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Communication in the Lukan Birth Narrative (Luke 2:1–20)

David Seal
Cornerstone University, Grand Rapids, MI

The Gospel of Luke was written in an oral culture and it documents events that transpired in the same first-century Mediterranean world. This is apparent in chapter 2 where there are references to various means of information being transmitted that were typical of an oral society. First, the chapter opens by recounting a decree issued by Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1–3). Second, the declaration by an angel that a Savior has been born (2:11) was also proclaimed to the shepherds by word of mouth. Third, the victory acclamation recited by the divine army (2:13–14) mimics acclamations vocalized by the Roman army. Finally, the narration by the shepherds of their experience visiting the Christ child and of the angel's message was conveyed to others by word of mouth (2:17–18). This essay will explore each of these modes of communication and discuss their implications for understanding the birth narrative.

Key Words: birth narrative, communication, Luke 2, media, oral cultures

Most public communication in the first-century Mediterranean world was oral. This would have included speeches (in the assembly, in the council, and in the law courts), public announcements, imperial edicts, lectures, invitations to banquets, acclamations, gossip, slander, oaths, hymns, curses, prayers, confessions, and advertisements in the market, just to mention a few.[1] The Gospel of Luke was written in an oral culture and it documents events that transpired in the same first-century Mediterranean world. This is apparent for example in chapter 2 where there are implied and direct references to various means of information transmission that were typical of an oral society. First, the chapter opens by recounting a decree or edict (Latin *edictum*, pl. *edicta;* Greek δόγμα) issued by Caesar Augustus that "all the world should be registered" (2:1).[2] It is likely that the edict was promulgated to the provinces of the empire through the voice of a herald or town crier (Latin praeco; praecones, pl.;

[1] Angelos Chaniotis, "Listening to Stones: Orality and Emotions in Ancient Inscriptions," in *Epigraphy and Historical Sciences*, ed. J. Davies and J. Wilkes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 302, 307.

[2] All scriptural quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

Greek κῆρυξ). Second, the declaration by an angel that a Savior (σωτήρ), who is the Messiah (χριστός), the Lord (κύριος) has been born (Luke 2:11) was also proclaimed to the shepherds by word of mouth in the fashion of a herald. Third, the victory acclamation recited by the divine army (2:13–14) mimics acclamations vocalized by the Roman imperial army in support of the emperor, and the acclamation exhibits features indicative of an underlying oral tradition. Finally, the narration by the shepherds of their experience visiting the Christ child and of the angelic herald's message was conveyed to others by word of mouth—the obvious means for transmitting news in an oral culture (2:17–18). Following a brief survey of the nature of oral societies, we will explore each of the modes of communication present in Luke 2 and discuss their implications for understanding the birth narrative.

The Nature of Oral Societies

The oral nature of the ancient world was due in part to the low literacy rate. In his extensive study of ancient literacy, William V. Harris concludes that the overall level of literacy in the first-century ancient eastern Mediterranean world was below 15 percent.[3] Catherine Hezser believes that the literacy rate among Jewish individuals may have been as low as 3 percent, depending on how one understands and defines "literacy."[4] Supporting the view that the ability to read appears to have been rare in antiquity are the remarks of the character Trimalchio in Petronius's *Satyricon,* who mentions the unusual talent of a servant who could read books by sight (75).[5] Some merchants of long-distant trade may have had a limited capacity to read and write for their work, or they hired literate employees to

[3] William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 267.

[4] Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine,* TSAJ 81 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 496. Based on his study of first-century communal reading events, Brian J. Wright contends that written texts were experienced broadly by people of various social and educational levels. This might suggest that the low percentages of literacy among the Roman and Jewish population in the first century was higher than has been previously assumed (*Communal Reading in the Time of Jesus: A Window into Early Christian Reading Practices* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017]).

[5] Lee A. Johnson, "Paul's Letters Reheard: A Performance-Critical Examination of the Preparation, Transportation, and Delivery of Paul's Correspondence," *CBQ* 79 (2017): 67.

carry out these functions.[6] Further, practical matters such as the absence of eyeglasses and the presence of eye diseases with minimal remedies would have prevented many from reading regardless of their literacy level.[7] While low literacy rates contributed to the popularity of oral recitation, even highly literate persons were accustomed to listening to passages read out loud, especially when the availability of texts was limited (e.g., Pliny, *Ep.* 9.34). Seneca articulated the benefit of listening to something recited, even if a person was fully literate, when he asked and answered, "Why should I listen to something I can read? Because the living voice contributes so much" (*Ep.* 33.9).[8]

In addition to the low literacy rate, the spoken word was preferred because texts were enormously expensive to produce—things such as papyrus, ink, and scribes were costly.[9] During the first century, it cost two drachmas to get a letter copied, which was the amount it cost to hire a foreman or industrial worker for two to three days.[10] In the second century CE, one sheet of papyrus cost two obols, about one third of the average daily wage for an Egyptian worker.[11] Since documents and reading material were scarce, people were adept at remembering what they heard—memory was the storehouse of information rather than books.[12] Seneca the Elder boasted that he could repeat two thousand names in the order they were given to him and recite from memory numerous lines of poetry (Controversiae 1, 2, Preface).[13] In oral societies, memory was trained more vigorously than it is today, and orality and memory were built into a written text. For example, in the Hebrew culture, literature

[6] Joanna Dewey, *The Oral Ethos of the Early Church Speaking, Writing, and the Gospel of Mark*, ed. David Rhoads, Biblical Performance Criticism 8 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 10.

