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NARRATIVE LOGIC IN THE ANNUNCIATION TO MARY (LUKE 1:26–38)

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One of the more controversial elements of the interpretation of Luke's infancy narrative is the question of the narrative logic of the annunciation to Mary in Luke 1:26–38. Two related questions are involved in this controversy. First, what sense does it make for a woman betrothed to be married to object to an announcement that she is about to give birth (1:34)? Second, how does the way that the reader answers this first question affect her or his understanding of the way in which Jesus is conceived? These questions were raised by Raymond E. Brown and Joseph A. Fitzmyer in the 1970s and were resolved in such a way that the *virginal* conception of Jesus was preserved, but at the expense of the narrative logic of the passage. Recently, however, Jane Schaberg has offered a sharp critique of the Brown/Fitzmyer solution and has proposed an innovative and controversial alternative of her own. Schaberg's interpretation rescues the narrative logic of the passage but suggests that Luke presents the conception of Jesus as an *illegitimate* one. Although Schaberg's interpretation has not been widely accepted, her critique of Brown and Fitzmyer appears to have some validity and suggests the need for another alternative. This study seeks to address these questions from a literary perspective and to show how an ancient reader would likely have answered them.

I. Recent Scholarship

Questions about Mary's words in 1:34 and the virginal conception in Luke generally have been the subject of regular scholarly inquiry because of the ambiguity of the key textual elements. Luke never explicitly states that Mary will conceive as a virgin.[1] The only clear suggestion of a virginal conception comes in Mary's questioning response to the angel's announcement of birth: "How can this be, since I do not know man?" (1:34). The seeming inappropri-

[1] See, e.g., H. Guy, "The Virgin Birth in St. Luke," *ExpTim* 68 (1957) 157.

ateness of these words from the mouth of a woman betrothed to be married has led to an enormous controversy about whether Mary here expresses a vow of perpetual virginity[2] or whether she simply is expressing confusion over how she could conceive a child prior to her actual marriage.[3] The angel's response to Mary's objection does not provide clear guidance in this matter, since it contains its own ambiguity. The angel tells Mary that "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God" (1:35). Neither of the verbs here, ἐπέρχομαι ("come upon") or ἐπισκιάζω ("overshadow"), has in itself any connotation of conception.[4] Thus, the angel's words mention divine agency, but certainly they do not rule out the possibility that Mary will *subsequently* conceive a child in the normal human fashion (i.e., with a male partner)[5] with the assistance of the Holy Spirit.[6] The combination of the oddity of Mary's words and the ambiguity of the angel's response seems to place the virginal conception in some jeopardy.

In light of this realization, Fitzmyer wrote in a 1973 article that the present Lucan account can be read as *not* about a virginal conception: "When this account is read in and for itself—without the overtones of the Matthean annunciation to Joseph—every detail of it could be understood of a child to be born to Mary in the usual human way."[7] The "details" that Fitzmyer refers to, items in the text that might be seen to promote the idea of a virginal conception, can all

[2] This interpretation has been popular among Roman Catholics, at least until recently. See, e.g., M. Villanueva, "Nueva controversia en torno al voto de virginidad de Nuestra Señora," *EstBíb* 16 (1957) 307–28; O. Graber, "Wollte Maria eine normale Ehe eingehen?" *Marianum* 20 (1958) 1–9; idem, "Marias Jungfräulichkeitswille vor der Engelsbotschaft," *Marianum* 22 (1960) 290–304; M. Zerwick, "'. . . quoniam virum non cognosco' (Lc 1,34)," *VD* 37 (1959) 212–24, 276–88; R. Laurentin, *Structure et théologie de Luc I–II* (Paris: Gabalda, 1957). C. P. Ceroke supports this view with slight modifications ("Luke 1,34 and Mary's Virginity," *CBQ* 19 [1957] 329–42). One seldom hears this line of thought expressed in more recent scholarship. Many scholars regard the idea of a vow of perpetual virginity in the first century as an anachronism.

[3] P. Gaechter, *Maria im Erdenleben: Neutestamentliche Marienstudien* (3d ed.; Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 1955); J. B. Bauer, "Monstra te esse matrem, Virgo singularis!" *MTZ* 9 (1958) 124–35; C. J. Jellouschek, "Maria Verkündigung in neuer Sicht," *MTZ* 10 (1959) 102–13.

[4] See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., "The Virginal Conception of Jesus in the New Testament," in *To Advance the Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 56 (originally published in *TS* 34 [1973] 541–75). G. B. Caird concurs: "It would never have occurred to a Jew to consider the overshadowing of Mary by the Holy Spirit as a substitute for normal parenthood" (*The Gospel of St. Luke* [New York: Seabury, 1963] 31).

[5] G. B. Caird comments: "There are in fact only two verses in Luke's Gospel that imply a virgin birth (1:34 and 3:23), and in both places the belief is hinted at rather than stated. Apart from these two verses the story reads like an account of a normal human birth, miraculous only because through it God has chosen to act for the deliverance of his people" (*St. Luke*, 30).

