Jesus Christ. Then he goes on to express that good news to the "exiles" of his time with such power that his short letter has become the classic expression of Christian hope.

Prophet and apostle together suggest images for preaching that Gospel. Did the prophet envision deliverance for those languishing in Babylon (Isa. 40:3-5)? The apostle announces that the New Exodus has taken place, with Christ as the sacrificial lamb setting men free from the bondage of emptiness and futility (I Peter 1:18f.). Did the prophet speak of the Lord caring for his own like a shepherd (Isa. 40:11)? The apostle declares that "the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls" has appeared, and is none other than the risen Christ (I Peter 2:25; 5:4; cf. John 10).

What shall I preach? The good news about Jesus Christ. Here is a Word from our God which will endure forever and which can enable even exiles to sing a Hallelujah Chorus.

Luke 1:26-38

Exegetical Prolegomena

OUR TEXT is Luke's Annunciation.[1] It is a simple story, but to the conscientious exegete it nevertheless presents some complex problems. To begin with, it presages the miraculous conception and birth of Jesus and constitutes, with the Matthean account, one of the two New Testament foundation stones of the venerable Christian doctrine of the virgin birth. Therein lies a theological difficulty, at least for many people. This difficulty is not lessened by the existence of stories about miraculous births in the Old Testament and in the literature of the Greco-Roman world. Perhaps there is nothing quite like the New Testament stories of Jesus' birth in Jewish and pagan antiquity, but they nevertheless reflect an ancient rather than a modern perspective and represent a genre that is at home in a world other than our own.

The text itself represents some complexities. There is, of course, the historical question, whose problematic character we have already suggested. Doubtless the old question, Did it happen? is too simply and narrowly put when confined to the matter of the virgin birth. Yet the intention of the narrative to speak of an

1. This exposition incorporates parts of an Advent sermon preached in Duke University Chapel, December 1, 1974. The scripture was read from the NEB and that version is used in this article.

event must not be lost among the difficulties inherent in the character of that event. Luke is a storyteller, by his own lights a historian, and this primal and instinctive perception must not be surrendered to our theological sophistication or lost through our literary analysis. Luke wants to tell his readers—including us—about something that has happened.

Although the goal may be simple, his literary technique is complex. Just the question of the relationship of this text to the Old Testament offers material and issues sufficient for a weighty monograph.[2] Extensive parallels to Luke 1:26-33 may be found in Zephaniah 3:14-17, and to Luke 1:32-33 in II Samuel 7:12-16. Strikingly similar birth annunciations occur, for example, in Genesis 18:9-15 and Judges 13:2-7. The virginal birth (or conception) evokes the Septuagint of Isaiah 7:14. The greeting to Mary in 1:28 may be likened to Judges 5:24. The promise of the conception of a son (Luke 1:31) is not unlike Judges 13:3 and Genesis 16:11, as well as Isaiah 7:14. Quite possibly Luke has by the use of midrashic techniques deliberately modelled his account on these, or other, Old Testament texts, some of which already had a history of interpretation in the early church.

Moreover, the Lukan Annunciation has striking points of contact with the Matthean (Matt. 1:18-25), despite the marked differences which render literary dependence in either direction unlikely. In each case Mary, a virgin, is betrothed to Joseph, who is, we are informed, of Davidic lineage. In each there is an appearance of the Angel Gabriel, who announces the conception of a son by the Holy Spirit and says his name shall be Jesus. Moreover, in both Matthew and Luke the birth of Jesus takes place in Bethlehem. Of course, in Matthew the annunciation is to Joseph, while in Luke it is to Mary; and otherwise, the narrative details are, generally, different. If, however, the similarities are too extensive to be coincidental, while the differences do not admit of direct literary dependence, some common source or, more likely, tradition must underlie the two accounts. There was in all probability an early tradition regarding Jesus' birth which Luke has taken up and employed to fulfill his purposes.[3]

Probably the structurally parallel account of the announcement of the birth of the Baptist to his father Zechariah is altogether the creation of Luke.[4] The coincidences with the Annunciation to Mary are too marked to admit of any other explanation. But the Lukan Annunciation itself, while based upon tradition, is in all likelihood the creation of Luke as it lies before us. Luke and Matthew betray

2. R. Laurentin, *Structure et Theologie de Luc I-II* (Études Bibliques; Paris, Libraire Lecoffre), is such a study.

3. This is the position of Martin Dibelius, "Jungfrauensohn und Krippenkind: Untersuchungen zur Geburtsgeschichte Jesu im Lukas-Evangelium," *Botschaft und Geschichte: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1953), I, 1-78 [first published, 1932]; see esp. pp. 9-17.