[7] Hezser, *Jewish Literacy*, 463.

[8] Rex Winsbury, *The Roman Book: Books, Publishing and Performance in Classical Rome*, ed. David Taylor, Classical Literature and Society (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 2009), 112.

[9] Ben Witherington III, *What's in the Word: Rethinking the Socio-Rhetorical Character of the New Testament* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 7.

[10] Pieter J. Botha, *Orality and Literacy in Early Christianity*, ed. David Rhoads, Biblical Performance Criticism 5 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 48.

[11] Robert A. Derrenbacker, "Writing, Books, and Readers in the Ancient World," *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 52 (1998): 207.

[12] Margaret Ellen Lee and Bernard Brandon Scott, *Sound Mapping in the New Testament* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2009), 92.

[13] Winsbury, *The Roman Book*, 121.

used in worship, such as Psalm 119, utilized an acrostic, where the first letter of each line was a particular letter in the Hebrew alphabet. This assisted the faithful in memorizing large amounts of material and allowed them to more fully participate in public worship. We will now explore the instances in Luke 2 where modes of communication indicative of an oral society are implied or directly stated.[14]

The Edict of Caesar Augustus

An initial example of this ancient media form in the Lukan birth narrative (2:1–5) is the reference to the edict of Caesar Augustus (27 BCE–14 CE).[15] The edict was carried out by Quirinius, legate of Syria (6–7 CE), requiring all the world (πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην) to register (ἀπογράφεσθαι) in their ancestral hometowns.

The edict calling for the registration was a type of written public announcement from an emperor or by a Roman magistrate who possessed the authority to assemble the citizens.[16] In addition to mandating a registration, the content of an edict could include other types of decrees, political proclamations (cf. Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 55.34.2), or general declarations (cf. Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 56.25.5).[17] As noted by J. A. Loubser, writing allowed emperors the ability to exert control over subjects in the outlying provinces of the empire.[18]

[14] For more on oral societies and its relation to the Bible, see John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Downers Groves: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

[15] For a discussion on the problems with the dating of the registration, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, 2 vols., Anchor Yale Bible 28 (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2008), 1:400–405. Analyzing the structure of Luke's preface, John Moles identifies certain elements of a Greek decree ("Luke's Preface: The Greek Decree, Classical Historiography and Christian Redefinitions," *NTS* 57 [2011]: 464–69). He identifies three fundamental elements: the initial "since" clause (1:1), the phrase "it seems good" (1:3), and the final "so that" clause (1:4). However, the more overt indication of the Roman decree is found in the opening verses of Luke 2.

[16] Margareta Benner, *The Emperor Says: Studies in the Rhetorical Style of Edicts in the Early Empire*, Studía Graeca et Latina Gothoburgensia 33 (Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1975), 25.

[17] Benner, *The Emperor Says*, 28.

[18] J. A. Loubser, *Oral Manuscript Culture in the Bible: Studies on the Media Texture*

The written text of the edict could be disseminated over vast distances using a herald. In a world lacking modern forms of mass communication, heralds were civil servants, employed by the state for the official business of orally communicating the content of imperial edicts.[19] The herald conducted his work in a prescribed populated location to reach the widest possible audience, whether in Rome or in the provinces. In addition to informing the majority of the citizens, a reading of the emperor's announcements gave populations living outside the center of Roman administration a chance to hear the actual words of their ruler. Through these recitations the emperor not only demonstrated his ability to command, instruct, and forbid over vast geographic expanses, but he also used these modes of communication to portray an image of himself as a benefactor.[20]

To gain the most public attention, heralds very likely borrowed some of the tactics of the orator's craft and adapted them for their official business on noisy street corners.[21] The techniques of the orator set the standard for all kinds of public speech. Thus, a herald's voice was loud (Cicero, *Quinct.* 3.13; Plutarch, *Cic.* 27.3), strong, audible (Josephus, *Ant.* 19.145), and had the capacity to bring crowds together (Horace, *Ars* 419).[22] Further, in a crowded and noisy public environment it would have been difficult to hear and understand what a speaker said. If heralds utilized the kinds of gestures that the orators employed, it would have provided a visual aid to help overcome these conditions. While the gestures described in the ancient rhetorical handbooks were used by orators, many of them were widespread in Roman society, even among the poor.[23] The gestures were likely utilized in a variety of modes of oral performance. Given the constant exposure to orators, the public would have been well-equipped

of the New Testament—Explorative Hermeneutics, 2nd ed., Biblical Performance Criticism Series 7 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 89–90.

