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Response and Responsibility - Chapter 1 of "The Feeling Intellect: Reading the Bible with C.S. Lewis"

Roger Newell
George Fox University, rnewell@georgefox.edu

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Response and Responsibility (Luke 1–2)

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David . . . Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “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 the Son of God. 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. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her (Luke 1:26–38).

Our highest activity must be response, not initiative.1

Let us imagine a devout first-century Jewish maiden at her prayers as she is suddenly visited by an angel of the Lord. If we are aware of the Old Testament back story, we can enter even more pointedly into the climactic nature of this moment. So let us hear the echo of Sarah's angelic visitation that ends in laughter, pregnancy, and Isaac's birth. Let us remember Samuel's surprising birth to Hannah after many faithful yet

barren years. Don't forget Rachel's humiliating wait for a child that ends in the gladness of Joseph's birth. All these help us penetrate further into this text. Even more intimately connected is the birth of Moses, the liberator of Israel. Remember, Moses is at once hidden and vulnerable, both in the bulrushes of the Nile and growing up in Pharaoh's own household. At his birth and during many times to come, he barely survives the violence of empire. All together these stories disclose a God-breathed conspiracy awaiting the climax that is Mary's story.

To recognize this long train of surprising and vulnerable births helps us overcome a "primary impulse" to glibly reduce this story as a plea to put Christ (or in this case, Mary) back into Christmas. An awareness of the back story offers more than further material for a devotional attitude as opposed to a skeptical approach to the text. Frankly, there is too much evidence that religious readers are as guilty of "maintaining and aggrandizing the self" as the skeptical. The experiment I am proposing is an equal opportunity agenda for unbelievers, believers, and those somewhere in between to break free of a whole variety of inattentive readings.

Of course, there is risk involved in paying fresh attention. Each fresh immersion, modest though it is, may involve us in a "temporary annihilation" that has a kind of congruence with Mary's provisional bereavement, for the divine appointment announces the time has come to let go of her dreams of how God shall meet her in exchange for an openness to God's surprise, where the annihilation of self bears fruit in finding it again beyond both hope and fear.

ENLIGHTENED MISREADINGS

This experiment in reading assumes that both the religious and the skeptical quite often read without much risk or without paying too close attention. Before we consider how religious readers distract themselves, let us consider an approach that for several centuries now has inhibited our mental and emotional receptivity. I refer to the Enlightenment reading habit in which both the many moderately educated readers and the few highly educated have been trained to view the birth narratives in Luke and Matthew as historically incredible and to put it bluntly, to view traditional Christianity as based on a mistake. According to this view, Jesus actually came to teach certain timeless truths, but these were soon obfuscated

2. See Wright, Judas and the Gospel of Jesus, 120ff.
by the church, as it both naively and connivingly corrupted the original message, ornamenting it with stories of miracles, angelic visitations, and apocalyptic endings, all the while seeking to control and profit by the message's distribution.

Behind this reading is a preliminary bias: that the Christian story as it stands, including the miraculous aspects of the birth narrative, is an incoherent pastiche of historical impossibilities. Such a way of reading refuses to suspend disbelief long enough to hear the story as it was meant to be heard with its historical truth claim intact. Lewis names this philosophical bias “naturalism,” challenges its internal coherence, and asks careful readers to set it aside and to grant the Christian story the courtesy of listening to it in its native context, including the awkward claim to historical truth.3

Hence the first step for the skeptical reader who will risk a “temporary annihilation” of the reading self is to identify the Enlightenment paradigm that filters the text. Having identified the filter, we may choose, as Coleridge would say, to suspend our disbelief in order to properly receive the text itself.4 When skeptics venture beyond their Enlightenment comfort zones, they may find not an arbitrary and confusing divine intrusion but a pattern of healing intervention, through a deeply personal gift to ones specially chosen to bear these weighty honors for the sake of others.