[6] As Fitzmyer points out in "Virginal Conception" (p. 48), evidence from Paul's allegory of Sarah and Hagar in Galatians proves that it is possible for someone to think that the influence of the Spirit in a conception (Sarah's) does not necessarily substitute for human intercourse.

[7] Fitzmyer, "Virginal Conception," 55.

be explained in other ways. Mary's question, for example, about how she could possibly give birth when she does not "know man" (1:34), is understood by Fitzmyer not as a substantive objection but as a literary device.[8] The question is not necessarily designed to promote the idea of a virginal conception or to express Mary's thoughts at the time in any way, but merely gives the angel an opening to speak about the character of the child to be born. Moreover, the statement of Gabriel in 1:35 about the Holy Spirit coming upon and overshadowing Mary can be seen as a figurative way of speaking about the child's special relation to God, without implying the absence of human paternity.[9]

Raymond Brown wrote a response to Fitzmyer in a 1974 article.[10] Brown agrees that Mary's question is not a substantive one but is a literary device. However, he disputes the claim that the text can be read as not about a virginal conception. His primary argument is that the parallelism between the conception/birth of John and the conception/birth of Jesus is decisive on this point. Brown points out that numerous details of the obvious parallelism between Jesus and John in Luke 1–2 are clearly designed to show that Jesus is greater than John.[11]

> Now this build-up of the superiority of Jesus would fail completely if JBap was conceived in an extraordinary manner and Jesus in a natural manner. But it would be continued perfectly if Jesus was virginally conceived, since this would be something completely unattested in previous manifestations of God's power.[12]

[8] Fitzmyer says: "as J. M. Creed has expressed it . . . 'a narrative of this kind ought not to be subjected to the strain of such questions.' The purpose of Mary's question to the angel is to give the evangelist an opening for the further angelic communication about the real character of the child to be born" ("Virginal Conception," 56). Although Fitzmyer cites Creed, he is following a line of argument first developed by Josef Geweiss in "Die Marienfrage, Lk 1,34," *BZ* 5 (1961) 221–54.

[9] Further, mention of Mary as Joseph's pregnant betrothed in 2:5 gives no hint about a supernatural cause for the pregnancy. The detail with which Fitzmyer's theory of a nonvirginal conception has the most trouble is the mention in the genealogy of Jesus "being the son (*as was supposed*) of Joseph" (3:23). Fitzmyer discusses the possibility that Luke inserted the phrase ὡς ἐνομίζετο to correct the genealogy in light of the annunciation scene, yet Luke would have done so only if he understood the scene itself as connoting a virgin birth. This piece of evidence notwithstanding, however, Fitzmyer concluded that the Lucan Gospel did not clearly assert the virginal conception.

[10] Raymond E. Brown, S.S., "Luke's Description of the Virginal Conception," *TS* 35 (1974) 360–63.

[11] He cites, for example, the fact that John the Baptist is "great before the Lord" (1:15), but Jesus is "great" without qualification (1:32); the fact that John the Baptist is "filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb" (1:15), but the very conception of Jesus involves the Holy Spirit, who "comes upon" Jesus' mother (1:35); and the fact that John the Baptist will "make ready for the Lord a prepared people" (1:17), but Jesus will actually rule over the house of Jacob and possess an eternal kingdom (1:33). See "Luke's Description," 361, or Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977) 300.

[12] Brown, *Birth*, 300–301.

This argument in fact caused Fitzmyer to change his mind and return to the more traditional position that Luke does indeed present the virginal conception of Jesus.[13]

Jane Schaberg, on the other hand, is not convinced by Brown's logic. Schaberg has recently undertaken a reexamination of the entire issue, arriving at the remarkable conclusion that Luke presents the conception of Jesus as an *illegitimate* one.[14] Although Schaberg's argument is extremely complicated and has several parts, I will focus here only on her interpretation of Mary's question in 1:34 and her response to Brown's theory about step parallelism.[15]

II. Schaberg's Argument

The first exegetical issue in Schaberg's argument involves the proper interpretation of Mary's question in 1:34. Here Schaberg addresses an interpretive question that has long bothered readers of this text: Why would a betrothed woman object to the announcement that she will become pregnant? As someone already past the first stage of marriage, why does Mary not assume that the conception will occur when she is taken to Joseph's home (the "home-taking") and begins to have relations with him?

Schaberg's initial response to this problem is to suggest that 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* (ἔσται) this be, since I have not had sexual relations with *any man* (ἄνδρα)?" 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."[16] The translation of ἄνδρα 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."[17]

Leaving aside for a moment the question of whether Schaberg's transla-

[13] See Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX* (AB 28; New York: Doubleday, 1981) 338; and "Postscript (1980)" to his 1973 article, in Fitzmyer, *To Advance the Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 61–62.

[14] Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

[15] Schaberg's book actually treats both of the canonical birth narratives in addition to a great deal of extracanonical evidence. I should be clear that I am concentrating only on her interpretation of *Luke's* Gospel and that any criticisms I have of this portion of her book cannot be applied to the work as a whole.