[19] Steven Muir, "Vivid Imagery in Galatians 3:1—Roman Rhetoric, Street Announcing, Graffiti, and Crucifixions," *BTB* 44 (2014): 81.

[20] Jonathan Edmondson, "The Roman Emperor and the Local Communities of the Roman Empire," in *Il princeps romano: autocrate o magistrato? Fattori giuridici e fattori sociali del potere imperiale da Augusto a Commodo,* ed. J. Ferrary and J. Scheid, Pubblicazioni del CEDANT 14 (Pavia, Italy: IUSS Press, 2015), 148.

[21] Muir, "Vivid Imagery," 81.

[22] Nicholas K. Rauh, "Auctioneers and the Roman Economy," *Historia* 38.4 (1989): 460.

[23] Gregory Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations in Ancient Rome* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1999), 50. For examples of the discussion of gestures in rhetorical handbooks see *Rhet. Her.* 3.14–15; Quintilian, *Inst.* 11.3.92–102.

in remembering and understanding them.

After the edict was spoken orally, it was more permanently published on a whiteboard (*album*) in black writing with red headlines and was posted for a fixed time, usually thirty days (Josephus, *Ant.* 19.291).[24] This offered the opportunity for those not present at the time of the announcement to learn about the information. It could be posted in popular places such as the bathhouses, temples, and marketplaces. Public posting occurred, for example, in Alexandria in 41 CE when L. Aemilius Rectus, prefect of Egypt, decided to post a copy of a letter of Claudius to the city, because the size of the municipality meant not all could be present at the reading out of the letter.[25]

An additional means for the emperor to communicate edicts as well as other news to his subjects was through the *Acta Diurna* (Daily Acts). The *Acta Diurna* was a written account of the news of the empire. Launched in 59 BCE by Julius Caesar (Suetonius, *Jul.* 20.1), the *Acta* provided details of government business—edicts, proclamations, and resolutions. Further, information such as marriages, births, deaths, crimes, trials, executions, legal decisions, and military battles were also included. In Petronius's parody the *Satyricon* (53), many of the above topics are mentioned by a character reading the Roman newspaper.[26] The *Acta* likely was either read aloud in public places so even the illiterate could know its contents, or the illiterate person would listen as a person at the posting read the news out loud.

The official language of the Roman administration was Latin. In media such as the *Acta,* or the text of edicts read by heralds, Latin was the preferred language, which served to emphasize the authority of Rome.[27] Language is not a neutral tool of communication between people, nor simply a system of signs for exchanging information. The Latin vernacular of the Roman conquerors served as an assertion of power and domination over the ruled where the spoken word in many cases was incomprehensible to those listening. In the Lukan narrative, through writing and an official herald, the power of the emperor was felt even by the illiterate.

It is possible that Joseph became aware of Caesar's edict requiring his

[24] Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire*, Classics and Contemporary Thought 6 (Berkeley: University of California, 2013), 110.

[25] Edmondson, "The Roman Emperor," 148.

[26] Brian J. Wright, "Ancient Rome's Daily News Publication with Some Likely Implications for Early Christian Studies," *TynBul* 67 (2016): 153.

[27] For examples of edicts in Latin see Benner, *The Emperor Says.*

subjects to register either through a herald, by word of mouth, or by the daily news publication the *Acta Diurna*. The purpose of the registration, in part, was to certify the number of an emperor's subjects so he would have an accurate account of the population for taxation purposes (*The Digest of Justinian* 50.15.1–8).[28] Rome required that subjected people pay a tribute or tax to their conquerors. With the conquest of Jerusalem by the military leader Pompey in 63 BCE, the Jews became subject to Roman taxes (Josephus, *J.W.* 1.154; *Ant.* 14.74). The Roman historian Tacitus (56–117 CE) acknowledged that the tax was burdensome for the Jewish people (*Ann.* 2.42). However, there were those opposed to the tax not only because it was onerous, but also because paying the tax amounted to submitting to mortal men when in fact they were to submit to God as their lord (*J.W.* 2.118).

The edict brings an obedient Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem, his ancestral town to register (2:4–5). Augustus's edict demonstrated an exercise of Roman authority. However, in relocating Mary and Joseph, the edict also enabled Jesus's prophetic birth in Bethlehem (Mic 5:2; Luke 2:4–7), thereby making Augustus an agent of God's authority.

The Divine Herald

Following the narration about the edict and the response of Mary and Joseph to the decree, a mere two verses recount the actual birth of Jesus (2:6–7). Luke is more interested in communicating the effect of Jesus's birth than the actual birth itself.[29] A heavenly herald proclaiming the good news of the birth to shepherds becomes the focus of the narrative. The herald announces and interprets the significance of the redemptive moment.