4. Admittedly, Dibelius thinks not (p. 8).

many common traits, but no common story which would allow us to reconstruct a primitive narrative tradition from our texts. It may well be, however, that the Lukan account, which is more direct and seems more original in betraying fewer apologetic traits, embodies a more primitive narrative. Although the quest for such a narrative cannot and need not concern us here, we must take note of the possibility (suggested by critics of as divergent theological perspectives as Vincent Taylor and Rudolf Bultmann) that an earlier version of the Lukan account—or the traditional story—contained no reference to Jesus' virginal conception; in other words, that verses 34-35 or 34-37 have been appended redactionally, whether by Luke or another, later editor.[5] While there are some weighty arguments favoring this proposal, they are offset by the fact that removal of these verses destroys the climactic parallelism with 1:18-20, where Zechariah expresses amazement at the Angel's announcement and receives an answer to his question and a confirmatory (if in his case punitive) sign. Moreover, if John's birth is to take place miraculously, it is altogether fitting, according to Luke's literary procedure and theological perspective, that Jesus' birth should be accompanied by even more miraculous circumstances.

Proclamation

Luke intends to tell us about a miracle. There is no question about that. Mary's astonishment—"how shall this be, for I do not know a man?"—is more than matched by our own. It may be true that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus live in a world in which demons ascend from below and angels—like Gabriel—come down from heaven. But it would be wrong on the basis of this ancient world-view to infer that the astounding and miraculous character of the narrative of Jesus' birth is significantly reduced. Indeed, the appearance of the angel already suggests that we are dealing with extraordinary events. For Luke, as for Mary, a great miracle is about to take place. Its magnitude is underlined by the lesser miracle of the birth of an infant son to the aged Zechariah and Elizabeth. Yet Zechariah and Elizabeth are married and living together, if elderly, while Mary is an unmarried virgin. Thus the story of the miraculous circumstances surrounding John's conception and birth serves to highlight the even greater miracle of Jesus' appearance.

Who can hear and believe such stories nowadays? Moreover, there are some good reasons for having doubts or questions about this ancient story since in the New Testament only Luke and Matthew describe Jesus' birth. Although they agree that Jesus was conceived prior to and apart from human paternity, their

5. See Taylor, *The Historical Evidence for the Virgin Birth* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1920), esp. pp. 34-45; he regards only 1:34f. as secondary. Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958), pp. 321f., takes 1:34-37 to be secondary. The latter seems to be the sounder proposal, since vss. 36f. presuppose the startling announcement of vss. 34f. Dibelius, pp. 16f., rejects all efforts to excise 1:34-37 as secondary.

infancy stories are, as we have noted, quite different, coinciding only on such startling details as the virginity of Mary. It is also a bit odd that Mary, already betrothed to Joseph, is so surprised at the angel's promise that she shall bear a son. Might she not have assumed that the angel meant "after you and Joseph are safely married." But in Luke's account Joseph never comes into the picture—except as the one through whom the Davidic ancestry of Jesus is traced. In fact, in the genealogies of both Matthew and Luke the Davidic ancestry of Jesus is through Joseph. Apparently, according to some early Christian belief, Jesus was a direct descendant of David on the side of Joseph. Yet according to our Lukan narrative, Joseph has nothing to do with Jesus' birth—and Matthew is even more emphatic on this point. We are confronted with an anomaly in the texts.