[16] Schaberg, *Illegitimacy*, 84.

[17] Ibid., 85.

tion is possible or probable, a strength of her position is that she is squarely facing the issue of the narrative logic of Mary's question. For Schaberg, it is clear that the character of Mary has a good reason for asking the question in 1:34. Mary assumes that the pregnancy will occur immediately, but she knows that she will not begin to have intercourse with her husband for quite some time. Therefore, she assumes that the angel is speaking of some other man and asks, "How will this be, since I do not have sexual relations with my husband?" In this way the question makes some sense in the narrative.

This question of why a betrothed virgin like Mary would object to the idea that she will become pregnant is one that is actually avoided by many other scholars. In fact, these scholars have concluded that the question does not make sense in the narrative. Brown and Fitzmyer, following Geweiss, argue for a "literary" solution rather than a "psychological" one—that is, one which attempts to discern what Mary was thinking when she asked the question. Brown, for example, finds all psychological solutions unsatisfactory and argues instead that the scene is "not meant to explain how [Mary] gained a knowledge of the way in which her child was conceived. It is rather meant to tell *the reader* how the child was conceived and hence to explain his identity."[18] Mary as a character could only have asked this question if she *already knew* that a normal conception after the home-taking with Joseph as the father was excluded.[19] Nothing in the text indicates that she knows this. However, according to Brown and Fitzmyer's logic, *Luke* already knows that this will not be the way that the child will be conceived. "Luke phrases Mary's question the way he does because he has the tradition that the divine plan excluded a human begetting of the child."[20] In other words, Luke has Mary ask the question for no discernible reason other than to give the angel the further opportunity to speak of the child's identity.[21]

[18] Brown, *Birth*, 307.

[19] Recognizing this, several scholars have surmised that an interpretation of Isa 7:14 led Mary to believe that the Messiah would be born of a virgin. This idea has been refuted in recent scholarship, however, with the demonstration that there is no evidence for such a pre-Christian interpretation of Isa 7:14 (see, e.g., Schaberg, *Illegitimacy*, 68–72, 88).

[20] Brown, *Birth*, 308.

[21] C. T. Davis III agrees with Brown and Fitzmyer that sense cannot be made out of Mary's question; he calls this objection "empirical nonsense," but maintains that it is present because it is a literary necessity. Without it, he argues, the angel cannot "spring the ultimate surprise," divine paternity (C. T. Davis III, "The Literary Structure of Luke 1-2," in *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature* [ed. D. J. A. Clines, D. M. Gunn, and A. J. Hauser; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982] 221–22). Eduard Schweizer also seems to agree, calling Mary's question "psychologically odd" and finally explaining that "the statement is only meant as an introduction to vs. 35" (*The Good News According to Luke* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1984] 29). Frederick Danker also seems to think that narrative sense cannot be made of Mary's question: "Strictly speaking, the question would have been irrelevant, for Mary was betrothed and could look forward to a normal marriage. Luke . . . does not anticipate that his readers should ask intrusive questions and miss the main point of his narrative. Psychologizing of ancient personalities is best left to writers of romances. Primarily, the question that Luke assigns to Mary gives him opportunity to relate the singular circumstances surrounding

Schaberg punctures this argument rather easily, however. One reason that Brown and Fitzmyer shun "psychological" solutions is that they assume that all such solutions concern the psychology of the historical Mary, which they regard as unavailable on the basis of Luke's text. However, Schaberg points out that although the psychology of the historical Mary is not a concern for the reader, reconstructing the psychology of characters who appear in the narrative often is an essential part of reading.

> The literary versus the psychological are in this case false alternatives. The literary solution here *is* the psychological solution. . . . Let me repeat: I am not speaking of the psychology of the historical Mary, but of the psychology of Mary, a character in the narrative.[22]

A second reason why scholars often argue that the search for the narrative logic of Mary's question is pointless is that the "objecting question" is part of the *form* of the annunciation story and is included by Luke for that reason.[23] Schaberg also rejects this argument: "The question is an essential part of the form *and* of the story line."[24] Schaberg does not elaborate, but what she seems to mean is that even though it is true that Luke is following a formal pattern here, it is simply not true that the use of formal patterns allowed or obliged authors to include material in their narratives that disrupts the narrative logic of the story. Luke seldom "ruins" the harmony of his narrative out of deference to the requirements of a "form." In other words, even where formal patterns can be detected, the story should make sense as a story to the reader, and readers should attempt to make sense of the story insofar as this is possible.[25]

Finally, Schaberg points out that scholars who interpret Luke's text as Brown and Fitzmyer do have given up too soon on the logic of the story. "To read Mary's question as only a 'literary necessity' in the way that has been suggested is to read it . . . as literary nonsense." Again I would add that from a literary perspective, it is not sufficient to say that Luke includes nonsense in his

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the conception of Jesus" (Frederick W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988] 38). The originator of this line of thought is Josef Geweiss (see "Die Marienfrage, Lk 1,34," *BZ* 5 [1961] 221–54).