The heavenly herald is introduced as an ἄγγελος κυρίου (2:9). As an angel of the Lord, this messenger hails from the divine realm and his message possesses divine authority.[30] It is noteworthy that the angelic messenger is not described as appearing in the sky. Instead, the herald takes a

[28] Alan Watson, *The Digest of Justinian, IV* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2009), 445–47.

[29] François Bovon and Helmut Koester, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50,* Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 86.

[30] The word "angel" indicates a role. The word can mean someone carrying a message from God, but this someone could still be a human being. Thus, the apostle Paul said of himself, "you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God" (Gal 4:14; see David Albert Jones, *Angels: A History* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010], 54–55).

standing (ἐφίστημι) position near the audience of shepherds. A standing position also indicates the messenger's authority (e.g., Deut 18:5; 1 Sam 19:20; Acts 7:55).

Representations on ancient vases of the emissaries of Greek and Roman gods are depicted with wings or winged shoes.[31] The wings signify that these messengers could transport their communiqué over vast distances, even bridging the expanse between the realm of the gods and the people.[32] Likewise, conversation between God and humanity could transpire through an angel, where there is little distinction between God and his messenger (e.g., Gen 21:17). In Exod 23:20–22, the angel is described as one who should be listened to by the patriarch, since the angel speaks in God's name. Angels are described in the New Testament as speaking to individuals, while the Old Testament describes God as the one speaking (Acts 7:30, 35, 38, 53; Gal 3:19; Heb 2:2).

Further support for the divine origin of the herald and the authority behind his message is the appearance of the divine glory (δόξα) along with the angel (2:9).[33] Occasionally in the Bible, God is perceived as being in or present with the angel (e.g., Gen 18:22–23; Judg 6:12–16). In the birth narrative, it is obvious then that God appears along with the divine messenger ("the glory of the Lord shone around them").

The emperor often would be accompanied by a herald, who would do the speaking for him (e.g., Suetonius, *Dom.* 13; *Aug.* 82). When an emperor visited a community, it gave his subjects an opportunity to see their ruler, to celebrate his virtues at the elaborate ceremonies of the emperor's arrival (*adventus*) and departure (*profectio*).[34]

With God present when the message was delivered to the shepherds, the angel's words were even more authoritative. Further, as noted by Mark Coleridge, "with the birth of Jesus, the presence of God becomes more

[31] Kristina Dronsch and Annette Weissenrieder, "A Theory of the Message from New Testament Writings or Communicating the Words of Jesus: From Angelos to Euangelion," in *The Interface of Orality and Writing: Speaking, Seeing, Writing in the Shaping of New Genres*, ed. Annette Weissenrieder and Robert B. Coote, Biblical Performance Criticism 11, ed. David Rhoads, Holly E. Hearon and Kelly R. Iverson (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 214.

[32] Dronsch and Weissenrieder, "A Theory of the Message," 214.

[33] In the Septuagint, δόξα translates the Hebrew *kābôd*, as the "splendor, brilliance," which is associated with Yahweh's perceptible presence to his people (Exod 16:7, 10; 24:17; 40:34; Ps 63:2; Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX*, 409).

[34] Edmondson, "The Roman Emperor," 146.

overt."[35] God's presence was not only experienced by Mary, with the child in her womb, or by Mary and Joseph, as parents of a newly born baby, but with the appearance of the herald and the divine glory to the shepherds, the presence of God was felt outside the family—by the common people.

In addition, the abrupt switch from the human focus of the birth (2:6–7) to the divine focus (2:8–14) reminds the audience that God did not merely set things in motion with the Spirit's conception (1:35) and then depart from the scene. God is still portrayed as exerting his presence and authority. Since God is present for the proclamation and the angel of the Lord belongs to the divine realm, then the angel's forthcoming announcement about Jesus's birth suggests that the newborn is no mere child but is deity and hails from the divine realm as well.

The Divine Edict

Having described the divine messenger, we will now examine the herald's message. The divine edict spoken by the angelic herald is characteristic of royal decrees. The text of edicts were written in the first person while the addressees were referred to in the second person plural.[36] The herald's words follow this format: "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (εὐαγγελίζομαι ὑμῖν χαρὰν μεγάλην ἥτις ἔσται παντὶ τῷ λαῷ, ὅτι ἐτέχθη ὑμῖν σήμερον σωτὴρ ὅς ἐστιν χριστὸς κύριος ἐν πόλει Δαυίδ; Luke 2:10–11). The pronoun "you" immediately following ἐτέχθη (is born) indicates that this proclamation is not intended as an ordinary birth announcement, but as a declaration of the birth's significance for the shepherds (2:11) and all people (2:10).[37]

The angel informs the shepherds that he is bringing them good news (εὐαγγελίζομαι). In the ancient world, the term εὐαγγελίζω was used in reference to positive proclamations about the emperor (e.g., Philo, *Embassy* 231; Josephus, *B.J.* 4.618). The word was also utilized in relation to reports about military victories (e.g., Pausanias, *Descr.* 4.19.5). It could also

[35] Mark Coleridge, *The Birth of the Lukan Narrative: Narrative as Christology in Luke 1–2*, JSNTSup 88 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 138.