POP CULTURE MISREADINGS

A lack of attention to what is actually going on in the text explains why “the many” need to jazz up Mary’s story. Some enliven the story with a fresh coat of meaning by ingeniously attaching its outer form to new inner content. Recall how four decades ago the Beatles revisited Mary’s reply to the angel, “Let it be.” The familiar words became a calming refrain for a new generation, a plea to discover a “peaceful, easy feeling” amidst a tension-filled world of Cuban missile crises, assassinations, and the Vietnam War. However, this mood remix transferred Mary’s words from her original Jewish context and inserted them into the world-renouncing Eastern vision of the world as Maya, the veil of illusion, a not unlikely description of the Vietnam War era for many listeners of popular music. And voila! The wisdom of Mary became an accompanying mantra for the

3. Lewis, Miracles, 84.
4. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, chapter XIV.
radical priest/guru who advises people to “tune in, turn on, drop out.” Later, George Harrison’s embrace of Hinduism was overt in the Hindu/Pantheist anthem, “My Sweet Lord.” But the process of transplanting old Christian idioms into new religious contexts had been at work for some time. So let Mary’s wisdom be . . . Buddhism’s *world-renouncing* strategy of non-attachment? Yes, but only if you set aside the *world-embracing* covenant of Yahweh with Israel, the first-century Jewish captivity under Imperial Rome, and Mary’s willingness to join God’s plan to ransom even more than captive Israel, for God’s intent to ransom will include the *entire creation through* Israel, through Mary and her child. However, give the Beatles their due. The original drama has been so often misread by the pious, one can hardly fault the minimally churched for attempting to retrieve a morsel of meaning from one more tired Western tradition.

**PIOUS MISREADINGS: THE DOMESTICATED CHRISTMAS**

I don’t wish to sound harsh about two thousand years of Church tradition in what I am going to say next. Full credit to the Church for preserving Mary’s words. But Christians have a nearly insatiable appetite (supplied by compliant preachers) for substitute feeling-contexts to awaken our drifting attention to the actual story. For well past a century now, the Church has leaned heavily on an alternative mood to the one actually imbedded in the birth narrative. It is no accident that nearly all the children’s Christmas pageants omit any reference to Mary’s questions, Joseph’s plans for a secret divorce, and Herod’s response to the news.5 Why so? It would “destroy the mood.” Which mood is this? Why, the nostalgic scene of family and friends gathered round a fireplace, not a manger, where gifts are offered, not to Jesus, but to one another. Also AWOL are frankincense and myrrh, though a bag of gold to pay for all these gifts would be nice. The sole angel in residence is the one perched atop an evergreen tree elegantly mounted in the living room. Crown it all with the presence of small children singing carols (or nostalgic remembrances thereof) and behold how thoroughly we have morphed Mary’s *Magnificat* into a hymn to domestic *gemütlichkeit* (cosiness).

There are a number of historical trends that have formed our now indigenously Westernized Christmas scenario. Karl Barth identified nineteenth-century father of German liberal theology, Friedrich

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5. A glorious exception is Robinson, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever.*
Schleiermacher, as a passionate admirer and advocate of the family domestic Christmas. Schleiermacher endorsed the domestic family mood around the tree as the best way into the birth narrative! He paid special tribute to the piety of his little daughter, Sophie, whose innocent singing of hymns captured for him the essential serenity at the heart of Christmas. The story of Mary, he says, is the storycloth that swaddles the elevation of our humanity; the birth of Christ symbolizes the birth of our deepened awareness. But if indwelling describes the manner in which the reader receives the atmosphere intrinsic to the text, what shall we call this cozy blanketing of Luke with a nineteenth-century Prussian (and in England, Victorian) Christmas domesticity? For an accurate mood awareness, one would far better start with an artist contemporary to Schleiermacher, the Pre-Raphaelite, Dante Gabriel Rosetti, and his work, The Annunciation. Rosetti takes the risk of entering Mary's new upside down world and paints what he sees when he goes there: the intensity, the recoiling, indeed the terror of that moment. From out of this inner wrestling with the angel, Mary's response emerges.

REVERENT MISREADINGS: EMBALMING THE TEXT

Schleiermacher illustrates how often the church is better at embalming Mary's story than remembering it. Hence come the various make-up artists: the Enlightenment touchup, the popular music re-imaging, and the "family values" restoration themes all rise forth to restore meaning. By embalming I mean that when we bring an a priori notion of reverence for Mary or the text (probably both), we paradoxically cut ourselves off from the text's intrinsic emotion and so must instead rely on an emotional artifice transplanted from elsewhere. The church's advent mood becomes dependent on a prepackaged Christmas sentiment. Lest we tarnish the halos painted onto the text, we airbrush away whatever interferes with this "all is calm" mood we are imposing, especially Mary's fear, confusion, and questioning of God. Though Mary's genuine anguish (not to mention Joseph's) is central to the plot, we silence them because our preferred way of reverencing Mary ignores her human dilemma. It is no surprise, then,

6. Quoted by Barth, "Schleiermacher's Celebration of Christmas," 154. For further reflections on Schleiermacher's interpretation, both its extraordinary appeal as well as critical questions, see Begbie, Resounding Truth, 141–8.
that when we begin to ask questions of applying the text to ourselves, we have already gone quite far in training ourselves to mute, fast forward, or *docetize* any angel debates of our own.