[22] Schaberg, *Illegitimacy*, 87–88.

[23] See Brown, Fitzmyer, Geweiss, Danker; and Benjamin J. Hubbard, "Commissioning Stories in Luke-Acts: A Study of Their Antecedents, Form and Content," *Semeia* 8 (1977) 103–26.

[24] Schaberg, *Illegitimacy*, 87.

[25] This is one of the foundational assumptions of literary criticism, which attempts to read the text as one would ordinarily read a story. Most real readers will always, as a first activity, attempt to see the unity in the text, how it coheres, how it fits together, how it *makes sense.* Other types of reading, such as form criticism, redaction criticism, and deconstructive criticism, attempt to see the nonsense inherent in the text, the fissures, the lacunae, the logical or philosophical contradictions. Obviously, these methods can be extremely productive, but the activities they call for are not what ordinary readers—ancient or modern—do when they read, and in this study our concern is with the probable perception of this text by an average ancient reader.

narrative for a larger theological or even narrative purpose. Luke is too good a storyteller to have done this. We must attempt to see if sense can be made of Mary's question as an intelligible question addressed by a character to another character in terms of the logic of the story. Schaberg's theory does this, while Brown and Fitzmyer do not. The question that remains is whether Schaberg's theory makes the *best possible* literary sense out of the narrative.

Now, is there any other support for Schaberg's theory that the narrative logic of the passage suggests that Mary is impregnated by a man other than her husband? Schaberg finds support in both the Visitation and the Magnificat. First, she notes that Mary went to visit Elizabeth "with haste (μετὰ σπουδῆς)." Her argument is that linguistically the phrase μετὰ σπουδῆς sometimes has overtones not of eagerness but of terror, alarm, fright, and anxiety. She concludes from this that μετὰ σπουδῆς "may be a clue—a small one, I admit—that points toward a situation of violence and/or fear in connection with Mary's pregnancy, or at least to the idea that she is depicted as reacting with anxiety or inner disturbance to the pregnancy."[26] The implication is, of course, that Mary is frightened because the pregnancy was brought about by seduction or rape by a man other than her husband.

Schaberg then constructs an elaborate argument for the idea that the Magnificat supports an illegitimate conception, since it contains several alleged allusions to the law concerning the seduction or rape of a betrothed virgin in Deut 22:23–27 and because it depicts Mary as someone who has been humiliated. It must be admitted that the general tone of the Magnificat as a song of personal and social liberation, combined with the curious use of ταπείνωσις in 1:48, does seem to support Schaberg's thesis and provides the strongest evidence for an illegitimate conception. Certainly the Magnificat seems truly appropriate only in the mouth of a character who has experienced injustice and justice, oppression and vindication.

Schaberg sees the appropriateness of the hymn in her hypothesis that Mary had been violated and made pregnant, but that she had been vindicated by God, causing her child to be recognized as God's son and the Messiah. Particularly trenchant is Mary's use of the term ταπείνωσις in 1:48, where she states that God "has regarded the low estate (ταπείνωσιν) of his handmaiden" (RSV). Schaberg argues that *usually* this term means not "low estate" or "humble station" (as some translate) but "humiliation."[27] Schaberg points out that theological explanations about Mary's humility and humbleness are unconvincing. The idea that she is "humiliated" because she is a virgin is also un-

[26] Schaberg, *Illegitimacy*, 90.

[27] Schaberg (*Illegitimacy*, 97) cites Fitzmyer as her authority here, and he in turn cites BAG, 812. It is true that BAG prefers "humiliation" for ταπείνωσις, but it also lists "humility" and "humble station" as possibilities and in fact translates ταπείνωσις in Luke 1:48 as "humble station."

persuasive.[28] Schaberg contends that her "humiliation" stems from the fact that she has been raped or seduced by a man other than her betrothed.

In the final part of her argument, Schaberg turns to Brown's contention that the step parallelism of the birth stories requires that Jesus' birth be superior to John's, and thus that an even greater miracle be present at the conception of Jesus than at the conception of John. Schaberg agrees that the principle is correct, but she contends that Brown's application of it is not. "What is 'greater' in the case of Jesus is not the miraculous manner of his conception, but God's overcoming of the deeper humiliation."[29]

III. Alternative Literary Reading

My goal here is to use the principles of literary criticism and a construct of an ancient reader to make as much sense of the annunciation scene as possible. I concede that it is possible that there may be parts of the narrative that simply do not make sense. However, we are obliged as readers to make every effort to make sense of the text before we resort to this conclusion.

