her soul-voice, she expresses the truth of women's power, which breathes life into that which requires restoration and communicates a deep state of love and emotion. Like *La Lola*, Mary personifies the epitome of sacredness and the archetype of womanhood's divinity. Her divine encounter in the Annunciation is a transformative experience, a powerful metaphor for restoring women's once-lost glory through the first Eve. It means, borrowing the statement of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "liberation from injustice to justice, from human rights abuses to freedom, and

honouring the humanity of all persons, from the degradation of womanhood to its dignity. It calls for a healing of society so that it can enjoy development and progress.”(Oduyoye, 2019, p. 39).

Broadening the Traditional Concept of Sacredness

In the narrative of Jesus’ birth, Luke’s intentional depiction of Mary’s humble origin already challenges the traditional concept of sacredness. Unfortunately, many interpreters focus solely on her virginity and docility — a deliberate attempt to control the power of women. No one describes this attempt better than Clarissa Pinkola Estés. She said, “The spiritual lands of Wild Woman have, throughout history, been plundered or burnt, dens bulldozed, and natural cycles forced into unnatural rhythms to please others.” Mary’s audacious statement in this narrative has often been exchanged with her later attributes of a woman who keeps everything in her heart. As we can see, unlike other women who encountered God, Mary did not seek validation of the promises of others. She did not even flinch in questioning the Angel when neither the Matriarch, Sarah, nor the chief priest, Zachariah, were spared when they dared question the messenger of Yahweh. However, Mary dared to ask, “*How can this be since I am a virgin?*” A reader who knows the traditional pattern of biblical annunciation narratives would anticipate a divine reproach while reading Mary’s query for the first time. Effectively, every other annunciation narrative questioning the divine power has always attracted God’s reproach—Sarah (Gen. 18:13), Manoah (Judg. 13:18), Zachariah (Lk 1:20).

Although it is worth noting that understanding the Lucan intention of transforming Isaiah’s “young lady” into a “virgin” is essential, (Brown, 1973), it is irrelevant to this present discussion. The interest of this paper is in the cultural significance of Mary’s premarital conception, which is more revolutionary, as it was scandalous that God chose a young woman of no historical consequence in this position. It is also necessary to understand that this fact explains the heroic aspect of Mary’s consent to the Angel’s message. To better understand the implication of what we have considered so far, let us look at a few biblical birth annunciation narratives that are similar to the one Luke reports in this narrative: Ismael (Gen. 16:7-12), Isaac (Gen. 17: 1-21; 18: 1-12), Samson (Judges 13: 3-31), John-Baptist (Luke 1: 11-20), and Jesus (Matt. 1: 20-21; Luke 1:26-37) (Brown, 1993, p. 156). Among these annunciation narratives, three were addressed to women (Haggai, the wife of Manoah and Mary) and two to men (Abraham and Zachariah). The stories of Haggai, the wife of Manoah, Mary, Abraham, and Zachariah, all involve encounters with divine agents.

In all these narratives, except for the Lucan narrative, either the encounter took place in sacred places (in the case of Haggai and Zachariah), or it was consummated in sacred ceremonies (in the case of Abraham and the wife of Manoah). The absence of this spatial aspect of Mary’s experience with the Angel brings forward its non-traditional nature. Haggai met God at Beerlahai-ROI, the Well of the Living One who sees me, and Zachariah met the Angel at the Sanctuary. Abraham and Manoah consummated their encounters through ritual food and sacrifice. Mary violates all these rules and sets a new parameter of God’s manifestation that revolutionizes the traditional comprehension of sacredness. In this way, she broadens the notion of sacredness by bringing God’s manifestation outside the traditional circle. In brief, she alters the notion of spatiality in defining sacredness. Additionally, she incorporates every individual, previously excluded from the sacred space of divine encounter, into a non-geospatial encounter with the divine.

The Disruption of the Patriarchal Narrative of God’s Manifestation

The uniqueness of Mary’s experience is her identity, unlike the other subjects of the annunciation narratives. Her experience disrupts the patriarchal narrative of God’s manifestation. In reality, except for Mary, the protagonists in these narratives are either directly or indirectly men. For instance, although Haggai disrupted the patriarchal appropriation of this function by naming God (El-roi), her role in this narrative is merely a parenthesis in the experience of the Patriarch Abraham and God’s promise to

multiply his descendants. A chiasmic structuration of Abraham's story puts Hagar's encounter with God and the birth of Ishmael at the centre of the narrative (Coogan et al., 2018, p. 33).

However, it is essential to underline the heroic aspect of the Haggai narrative. Haggai was a slave girl who was forced into surrogacy to fulfil Abraham and Sarah's desire to have a child. Amid this precarious situation, Haggai decided to control the narrative. When things got out of hand, she decided to emancipate herself and took to her heels into the desert. On her way back to Egypt, deep into the desert, the Angel of the Lord appeared to her. Dolores Williams does justice to her narrative in her famous book *Sisters in the Wilderness* (1993). She explores how Haggai deploys all her energy to recreate her history and oblige society to recognize her agency: "Hagar, by way of her own speech and religious experience, comes through to the reader as a person momentarily in control of her destiny." (1993, p. 20).