[36] For examples of Roman edicts in this form, see Benner, *The Emperor Says*.

[37] Gary Yamaski, "Shalom for Shepherds: An Audience Oriented Critical Analysis of Luke 2:8–14," in *Beautiful Upon the Mountains: Biblical Essays on Mission, Peace and God's Reign*, ed. Ivan Friesen and Mary H. Schertz (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 152.

be applied when speaking about more mundane news as well (e.g., Aristophanes, *Eq.* 644–7).[38] For the ancient world, εὐαγγελίζω was something of a "media" term, meaning the announcement of a message of (usually) good news that was previously unknown to its recipients.[39]

The content of the announcement of the birth to the wider public has parallels with other imperial notifications. It was not unusual for the imperial household to announce important family matters. The emperor Nerva convened an assembly on the Captolium, announcing he would have a new son, a successor to the throne (Pliny, *Pan.* 8.3). Augustus announced in an assembly that he had adopted Tiberius as his son, for the common good of the people (Suetonius, *Tib.* 21.3).

The titles ascribed to the newborn also have political connotations. The designation σωτήρ ("savior," 2:11), which conveys the benefit Jesus's birth brings for all people, was a title frequently applied to emperors (Josephus, *J.W.* 3.9.8). According to H. S. Versnel, a σωτήρ was originally someone, who by military action, has saved a town and people from danger—the people have been liberated.[40] An inscription found at Priene, celebrating the birthday of Augustus in 9 BCE, hails him as a savior.[41]

The nature of the salvation announced by the herald can be determined by considering what has previously been communicated in the Lukan narrative by Mary's song of praise. Her song indicates that God is acting on the side of the marginalized in situations of oppression by scattering the proud (1:51b), bringing down the powerful (1:52a), and sending the rich away empty (1:53b). At the same time, God is lifting the lowly (1:52b) and filling the hungry with good things (1:53a). Through Mary's song, God as savior is to be understood in the sense of material well-

[38] As noted by John P. Dickson, "Gospel as News: εὐαγγελ- from Aristophanes to the Apostle Paul," *NTS* 51 (2005): 214.

[39] Dickson, "Gospel," 213, 230.

[40] H. S. Versnel, *Triumphus: An Inquiry into the Origin, Development and Meaning of the Roman Triumph* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 386.

[41] Mark Reasoner, *Roman Imperial Texts: A Sourcebook* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 30. In the spring of 307 BCE, upon entrance into the harbor of Athens, Demetrius Poliorcetes proclaimed the freedom of Athens. As a result, the Athenians invited Demetrius ashore and they called him "benefactor" and "savior" (Plutarch, *Demetr.* 9.1). Nero was called savior and benefactor (*OGIS* no. 688; Craig A. Evans, *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies: A Guide to the Background Literature* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005], 312). Julius Caesar was called savior of human life (*SIG* no. 760) and of the inhabited world (*IG* no. 12.5, 556–57; Evans, *Ancient Texts*, 312).

being. There is also a sense the salvation had a political dimension. Mary speaks of God as one who brings down the powerful from their thrones (1:52), connoting a state of political liberation for the people. Finally, the phrase "by the forgiveness of their sins" (1:77) conveys that God's salvation also entails a sense of spiritual well-being. The titles "savior" and "messiah" applied to Jesus highlights the active expression of his authority—he saves God's people.[42]

The designation κύριος ("lord") also had political relevance as some emperors were given this title as well (e.g., Suetonius, *Cal.* 21–22.4; *Dom.* 13.2; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 67.4.7). However, Augustus declared his displeasure with this designation for himself (Suetonius, *Aug.* 53). The label "Lord" ascribed to Jesus stresses the passive connotation of his authority—he is to be obeyed and honored.[43]

It would seem for Luke that the angel's announcement of Jesus's birth to the shepherds was meant to be juxtaposed with the notification of the emperor's edict for all to be registered. In contrast to Caesar's exercise of authority, which was oppressive and self-serving, the authoritative heavenly messenger brings the good news of God's exercise of authority, which was liberating and self-giving. Augustus's edict represents the Roman claim to world power. God's edict announcing Jesus's advent overturns worldly powers. It will pull Caesars down from their thrones and exalt the lowly (1:52). Importantly, the advent does not immediately institute a system collapse of the Roman Empire or even validate human revolutionary activity.

The Divine Army

Following the messenger's announcement to the shepherds, the heavenly host voice an acclamation, praising God and proclaiming the results of the savior's arrival (2:13–14). Prior to discussing the acclamation, it is necessary to note Verlyn D. Verbrugge's observation concerning the term στρατιᾶς (2:13), translated as "host" (NRSV).[44] Verbrugge observes that in classical Greek, the term στρατιᾶς often denoted an army or a company of soldiers. The word στρατιά occurs twenty-eight times in the Septuagint

[42] David W. Pao and Eckhard J. Schnabel, "Luke," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament,* ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 268.