Devotional readers embalm the story in other ways. Sometimes we are so anxious to affirm the proper doctrine about this story that we obsess on defending the creed rather than receiving the meaning afresh. But when we read a text in order to protect it or convert other readers to its message, we disconnect ourselves from Mary’s felt response recorded therein, as well as the other recipients whose lives were forever changed by the events. Thus the *meaning* of the story mutates into crafting apologetics for the virgin birth, not receiving the story, including Mary’s fears and questions, not including the doubts and fears within the hearts of even the most orthodox of contemporary readers. However, a fresh immersion into Mary’s fear and questioning might awaken our own. This entails an emotional risk on our part.

What happens when we use the text as a litmus test to separate believers from nonbelievers? I suggest this only produces an inner competition between anxiety and serenity. Those who take the story as God-given are our people (serenity); the rest are against us, Mary, even God (anxiety). This gaining and losing of team members is the heavy price of reading defensively. But when I use the story to divide believers from doubters, I have missed the way the story actually unites us in a communion of astonished *listening*. The purpose of the story was never to set Mary against her fellow creatures, particularly all skeptical non-admirers, but rather to show how God came to be Emmanuel, God with (all of) us. As the story proceeds, Mary will find herself amidst all manner of sinful types—religious, nonreligious, and shades in between. My point is that polemical religious reading turns Mary’s unique divine/human encounter into a checklist for identifying who is in the kingdom and who is not. This reading makes no demands for bereavement or self-annihilation. It easily slips into a reading for a comforting victory over one’s theological opponents.

**RESPONSE AND RESPONSIBILITY**

The above is preliminary for examining how religious or pious reading can seriously avoid a more radical indwelling of the text. To offer a parable of such misreading, I call upon the long-running national public radio program created by Garrison Keillor, *The Prairie Home Companion,*
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and his regular feature of news from Lake Wobegon, a fictional but based-on-fact hometown, "Where all the women are strong, the men are good looking and all the children are above average." Listeners are aware that Wobegon is quite a churchy place, where an array of denominations and clergy helps people practice the art of responsible living. For our purposes, I focus on the Catholics, led (or commanded) by Father Emil. Do you recall the church's name? Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility. In the confession box, Father Emil can be heard to sternly mutter now and again, "Oh, you didn't? Shame on you!" We chuckle at such heavy handedness and pity his scolded flock, but how does one teach responsibility to an irresponsible culture? With Father Emil, at least you get boundaries. You know you ought to behave responsibly, for heaven's sake!

What can possibly be the connection between Mary's response to the angel and a church named "Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility"? What does this abstract noun "responsibility" have to do with the active verb "respond" as in the art of responding well to a text, or to an angel? Lewis and his friend Owen Barfield loved to excavate the history of words in order to recover meanings that the sands of time and cultural practice had worn away. Their example, plus the juxtaposition of twinned words inspired by Jane Austen (such as Pride and Prejudice and Sense and Sensibility) prompted me to explore the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) for possible clues about the relationship between response and responsibility. Might the history of word usage unearth a clue about religious misreadings, as evidenced by the descent from Mary's magnificent response to Father Emil's parish full of perpetual responsibility?

What I discovered was that response first came into English from Latin in the fourteenth century, where its first recorded use occurs in, of all places, church, and refers to the reply of the congregation to a verse of Scripture spoken or sung by the priest. It's that part of the liturgy said or sung by the people in response. Moving along a century, respond is used to refer to the one half pillar attached to a wall to support an arch. The pillar on the other wall across the sanctuary? That's a corresponding pillar. "To answer. To reciprocate. To act in reply to some influence. A response." Next question: when does the noun responsibility first appear in English? Not until 1643, over two hundred years later, when it refers to being accountable to another, and has acquired a moral overtone. Not until 1796, four

hundred years later, does it refer to doing one's duty or performing an obligation for which one is responsible. I was struck by the historical lag between response and responsibility and how late had come a stress on ethical obligation. However, once the moral admonishment was sounded, it soon dominated the scene. Throughout the Victorian era, responsibility came to be used with increasing frequency, urgently reminding readers of their personal moral duty.