A first question about the narrative logic of the annunciation to Mary is this: What is the *meaning* of Mary's question itself? What precisely is she saying in 1:34? When the reader first confronts Mary's question and ponders its logic in the narrative, the reader is likely to conclude that Mary is objecting to the announcement of birth on the basis of her virginity (*contra* Schaberg). There are -several reasons for this. First, when Mary's character is introduced in 1:27, the narrator tells us *twice* that she is a virgin (παρθένος). This can be emphasized because it is intrusive commentary by the narrator. The fact that the narrator finds it important to give us this information, and especially to *repeat* this information, can only mean that it is important for understanding the story. Readers would remember it when trying to figure out the logic of 1:34.[30]

Moreover, there are several reasons for believing that Mary as a literary character objects to the announcement of birth because she considers this a *physical impossibility*.[31] A first reason is that this annunciation very closely par-

[28] Virginity, as Schaberg points out, is not valued generally, but in Mary's case (that of a betrothed girl) the circumstances are different. It is certainly nothing to be ashamed of, but rather showed that her father had raised her correctly and afforded her the proper protection.

[29] Schaberg, *Illegitimacy*, 102–3.

[30] Brown makes this point in "Luke's Description," 361–62. He adds the point that just as the narrator had prepared the reader to understand Zechariah's objection in 1:18 by indicating the couple's advanced age in 1:7, so also does the narrator prepare the reader for Mary's objection in 1:34 by indicating her status as a virgin in 1:27. The parallels between the annunciation stories are crucial.

[31] This is something that Schaberg wants to avoid: she translates 1:34 in such a way that the reader is not "prejudiced" to think immediately of an event that is physically impossible. What she does not consider is that there may be literary reasons for the reader to think just this.

allels the one given to Zechariah in 1:5–25, and there Zechariah had objected on the basis of physical impossibility: he and his wife were "advanced in years"—that is, Elizabeth was beyond childbearing age. Second, the angel compares Mary's situation to that of Elizabeth in 1:36 ("And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren"). It seems likely that the angel would mention the pregnancy of Elizabeth only if there was some parallel between her pregnancy and Mary's (namely, that both would be considered physically impossible). Finally, there are the words of the angel in 1:37. Following Mary's question, the angel explains to her how she will become pregnant and then concludes with the phrase: "For with the words of God, nothing is *impossible.*" Again it seems likely that the angel would only have used this phrase if he were speaking of something that is physically impossible, that is, a virginal conception. Certainly there is nothing "impossible" about a rape or seduction, nor is there anything "impossible" about God's vindicating a woman who has been raped or seduced.

A second question about the narrative logic of the passage is this: Why would Mary as a character in the narrative make a statement like this? Even if she is a virgin, why would Mary object to the annunciation on that basis? Why would she not just assume that she would conceive when she is taken to Joseph's home and begins to have relations with him? After considering the various alternatives,[32] it seems clear that an ancient reader would conclude that as a betrothed virgin, Mary objects because she assumes that the angel is telling her that she will become pregnant *almost immediately,* before she could possibly have sexual relations legally with her husband. With respect to the timing of

[32] There are several theories which I will not consider here. Redaction critics have claimed that the editor has destroyed the coherence of the original text. Hubbard claims that in the original version Mary was betrothed to Joseph and had no reason to object. "Verse 34, therefore, probably represents Lucan redaction of the annunciation tradition" (Hubbard, "Commissioning Stories," 120). W. Grundmann argues that in the original version Mary was not engaged, and so the question in 1:34 would make sense in this situation (*Das Evangelium nach Lukas* [2d ed.; THKNT 3; East Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1961] 57). Luke destroys this by adding the reference to Mary's engagement to Joseph in 1:27.

The difficulty with such solutions, as Schaberg notes, is expressed succinctly by G. M. Soares Prabhu: "Even if either of these solutions concerning additions were accurate, which I think is not the case, this would still not solve the redaction critical problem of how Luke intends us to understand the story as we find it in the Gospel" ("'Rejoice Favored One!' Mary in the Annunciation-Story of Luke," *Biblebhashyam* 3 [1977] 274–75). Nor are other easy or pious explanations satisfactory. In particular the popular idea that Mary had already resolved to remain a virgin for her entire life and that the marriage to Joseph was one of convenience, designed to keep other suitors away, has no foundation in the text. Moreover, it is completely out of harmony with the Jewish mentality of the time, which did not value or revere virginity and regarded childbearing as the glory of a woman (see Brown, *Birth,* 303–7). Other ideas—for example, that Mary's words describe a premenstrual condition or that they express ignorance of how children are conceived, are similarly incredible (see Schaberg, *Illegitimacy,* 86–87).

Mary's pregnancy, there seem to be three possible alternatives. Schaberg gives a succinct outline:

> The angel has announced that Mary will conceive (v 31; cf. v 35), so it is clear that Luke does not think of her as already pregnant before the announcement. Does he think of her becoming pregnant as the pregnancy is announced (and so objecting on the basis of her virginity)? This seems to be ruled out by the future tenses in v 35. Is Luke then presenting Mary as surprised to think that conception is immediate or already underway (a misunderstanding then corrected by the angel's reference to the future)? It is true that some Old Testament annunciation scenes concern women already pregnant (Gen 16:11 MT; LXX, cf. Isa 7:14 MT). But the majority, including the annunciation scenes on which this one is modeled, concern future pregnancies (1 Sam 1:19; Luke 1:24; cf. Jubilees 16), so it is unlikely the reader would be expected to understand Mary's question from the perspective of an immediate pregnancy. Does Luke intend the reader (with Mary) to understand that the pregnancy is in the imminent future, to occur before the home-taking? This last is the most natural interpretation, and one that allows the pieces of the narrative to fit together smoothly. Mary objects to the announcement of a pregnancy in the near future, since she is in the interim period between betrothal and home-taking, the period in which she does not "know" Joseph.[33]