[43] Pao and Schnabel, "Luke," 268.

[44] Verlyn D. Verbrugge "The Heavenly Army on the Fields of Bethlehem (Luke 2:13–14)," *CTJ* 43 (2008): 302.

and the majority of these instances refer to human armies.[45] A company of soldiers was likely what Luke desired to portray as appearing alongside the herald in the fields outside of Bethlehem.[46]

Depending on the importance of a message, a herald was often accompanied by an armed cohort for protection while in route to his destination (Josephus, *Life* 301).[47] In the Greek world, heralds were sacred and under the divine protection of Hermes, the divine herald (Hesiod, *Theog.* 939; Homer, *Od.* 12.390).[48] The sacred and protected nature of heralds was respected among the Romans who recognized the essential nature of the protection (*The Digest of Justinian* 50.7.18).[49] For Luke, the sudden appearance of the multitude of heavenly soldiers proclaiming praise likely represents the herald's defending armed regiment.

The Army's Acclamation

In addition to protecting the angelic messenger, the heavenly host also demonstrates another popular style of media in the ancient world. Through an acclamation, the angelic army is depicted as supporting and honoring the divine commander by declaring glory to God and the ensuing peace following a military victory.[50] Acclamations are public acts of

[45] E.g., Exod 14:4, 9, 17; Num 10:28; Deut 20:9; 1 Chron 12:14, 22, 23; 18:15; 19:8; 20:1; 28:1; 2 Chron 32:9 (see Verbrugge, "The Heavenly Army," 303).

[46] Behind the notion of a divine army stands the idea of Yahweh as a military commander. When waging his wars, Yahweh was helped by an army of warriors (e.g., 2 Kgs 6:17; 7:6; Isa 13:4–5; Joel 4:11; Hab 3:8). Such heavenly armies appear in 2 Macc 10:29–32 and are indicated as a widespread popular vision during the great revolt by Josephus: "Before sunset throughout all parts of the country chariots were seen in the air and armed battalions hurtling through the air and encompassing cities" (*J.W.* 6.298–299). As noted and cited by Richard Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 77.

[47] Hezser, "Oral and Written Communication," 90.

[48] Andrew S. Brown, "The Common Voice of the People: Heralds and the Importance of Proclamation in Archaic and Classical Greece with Special Respect to Athens" (PhD diss., Wadham College, 2011), 164.

[49] Watson, *The Digest of Justinian*, 436.

[50] In biblical literature, heavenly beings sometimes celebrate future events as though they already transpired (e.g., Rev 5:9–10; 11:17–18; 18:2–3; 19:1–2, 6–8). The angels' words proclaim the benefits that are to ensue (Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel*, 3rd ed. Reading the New Testament 3 [Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2013], 34).

oral performance. They entail the unified chanting of words or phrases, which express an opinion or a request. Notice the words αἰνούντων (praising) and λεγόντων (saying) do not convey that the heavenly troops were singing but rather speaking (2:13). Further, both αἰνούντων and λεγόντων are present active participles conveying a continuous action.[51]

The idea of Roman legions publicly proclaiming a commander's worth is recounted by Josephus who asserts that the emperor Vespasian and his son were honored with joyous acclamations by the assembled troops, celebrating their leader's gallantry (*J.W.* 7.126).[52] On another occasion, Roman soldiers on the battlefield recited a popular acclamation when they hailed their commander as "imperator" (Josephus, *J.W.* 6.317; Suetonius, *Tit.* 5).[53]

Acclamations could consist of a simple praise, various titles, rhythmic sentences, rhythmic formulas, or phrases that could be shouted or sung. Raymond Brown offers two possible structures of the angelic army's acclamation (2:14). However, he prefers a bicolon structure because the arrangement exhibits better parallelism:

δόξα ἐν ὑψίστοις θεῷ
καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς εἰρήνη ἐν ἀνθρώποις εὐδοκίας

Glory in the highest to God,
And on earth peace among people toward whom he manifests his good pleasure.[54]

In this layout, there are three elements in each line, a noun, a localization phrase, and a directional phrase. So "glory" and "peace" are parallel;

[51] In a similar fashion, it was believed that Enoch witnessed armed troops in heaven worshiping God with unceasing voices (2 En. 17).

[52] It was crucial for the emperor to have devoted troops, for Gaius Caligula was killed by his own praetorian guard in 41 CE. Men from the praetorian guard also took the initiative to find and acclaim Claudius, the uncle of Caligula, as the next emperor (Reasoner, *Roman Imperial Texts*, 67). Consequently, support and loyalty from a critical mass of the legions became essential for a potential new ruler as well as a reigning emperor because imperial power rested on force and the threat of force. Thus, in an oral society, positive acclamations served as a spoken vote of confidence by the army in support of the soon to be or reigning emperor.