Christians who read these texts and take such matters seriously will because of such anomalies often move in one of two basic directions. Some may begin to consider such possibilities as that Jesus' Davidic ancestry was on the side of Mary too, and thus Mary and Joseph were themselves remotely kin. The text, however, says nothing about this. They may also suggest that the angel took Mary so completely by surprise that she forgot about Joseph, whom she may never have met even though she was betrothed to him. Betrothal was by parental agreement rather than romantic attachment. A few will attempt to explain discrepancies between Matthew and Luke by recourse to the age-old story of the three blindfolded gentlemen attempting to determine the shape of the elephant by touch alone. (One felt his tusk, another his ears, the third his trunk.) Thus Matthew and Luke know and tell different aspects of the same story. But it is really not the same story; the points of agreement are theological rather than narrative. Moreover, the analogy is imperfect; the Gospel writers are not groping after elephants in the dark.

On the other hand, some Christians take the difficulties in these stories to confirm long-held suspicions about the accounts of Jesus' birth. They are fine for the ancients, the elderly, and children, but what man or woman of today can take them seriously? We know, as people of antiquity did not, that virgins do not conceive and bear sons. Then there is the appearance of the angel to Mary. Of course, angels trip lightly onto and off the stage in these stories. Whoever wants to take literally the promise of the virginal conception ought also to be prepared to accept the appearance of Gabriel on the same terms! Furthermore, there is a wide range of questions, from the doctrine of the incarnation to a Christian understanding of sexuality, that are simply set in the wrong perspective by these birth narratives. If Jesus were not conceived and born in the normal way, human sexuality is somehow devalued and Christ's oneness with mankind put in question. In other words, God did it wrong!

Both these approaches, the effort to save the historical credibility of the nar-

rative and the dismissal of it on grounds of its incredibility or unsuitability, fail to do justice to the biblical text. The Annunciation is not intended to provide answers to certain questions, as important as they may be to us. Nor is justice done the story when its defenders or detractors subject it either to cross-examination or to rational explanation. The Evangelist is not concerned with the question of how Jesus can be the Son of David through Joseph and yet not Joseph's natural son, although the text appears to say both things. As though oblivious to such questions, Luke later calls Joseph the Father of Jesus. The same Joseph is not responsible for Jesus' conception and birth and at the same time is his earthly parent. Nor is Luke concerned with the proper Christian teaching about sex and family, and such a teaching may not be inferred from the text.

The narrative is about a miracle, Jesus' conception and birth. The primary miracle is that Mary shall conceive and bear a son, Jesus. "He will be great; he will bear the title, 'Son of the Most High'; the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David, and he will be king over Israel forever; his reign shall never end." (1:32f.) A pretty big miracle! The miracle of the virginal conception enters in only secondarily. Yet enter it does. There is a certain wonder that accompanies every birth, as anyone who is a parent knows. But this birth is uniquely wonderful.

Nevertheless, the point is not a biological curiosity, but the initiative and purpose of God, who makes himself known to fulfill ancient prophecies and assert his rule in Jesus. Paul writes, "God was in Christ Jesus reconciling the world to himself." John says, "God sent the Son into the world;" "The word became flesh and dwelt among us." This is Luke's way of conveying the same basic truth.

To people who live in the twentieth century but are Christian by birth and tradition it may seem less offensive or more credible to think that the word became flesh and dwelt among us than to think that a virgin conceived and bore a son. What is more, Christians as a rule have believed in the virgin birth (or virginal conception) because they have believed Jesus Christ was the Son of God; they have not believed that he was the Christ or God's Son simply because he was born of a virgin.[6] That Jesus was born of the virgin is taught in the Koran and presumably believed by Muslims. Yet they do not believe that Jesus was the Son of God in the sense that Christians affirm that he is. So you can believe that Jesus was born under very unusual circumstances without believing what Christians have believed about Him.

The next step, and the logical one in the line of argument here suggested, is to say that the virgin birth is not, after all, so important, or that if one believes that Jesus is the Christ it does not make any difference whether he or she believes in

6. Cf. the helpful comments of Raymond E. Brown, "The Problem of the Virginal Conception of Jesus," *Theological Studies,* 33:3-34 (March, 1972), esp. p. 16.

angels, the virgin birth, and so forth. If one wants to draw that conclusion, all right. But before that move is made we ought perhaps to reflect a little on what we are assuming.