The most important point in this regard is that if Mary objects to the angel's announcement because she assumes that this pregnancy will begin almost immediately, before she could possibly have sexual relations legally with her husband, she turns out to be right. Schaberg in fact admits this:

> If we read Mary's question as one of surprise that she will conceive in the immediate future, rather than in the still relatively distant future when she and Joseph will complete the home-taking, the continuation of the narrative indicates that her question is meant as the expression of a correct intuition. The pregnancy apparently is thought to take place in the interval between the annunciation to her and her visit to Elizabeth, [since Mary is already pregnant when Elizabeth greets her].[34]

How long is this interval between the annunciation to Mary and her visit to Elizabeth? Although the text does not say directly, we have two clues. First, Mary proceeds to Elizabeth's side "with haste" (μετὰ σπουδῆς). Second, the reader's deductions from the chronology given by Luke show that the interval cannot have been very long at all. Elizabeth is already six months pregnant when the annunciation to Mary occurs (1:36). Mary remains with Elizabeth "about three months" after the visit, and yet she still leaves before John is born. Even if Luke thought of the term of a pregnancy as ten (lunar) months rather

[33] Schaberg, *Illegitimacy*, 87. Although Schaberg says a great deal in favor of this last interpretation, she does not in fact subscribe to it. She does not, however, give her reasons for this.

[34] Ibid., 88.

than nine, this still leaves a relatively short interval between the annunciation and the visitation. Readers would likely have thought of the onset of Mary's pregnancy as immediate, seemingly not long enough for the home-taking to have taken place (this is confirmed in 2:5—Mary is still "betrothed") nor for another man to have gotten involved.[35]

Thus, when Mary questions the angel's announcement, she probably understands that this pregnancy will occur almost immediately and she objects almost certainly on the basis of her virginity, in effect saying, "How can I become pregnant now, since I will not have relations with my husband for some time?"[36] All of the OT annunciations involve conceptions that have either

[35] It is not insignificant that neither Joseph nor any other man is mentioned between the time of the annunciation and Elizabeth's confirmation that Mary has in fact conceived.

[36] Schaberg is clearly quite sympathetic to this interpretation, as she hints in *Illegitimacy,* 87, 226 n. 35. However, she does not follow up the implications of this interpretive possibility, perhaps for the very reason that she recognizes that it opens the door for the type of reading that I am suggesting here. This view is supported by many scholars. Prabhu agrees without reservation that this is the best explanation of the text: "In the context of the story Mary is to be understood as expecting an immediate fulfillment of the angel's oracle—as does happen in other call narratives, where the charismatic leader is invested with his charismatic power from the moment he is called" ("Rejoice," 274–75). E. Earle Ellis comments: "Mary's question assumes that the prophecy is to be fulfilled immediately in the normal manner of conception" (*The Gospel of Luke* [London: Thomas Nelson, 1966] 69). Other scholars who agree include P. Gaechter, J. B. Bauer, C. J. Jellouschek, and D. Haugg (*Das erste biblische Marienwort* [Stuttgart, 1938]).

There are two scholars who expressly disagree with this position: (1) Joseph Fitzmyer (*Gospel,* 1. 349–50) finds the theory that Mary thought of the conception as occurring in the immediate future, before the home-taking could take place, as the best of the "psychological" interpretations. However, he argues that this explanation tends to obscure the future tense used by the angel. This logic is faulty, as Schaberg points out. "This is so if the conception is thought of as 'then and now' but not if as in the future before the still distant home-taking" (Schaberg, *Illegitimacy,* 226 n. 35). (2) Aside from Fitzmyer's objection based on the future tenses of vv. 32 and 35, the only other arguments I have found against this view are advanced by Josef Geweiss ("Die Marienfrage, Lk 1,34," *BZ* 5 [1961] 221–54; digested in *TD* 11 [1963] 39–42). His objection is threefold. First, he claims that the *present* tense in Mary's question ("I do not know man") cannot have a *future* implication ("I cannot know man in the immediate future"). This is clearly false, since the present indicative "denotes action *occurring* or *continuing* or *repeated* in present time" (H. L. Crosby and J. N. Schaeffer, *An Introduction to Greek* [Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1928] 7). This is what BDF calls the "durative present." Thus Mary's οὐ γινώσκω can mean not only "I do not know" but also "I will *continue* not to know." Geweiss's second claim is that it is not necessary to take the angel's words "you will conceive" as referring to the immediate future: "Neither the grammar nor the sense of the passage demands this reading." On the contrary, the passage (if not the grammar) demands precisely this reading. When it comes to the timing of Mary's conception, it seems that there are three possibilities. Either she has conceived, she will conceive shortly, or she will conceive after a longer period of time. The first possibility is ruled out by the future tenses used by the angel. The third possibility is ruled out by the illogic of an angel announcing a birth that will not take place for an extended period of time. Therefore, the logic of the passage, as well as OT precedent, demands the second interpretation: the angel's announcement refers to the immediate future. Finally, Geweiss says that this view is to be rejected because "it wrongly supposes that the angel refers to conception before marriage, during the engagement period." This is a most curious statement. How can he say