[53] The English term "emperor" comes from the Latin *imperator*.

[54] Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, 2nd ed. AYBRL (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 405.

"in the highest" and "on earth" are parallel; and "God" parallels "people toward whom he manifests his good pleasure."[55] To ascribe glory to God does not signify that the angels were adding something to God that was currently not a part of his nature, but instead it acknowledged his existing divine attribute of glory (δόξα).[56] The locational phrase ἐν ὑψίστοις (in the highest), which is parallel with the location "on earth," does not refer to degree, but to God's abode in biblical cosmology (i.e., the heights of heaven; cf. Job 16:19; Ps 148:1; Sir 26:16; 43:9; Pss. Sol. 18:10).

The two parallel lines create a thought pattern or thought rhythm, which is characteristic of Semitic poetry.[57] This rhythmic nature provided appeal and the parallelism aided in recall.[58] The parallel format and rhythm are helpful factors for memorizing and recalling words by those only hearing the acclamation recited. Consequently, they could be easily learned and chanted in unison by large groups of people.

The parallelism also suggests an underlying oral tradition of the acclamation. Robert Miller reminds us that "the parallelism of Hebrew poetry has regularly been considered a sign of its oral origin."[59] A basic method for assisting the memory of a tradition passed on by word of mouth is to frame the first part of the sentence in a way that will suggest or forecast the later and will recall the first without being identical with it.[60] For example, we can observe the correspondence of one verse or line, with another in Judges 5:25: "Water he asked, Milk she gave; In a princely bowl she offered curds."[61] Milk and water are both liquids (a semantic equivalence) and both nouns (a grammatical equivalence). While individuals in

[55] See Joseph A. Fitzmyer's arguments for translating εὐδοκίας as referring to God's "good pleasure" rather than "human goodwill" (*The Gospel According to Luke I–IX,* 410–12).

[56] Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *Neglected Endings: The Significance of the Pauline Letter Closings*, ed. Stanley E. Porter, JSNTSup 101 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 138.

[57] Andrew E. Hill, "Song of Solomon," in *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 3:452; G. P. Luttikhuizen, "The Poetic Character of Revelation 4 and 5," in *Early Christian Poetry*, ed. J. Den Boeft, R. Van Den Broek, A. F. J. Klijn, G. Quispel, and J. C. M. Van Winden (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 16.

[58] Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations*, 134.

[59] Robert D. Miller II, *Oral Tradition in Ancient Israel*, Biblical Performance Criticism 4, ed. David Rhoads (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 72.

[60] Dewey, *The Oral Ethos*, 41.

[61] Translation by Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 12.

pre-literate cultures are gifted in storing and retrieving vast amounts of oral texts, there was still a need for information to be spoken in a manner that was easy to remember. By employing standardized formats to speech, such as parallelism, a listener is assisted in the later recollection of that information.

The acclamation was important to preserve for a couple of reasons. First, the army's acclamation had divine origin—it was spoken by God's army. An inspired prayer was thought to enhance a prayer's efficacy. The format of the acclamation may be intended to ensure it was remembered verbatim, so its effectiveness was guaranteed when repeated. In Greco-Roman religion, proper recitation of prayers in order to insure their efficacy can be seen in Pliny (*Nat.* 28:11–14), where he recounts how severe damage was caused by mistaken prayers.[62] Enoch was told that if the angels do not recite a song at the right time or in a proper and fitting manner, they would be destroyed (3 En. 47:2). The Lord's Prayer in its various occurrences, is introduced with an obligatory formulary: "When you pray, say…" (Luke 11:2), "Pray then in this way" (Matt 6:9), "pray like this…" (*Did.* 8:2).[63]

A second possible reason for the parallel format of the acclamation was that in some Jewish and Christian circles it was believed that certain prayers allowed joint participation between the earthly choir and the heavenly choir (e.g., Pss 103:20; 148:2; Dan 3:58 LXX; Pr Azar 1:37; 1QH[a] 11.12; 4Q403 1 I, 30b–33a; 4Q504 7, 4–9; 1QM 17, 7–8; 1QS 11, 7–8, 1QSb 4, 24–26; Apoc. Zeph. 8:3). In this respect, it is understandable why a text that is simple to remember is necessary.

Reciting a song or acclamation in unison is an invitation to join or support a movement. It creates solidarity and an intense feeling of membership in a community.[64] The need for solidarity is important for a group's survival, especially when it is espousing views that are deemed by other parts of society as subversive or radical.[65] The acclamation by the divine army expresses a unified loyalty to God and underscores the universal peace that the arriving savior will realize.

Like the titles "Savior" and "Lord" ascribed to the newborn, the acclamation's reference to peace on earth has political overtones as well.

[62] Mathias Klinghardt, "Prayer Formulas for Public Recitation. Their Use and Function in Ancient Religion," *Numen* 46 (1999): 17.