Is it actually easier to believe that God in that Nazarean carpenter was reconciling the world to himself? If one wants to believe in a miracle, there's one! Is it really less offensive to the assumptions and tastes of modern man that God chose to make himself known through a rejected son of a persecuted people? Is it not astonishing to us that God should reveal himself in poverty, defeat, and death, when we all take for granted that wealth, victory, and life—especially youth—are infinitely more desirable? Is this Jesus the one who will be great, Son of the Most High, king over Israel forever? All natural and ordinary notions of greatness, divine Sonship, and Kingship are called into question.

Yet Luke does not intend in the Annunciation to underscore the paradoxical dimension of God's revealing himself in Jesus. That is, he does not emphasize God's revealing his glory in humility and death. Instead, he wants to celebrate the momentous truth that God has, at length, visited his people. Long years of barrenness and oppression are at an end. There is cause for joy and celebration. Purposelessness and despair shall not, after all, have the last word. God's promises to Israel and her expectations are not null, void, and empty. Something momentous is now happening. A birth will occur. Peace on earth is proclaimed.

If Advent, for which this text is an appointed reading, means anything it means people have reason for expectation and hope. There is a word of encouragement and reassurance that vitally affects the fortunes of mankind and each of us. The senseless and demonic slaughter of people, whether by pogrom or incineration, is not the last word. The television scenes of horrible hunger and starvation that give us indigestion over dinner are not the last word in a God-less and indifferent world. Domestic strife, heartache, recrimination, alienation, and divorce are not the last word. Neither are senility, incontinence, and the dissolution of a familiar human character and personality. The last word about us will not be the medical examiner's report.

The next-to-last word is that human history is not merely an interesting, but dangerous, merry-go-round. Something literally epoch-making has happened, is happening. We are going somewhere. The next-to-last word is that the virgin will conceive and bear a Son. The last word is that the God manifest in that Son rules and will rule. The end is God. Therefore, life is good. We are blessed. The Gospel of Luke announces good news to us. The Annunciation to Mary is the harbinger of that gospel. In fact, it is the gospel in a nutshell. Perhaps it does not represent every theological necessity or correspond to every valid moment of Christian experience. At the beginning of Luke's work it points suddenly, perhaps precipitately, to the triumphant end and goal. Yet in doing so it affirms

that the gospel, while not cancelling out the ambiguity and harshness of life, is, nevertheless, good news for humankind.

Thus the story still has power to excite and to awaken expectations: "You shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall give him the name Jesus. He will be great; he will bear the title 'Son of the Most High'; the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David, and he will be king over the house of Jacob forever; his reign shall never end." Yet Mary's question, "How can this be?" is still very much our own, whether we think of Jesus' birth or the promise to mankind which it conveys. The angel's response refers Mary to God's power to make real the thing promised. In Advent, Mary's question arouses hopeful expectancy and the anticipation of joy in our hearts. We too listen for the heaven-sent word of confirmation: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." "Here am I," says Mary, "I am the Lord's servant; as you have spoken, so be it." So be it indeed!

Luke 4:16-21

THIS PASSAGE from Luke in which Jesus stands in the synagogue and reads from the prophet Isaiah is fundamental to the intention of that Gospel and serves to define the ministry of Christ in the double sense of that term—the ministry which Jesus carried out and the ministry that goes on in the world in his name and in identification with him. The determinative role of this passage has been recognized by many. Hans Conzelmann has said of this text: "Luke 4:18 is one of the programmatic passages which describes the ministry of Jesus in the words of the Septuagint."[1] Or as Gunther Bornkamm has put it: "The evangelist Luke has expressly set down the relevant word of the prophet as the governing text of all Jesus' works."[2]

There are a number of clues to the significance of the passage. Some of the most obvious are provided by looking at its literary setting, particularly in relation to the other Synoptic Gospels. Verses 16-21 are part of a larger unit that includes verses 16-30. That pericope, however, has two stages to it and one may consider the first part through verse 21 (or verse 22*a*—the transitional point is not entirely clear) on its own terms as we shall do here for reasons of space and in order to

1. Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke,* trans. by G. Buswell (New York, Harper and Brothers, 1960), p. 221.

2. Gunther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth,* trans. by I. and F. McLuskey and J. M. Robinson (New York, Harper and Brothers, 1960), p. 75.