What happened? Semantically speaking, meaning migrated from a sung dialogue and worship framework to a legal or moral frame of reference; from a glad response to God's initiative to warnings of reward and punishment. We have camped inside a small strip of meaning within an emphasis on personal, moral liability ever since. I suspect no publishers have on their book lists *The Joy of Responsibility.*

This glimpse into the history of word use offers evidence that the sparking gap between divine and human agency has become for moderns and post-moderns an ugly ditch, either a deterministic causation or a problematic legal obligation. The original pattern of enlivening gift and glad response that Mary felt in her deepest depths has vanished.

Now fast forward to perhaps the defining problem of the Reformation era. I have in mind the tortured struggle of Martin Luther and his search for a merciful God. So perpetually responsible, so anxious to please God, this first-born, monk-trained scholar was unable to respond to the gracious news to which Mary submitted. Luther, by contrast, steeled himself to bear responsibility for yet another round of confession, contrition, and restitution, as decreed by the church's penitential framework, which he had dutifully internalized. History records that Luther eventually found his way to a free response to grace, far too free for some contemporary critics. How did he come to exchange the onus of responsibility that perpetually condemned him for a joyful response to God's gracious welcome?

*Restoring the "Real Potency"

There is a connection between Luther's crisis and the childhood crisis of C. S. Lewis four centuries later. It hides within the question, "How did

10. In his analysis of early Protestant literature, Lewis reports how loyal Catholics such as Thomas More believed Luther made converts because "he spiced all the poison" with "libertee." Protestant teachings "were not too grim, but too glad to be true." Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, 34.
Lewis come to write the Narnian Chronicles?” Lewis’s answer casts a
flood of light on both his own and Luther’s crisis. He writes:

I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain
inhibition which had paralyzed much of my own religion in child­
hood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought
to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the
chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to
feel can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm. The whole
subject was associated with lowered voices; almost as if it were
something medical. But supposing that by casting all these things
into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and
Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time
appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those
watchful dragons? I thought one could.11

Better than any explanation of the church historians, Lewis lays
bare Luther’s distortion: the obligation to love God paradoxically cuts
off our capacity to respond to God’s love. Possibly some kind of protest
movement must occur in every Sunday school class, every stained glass
institution. If not, the children of the righteous will respond—not to
the gospel, but to elder brother exhortations about responsibility: “You
should believe. You ought to be thankful to God.” The pedagogues of
piety rarely notice they have turned the gospel upside down, making
should news out of good news.

Whenever church transposes the respond into an initiative, it freezes
the emotional response because one cannot feel gratitude at the same mo­
ment one is told one ought to be grateful. Why not? Because the “ought”
of responsibility centers me on myself, my response, and thus diverts at­
tention from the reality that evokes a free response. When I focus on how
I ought to respond, I have ceased attending to the angel's news. Herein
lies the perennial temptation that threatens all devotional reading of
Scripture. But Lewis, the master reader, slips us past the should news and
re-connects us to good news. How? By engaging our imaginations, Lewis
has smuggled a generation of Narnian readers past the watchful dragons
of self-centered devotional reading.

Of course, recent best-selling fiction, heavy with religious overtones,
such as The Da Vinci Code and the Left Behind series, also engage our

imagingations. But this kind of imaginative “use” of the Christian story is like the Englishman searching for a cup of tea on a continental holiday. They have not done the a priori work of disengaging from other controlling narratives before listening to the gospel. Quite the contrary, they transplant other dominant themes from outside the text and rearrange New Testament events, persons, and church history to lend a verisimilitude to the gospel. Familiar names and syntax springboard readers into a far different story line, the former generated from Gnostic conspiracy theories, the latter from the end-times secrets discovered by nineteenth-century dispensationalist speculations. Trading on such resemblances, readers imagine they have discovered through these new authors (authorities) the real meaning (and exciting, hidden narrative) behind the official story of Christianity. The story that fascinates me is really about Dan Brown and I, or LaHaye/Jenkins and I, who have read between the lines with the correctly cryptic theological key, uncovering the secrets of history now unfolding before our very eyes. I am an initiate, one of the chosen, who now grasps the meaning behind the externals of traditional churches, governments, and even current Middle Eastern politics.