Haggai's spiritual and maternal agency remained evident in the Angel's confidence. The Angel gave her the name of the child she was carrying without considering her social background. She also did not hesitate to name God. In the case of the birth of Gideon (Judges 13: 3-31), even though the Angel of the Lord appeared to the wife of Manoah (a certain man of Zorah of the tribe of the Danites), it took the confirmation of Manoah and his offering of sacrifice to authenticate the experience. Similarly, in the other annunciation narratives, Abraham was a patriarch, and Zachariah was a high priest, while Mary was simply a young girl from Nazareth, a city considered to be without any significance (John 1:46).

Among all these annunciation narratives, Haggai stands out as the one in which the woman decides to end a dehumanizing situation that limits her complete emancipation. On this level, she could stand as the beginning of the disruption of the patriarchal narrative of divine manifestation. Nevertheless, it is in Mary that the entire barrier is brought down when the Angel chooses her, knowing that as a young girl, her acceptance of the message will be a blow to the patriarchy. Hence, in Mary, all women and poor people become agents of disruption of the patriarchal narrative of God's manifestation.

Annunciation of the Lord as a Decolonial Narrative

In this encounter, God demonstrated His compassion towards the humble by exposing the vulnerability of the mighty. As expressed by Mary in the Magnificat, this experience highlights the decolonial aspect of her calling, as she sings, "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly" (Luke 1:52). According to Miller Amanda C (2014) "The following verses reveal a God of stark reversals with a strong preference for the hungry and humble, and a bias against the rich and powerful rulers." (2014, p. 90). What a great message for people experiencing poverty in our society.

In the Magnificat, Mary takes on the story of Hannah, the matriarch, when she sings her people's song in first person: "For the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name" (Luke 1, 44b). Luke is clear about Mary's unique encounter with the angel. According to Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983), Hannah's favour with God, which results in the "elect child," represents God's redemptive favour upon Israel. Hannah's redemption from the shame of barrenness is used as an image of God's revolutionary power in history (1983, p. 152). Despite the significance of God's mercy towards the impoverished in Jewish society, it is genuinely decolonial for God to elevate Mary to divine status, an honour surpassing that of prophets, patriarchs, and matriarchs. As Ruether explains, "God's grace upon Mary, the divine favour by which she will bear the messianic child, is seen as an expression of a revolutionary transformation of an unjust social order." (1983, p. 153).

This experience transformed Mary's personal story from being insignificant to becoming a favoured one. She is now blessed and no longer just a young woman engaged to Joseph. As she says, "for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on, all generations will call me blessed." Pelican Jaroslav (1996) explains her transformation in these words: "Mary as the *Mulier Fortis* was an extension and expansion of Mary as the second Eve, who had entered the lists of battle as the First Eve had done but who being *fortis* had defeated the devil, conquering the conqueror" (1996, p. 27).

The Annunciation narrative is a firm profession of faith in a God who trusts those society has long considered unworthy of direct contact with God. It is a narrative that urges the Church to embrace God's act of incorporating the vulnerable in the narrative of divine strength. In this narrative, God decided to decolonize the entire narrative based on patriarchal comprehension of the epiphany. Henceforth, the poor and those considered, according to our religious canons, to be outsiders can now activate their agencies to witness their incorporation into the family of God.

This is because Mary's unmerited glorification and incorporation into a sacred story, previously reserved for a select few in the history of her people, is a powerful example for us to broaden our conventional understanding of sacred space. This event calls into question the notion that God only recognizes our self-made religious sanctuaries and the concept of sacredness that we have constructed for ourselves. It puts a hammer on the single story of a God whose will depends on the experience of our individual religious communities.

Conclusion

The Lucan Annunciation is a significant moment in biblical narratives, marked by a paradigm shift towards decolonization and redefinition. At the heart of this story is Mary, a young woman who defies societal norms by questioning the angel's message and asserting her agency. Her boldness and revolutionary spirit led to her elevation to a divine status, broadening the concept of sacredness and challenging traditional interpretations of religious texts.

As we delve into Mary's pivotal role in this narrative, we uncover layers of significance previously obscured. Her questioning of the angel's message and acceptance of her role as the mother of Jesus challenge our understanding of sacred spaces and hierarchical structures. Her journey becomes a call to recognize the inherent worth and agency of all individuals, regardless of their societal status or historical background.

Mary's story invites us to embrace the marginalized and to witness the transformative power of faith and agency. It reminds us that we must rethink traditional interpretations of religious texts and embrace a more inclusive and equitable vision of the divine. Mary's journey serves as a powerful call to action, challenging us to break down oppressive structures and build a more just and compassionate world.

Ultimately, the Lucan Annunciation narrative invites us to expand our understanding of sacredness and actively engage in decolonizing our perspectives on God's plan for humanity. Through Mary's story, we find not just a tale of divine favour, but a revolutionary narrative that inspires us to embrace inclusivity and empowerment. The Annunciation account is, indeed, a decolonial narrative in which Mary's experience becomes the model for broadening the notion of sacredness and the inclusion of the poor in God's plan.

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