already taken place or take place immediately after the annunciation. There is never any mention of a delay. The length of time before Mary would be taken to Joseph's home and would begin to have relations with him could have been as much as a year.[37] Mary clearly sees that, if she was to conceive by Joseph, then the angel would have waited until after the home-taking to present her with this annunciation.[38]

A third question about the narrative logic of the annunciation to Mary concerns the logic of the angel's response to Mary. My answer to this question is that the angel's words make sense only if he is explaining how Mary can conceive in spite of the fact that she is a virgin. There are two parts to this argument. First, a reading of the angel's response must be able to explain why the angel does not punish Mary for voicing an objection as he punished Zechariah. The reader is probably expecting the angel to rebuke and punish Mary for her doubting question. This is precisely what happened to Zechariah—he doubted the angel's promise of a son and was punished by being made mute. The second annunciation has paralleled the first so closely thus far that the reader probably expects the same reaction. However, the angel does not punish Mary. He gives her a patient explanation of her situation and offers some proof of his reliability. In terms of the story's logic, *there must be a reason* that Zechariah is punished and Mary is not. The only possible reason is that Mary is told she will conceive as a virgin. Zechariah can fairly be punished because there is *precedent* for his situation. This has happened before in the OT. Abraham and Sarah also have a child when they are "advanced in years," and Zechariah should remember this.

On the other hand, there is no OT precedent for a virginal conception. Thus if Mary objects to this, she cannot be faulted in the same way that Zechariah is and it is not surprising that she is not punished as he is. Conversely, if Mary's objection does not concern the unprecedented divine act of a virginal conception, then the question would remain as to why she is not punished or rebuked like Zechariah. The uniqueness of a virginal conception would give her an excuse, but without it she has no excuse and she seemingly is the beneficiary of an unfair double standard.

Second, the angel's words must be understood in such a way that they con-

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that this supposition is wrong when the text goes on to tell us that it is right? Mary conceives and gives birth *before* her marriage. In 2:5 she is still "betrothed."

Many other scholars who argue otherwise seem to have overlooked this option. Schweizer overlooks it when he argues that Mary's question is "psychologically odd," but explains that "she must surely have thought of her imminent marriage" (*Good News*, 29). But it is precisely because her marriage is *not* "imminent" that she asks the question. Raymond Brown simply does not consider this possibility.

[37] See *m. Ketub.* 5:2. For fuller explanations, see Brown, *Birth*, 123; Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 365–68.

[38] This is the most plausible explanation. Why would the angel appear to Mary and say, "You will conceive six to eight months from now?" Annunciations occur after or shortly before the beginning of the pregnancy they announce. Mary realizes this, as her question clearly shows.

stitute a *real response* to Mary's question. It is evident that the answer of the angel to Mary's question creates certain problems for Schaberg. If it is not a response telling Mary how she will become pregnant in spite of her virginity (an idea that Schaberg's interpretation excludes), then what is the purpose of the angel's words? The angel's statements must be seen as almost completely nonresponsive to Mary in Schaberg's interpretation.[39]

On the other hand, if the angel is explaining to Mary how she can become pregnant despite her virginity, then his words about divine agency—vague as they are—make a considerable amount of sense. This is also true, as I have pointed out earlier, of the angel's reference to Elizabeth and the reassurance that nothing is impossible for God. These also make sense and serve as a response to Mary only if the angel is talking about a virginal conception.

A fourth point about the narrative logic of the annunciation to Mary concerns her final response to the angel's words in 1:38. My point here is that Mary's response in 1:38 makes sense only if the episode concerns a virginal conception. It seems clear that when Mary speaks—"I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it happen to me according to your word"—what she is doing is *consenting* to her situation. However, it is impossible to consent to rape or seduction.[40]

Finally, there are issues of narrative logic that continue beyond the annunciation scene itself. My final point is that subsequent episodes in the birth narrative make more sense if one understands 1:26–38 as implying a virginal conception. After the annunciation, Mary proceeds "with haste" to Elizabeth's side out of eagerness, not fear or anxiety. Elizabeth provides confirmation that Mary has become pregnant prior to the home-taking and, significantly, *congrat-*

[39] Schaberg realizes that her interpretation makes the angel's response nonresponsive to Mary, but she justifies this by arguing that the angel's response to Zechariah was not responsive either: "Neither of the angelic responses that follow is a direct answer to the question posed by the human participant in the dialogue. Neither response gives information about 'how' the respective pregnancies will be accomplished" (Schaberg, *Illegitimacy*, 110). This is a poor argument. Although Gabriel does not respond directly with an explanation as to how Elizabeth will become pregnant, his statement is very much a response to Zechariah' s doubtful objection. Schaberg even admits this, saying that with Gabriel's statement that Zechariah should believe because he is hearing *God's* word, "the sign is given: because he did not believe, he will be mute until the promise is accomplished. The essence of this angelic response is: You should have trusted. It can be read as a rebuff to Zechariah's challenge" (ibid., 111). Thus, the angel's statement to Zechariah clearly *is* a response to his objection, and there is no precedent here for claiming that the angel's response to Mary is nonresponsive as well.