[63] Klinghardt, "Prayer Formulas," 3.

[64] Terry Giles and William J. Doan, *Twice Used Songs: Performance Criticism of the Songs of Ancient Israel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 141.

[65] Giles and Doan, *Twice Used Songs*, 77.

With his victory at Actium, Augustus brought peace and order into the world for the first time in anyone's memory.[66] In addition to inscriptions, paeans of praise for the ruler who had brought peace, order, harmony, and prosperity appears in various genres of literature, such as poetry (e.g., Horace, *Odes* 4.15), history (e.g., Velleius Paterculus, *The Roman History* 2.89), and philosophy (e.g., Epictetus, *Diatr.* 3.13.9).[67]

The Roman concept of peace referenced above is an ideal state that a hero achieved through war.[68] The concept of peace in the acclamation of the heavenly warriors is accomplished by Christ through his death and resurrection (Rom 5:1; Col 1:20) and experienced by the Church (Acts 9:31). It refers to both the absence of hostilities and a reconciled relationship with God and others in the context of the new creation (Isa 9:6; 32:15–18).

The Shepherds' Testimony

A final illustration in the birth narrative of information transmission in the ancient world involves direct personal communication between people. In an oral society, with no telephones or internet, sharing the angel's message by the shepherds with the wider public would need to rely on direct, face-to-face communication to further be distributed beyond their small circle (Luke 2:17–18). Sharing information by word of mouth could easily be carried out with one's relatives, fellow villagers, and neighbors.[69] The first-century Mediterranean world was a society in which people lived close to each other. In the crowded cities of the Roman Empire persons were rarely alone. Pieter Botha contends that the numerous people who lived in the tiny apartments of ancient cities must have lived almost entirely outside, "in the streets, shops, arcades, arenas and baths of the city."[70] The average Roman home most likely served only as a place

[66] Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas*, 26.

[67] Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas*, 26; Gary Gilbert, "Roman Propaganda and Christian Identity in the Worldview of Luke-Acts," in *Contextualizing Acts, Lukan Narrative and Greco-Roman Discourse*, ed. Todd C. Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele, SBLSymS 20 (Atlanta: SBL, 2003), 240.

[68] E.g., Res gest. divi Aug. §25.

[69] Peter J. Botha, "Paul and Gossip: A Social Mechanism in Early Christian Communities," *Neot* 32 (1998): 270.

[70] Botha, "Paul and Gossip," 270. For gossip in the barber shops in antiquity see Plutarch (*Mor.* 509A; Botha, "Paul and Gossip," 270).

to sleep and store possessions. Thus, the opportunities for sharing information with others were considerable. Much of what one learns and passes on is done in the context of a conversation.[71]

While gossip has mostly a negative connotation, in non-literate oral societies it can serve positive purposes. As Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh maintain, gossip can be used for constructive information sharing.[72] For example, positive evaluative talk about an individual can identify potential leaders, as their reputation is enhanced through information sharing within a community. The shepherds' mode of passing on information was prominent in the first-century oral culture and was important for spreading news as well as constructing a person's public identity. In this sense, gossip played an important role in spreading knowledge about Jesus's words and deeds during his ministry (e.g., Matt 4:24; Mark 1:28; Luke 4:14). Thus, very early in the life of Jesus, as the shepherds share their story, the people respond with amazement. The community begins to understand that God is exerting his authority as one epoch of salvation history gives way to another and Jesus's positive role and reputation in the divine plan begins to develop (Luke 2:18).

Conclusion

We have highlighted several modes of communication typical of an oral culture and their function as they appear in the Lukan birth narrative. First, the Augustan edict, compelling subjects to register for the purpose of taxation, and the divine proclamation of a savior's birth were both expressed by official heralds. Through this corresponding arrangement of the two edicts, Luke sets the authoritative words of Caesar (both spoken and written) and God in opposition. Caesar's edict is oppressive, creating a tax burden for inhabitants of the Roman Empire. God's edict is redemptive, announcing the advent of a Savior for all people. The divine decree trumps the Roman decree. Second, the divine army accompanies the herald, underscoring the importance of the herald's message. Their acclamation, praising God and announcing proleptically the resulting peace on earth, demonstrates a unified loyalty to the divine victorious commander. Further, the acclamation's parallelism suggests an underlying oral tradition, perhaps for impressing a culture's most precious traditions on the minds of people. In an oral society, where the majority of the people were

[71] As noted by John W. Daniels Jr., *Gossiping Jesus: The Oral Processing of Jesus in John's Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 6–7.

[72] Bruce J. Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 103.

illiterate and writing materials were expensive, the focus was on the transmission of words from mind to mind. Finally, the shepherds' face-to-face conversations with members of the public about the angel's message concerning Jesus, bears witness to the ancient Mediterranean oral culture's practice of advancing news and shaping perceptions and identities of a community's rising leaders.