[40] Schaberg responds: "Notice that although Mary is consenting in 1:38 to a future pregnancy and motherhood, she is not depicted as consenting to the act that will cause the pregnancy" (*Illegitimacy*, 131). This is true only if one understands the angel's response in 1:35ff. as a *non-response*, as not telling Mary how her pregnancy will come about. Schaberg seems to realize the weakness of this explanation, and the damage done to her case by the consent of Mary in 1:38: "This element of consent makes it almost—but not totally— impossible for the reader of this Gospel alone to understand that this pregnancy is illegitimate and perhaps the result of violence done to Mary" (ibid., 139).

ulates her for her faith. Elizabeth's words of congratulation make sense only in light of a virginal conception, not in light of a rape or seduction. As Raymond Brown points out:

> It is to the virginal conception rather than to a natural conception that Elizabeth refers when she says of Mary: "Fortunate is she who believed that the Lord's words to her would find fulfillment" (1:45). No belief would really be required if Mary was to conceive as any other young girl would conceive.[41]

In Schaberg's interpretation, not only is no belief required, but no fulfillment has taken place. If God's promises to Mary refer to divine action in making an illegitimate child God's son, then this certainly has not occurred yet.[42]

IV. Conclusion

From a literary perspective, Schaberg's interpretation is preferable to that of Brown and Fitzmyer because she focuses on the dynamics of the narrative rather than Luke's theological purposes and insists that her reading make sense in terms of the story's logic. However, there are problems with Schaberg's reading. Her translation of Mary's question in 1:34 is unlikely, and she has great difficulties dealing with both the angel's response in 1:35–37 and Mary's final acquiescence in 1:38. I have attempted to show that it is possible to preserve the narrative logic of the passage in another way. Luke mentions the fact that Mary is a virgin twice in his introduction of her character precisely because this will become important for the reader's understanding of the plot. When Mary questions the angel's announcement, she understands that this pregnancy will occur immediately and she objects on the basis of her virginity, in effect saying, "How can I become pregnant now, since I will not have relations with my husband for some time?" The angel's response naturally answers Mary's question, *explaining* to her how she will become pregnant even though she is a virgin, that is, by God's agency. Mary accepts her fate, showing that she believes that the promises made to her will be fulfilled, and in fact confirms this belief by aligning herself with other women who have been so blessed, calling herself God's "handmaid," as did Hannah in 1 Samuel 1. In the next scene Elizabeth congratulates Mary for believing that there would be a fulfillment of what was

[41] Brown, *Birth*, 301.

[42] Schaberg might argue that Mary believes that God will vindicate her by choosing her son as the Messiah. However, this refers to a fulfillment yet to come, not one that has already occurred, as Elizabeth's words imply. Moreover, if Mary believes that she will be vindicated, why is she "anxious and terrified" (see Schaberg's interpretation of μετὰ σπουδῆς) even after the angel has reassured her of God's protection? This is one of the more puzzling aspects of Schaberg's interpretation. She argues that Mary is "anxious and terrified" in 1:39, but is feeling "vindicated" by 1:48. What has happened in the interim to bring about this change of heart? The Magnificat is clearly Mary's celebration of her pregnancy, but in Schaberg's interpretation it is not the pregnancy that should be celebrated but the moment when God vindicates this humiliated woman by seeing to it that her child is called the son of God. This does not happen here.

spoken to her from the Lord, and Mary goes on to celebrate her extraordinary pregnancy in a long speech. Nothing in the text precludes understanding it in this way.[43]

[43] Schaberg understands that her reading is not compelling, admitting that "my reading of Luke is less pursuasive [*sic*] than the reading of Matthew presented in chapter 2" (Schaberg, *Illegitimacy*, 139), or elsewhere, that "Luke permits rather than requires this proposed reading" (ibid., 82). However, she attributes this to the fact that "in at least four ways Luke has obscured and nearly obliterated the tradition of illegitimacy that he inherited" (ibid., 139). What this apology ignores is that what Luke has erased or distorted from his sources is not only sheer speculation; it was Luke's choice to do so in the way in which he has done it. Schaberg's entire argument is supposed to be concerned with whether Luke *intends* a virginal conception, not whether his sources contain one or not. At certain points in her argument and in her final assessment of it, Schaberg confuses these issues, and as a result her contribution to this debate is diminished somewhat, in spite of the admirable rigor with which she examines the question.