My point here is not to deny that there may be moral or spiritual insights one can acquire from novel renderings of the gospel. Lewis once wrote: “I suspect that men have sometimes derived more spiritual sustenance from myths they did not believe than from the religion they professed.” If one can feed on various myths and derive a measure of spiritual benefit, then a case can be made for some degree of spiritual nutrition in the Rapture novels of Jenkins/LaHaye or the Gnostic conspiracies of Dan Brown. But the rewards and the reading habits they engender are not the same as that granted the reader who indwells the original story. I am afraid the nourishment they provide is of the junk food variety, high on fats, low on nutrition. For many readers, such a diet may inoculate them from a response to the real gospel.

Having indicted both the liberal Dan Brown and the conservatives Jenkins/LaHaye with misreading the gospel reminds me they both swim in the same contemporary cultural stream, one that is highly sensitive to self and reader, including the reader’s constructions, locations, and responses, not to mention marketing niches. Readers (and authors) have never been

more aware of their own agendas. This raises the question I have borrowed from Lewis to begin this experiment: is it hopelessly naïve to attempt to read Mary's story on her terms, not ours? To answer emphatically that I hunger to read the text on its own terms is not to devalue my own questions, nor do I wish to suggest that I approach the gospel with a blank slate or without prior understandings (vorverstehen). Let us acknowledge it is an act of faith, to declare openly that it is possible to lay aside our own agendas and submit ourselves to Mary's story in a way that listens to the text's agenda, because we are not content simply to impose our own religious preferences or relentlessly demand novelty. This way of confessing my hope that such a recovery is possible reflects the old paradox at the heart of good reading, namely, "He that loseth his life shall save it."\(^{14}\)

Rather than trade on familiar words, names, and associations to create a new meaning, Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* offer a real alternative: he clothes the old gospel story in an unexpected garment (fairy tale or Märchen) in order to steal past our self-invasive reading habits. In other words (and here I borrow the language of my daughter, Marilee), Lewis costumes the gospel within a non-religious genre and thereby circumvents the pious readers' habit of turning the gospel into a story about ourselves, whether as self-condemning judgment (the early Luther), self-congratulatory religiosity (the Pharisee in every religious culture and century), or initiates with privileged access to a well-kept secret (the Gnostic impulse from Nag Hammadi to Dan Brown to Jenkins/La Haye).

**INDWELLING THE ANNUNCIATION TEXT**

The broad and much-traveled highways of misreading stand in contrast to the narrow path of indwelling the text. And though context transplants and imaginative intrusions are ever popular, they miss the point of entering into another place and way of life that we could encounter if we opened ourselves to the native country before us. Fortunately, we have a humble tool to keep us from wandering satisfied too long within our own interiority. The *feeling intellect* embodies the way of indwelling that constitutes the essence of good reading. Its way is to listen attentively and obediently to the text within its historical setting. It is *a process that involves a double movement* of emptying ourselves of other dominant narratives and paradigms, and then opening ourselves radically to fresh

investigation of the original context, including its religious, historical, social, and literary background. In, with, and under this fresh immersion into text and context, the feeling intellect awakens us to the ideas and emotions embedded within.

We began this chapter by reading Mary's story against the framework of surprising birth stories throughout Israel's long history. Let us end by engaging the political/cultural layer of first-century background. After all, the Annunciation is spoken from within the world of first-century Judaism, to a people humiliated and suppressed by Imperial Rome, conflicted by fierce religio/political rivalries, torn by competing responses to their occupation, and desperate for deliverance. Amidst this context of brutal occupation and fratricidal conflict, a young Jewish woman enters the scene and by her own quality of response, invites us to set aside all prearranged halos and imaginatively participate in her actual process of trust.

When the text says, as it does, that Mary "was deeply troubled by what the angel said and wondered what this greeting could mean" (Luke 1:29, emphasis added), and further, that she apparently needed the reassuring words, "Do not be afraid, Mary" (Luke 1:30, emphasis added), then we should awaken to something deeply troubling as she faces a string of impossibly difficult questions. Moreover, the whole mood is climaxed by an urgent plea, perhaps tinged with confusion and grief, for further clarification: "How can this be?" (Luke 1:34). How ironic that the very question skeptics of the birth narrative often ask dismissively and that the religious reader is tempted to devoutly (or docetically) skim past, Mary herself asked first and most passionately. As we are caught up in this awareness, we now begin to pass the Beowulf test of immersing ourselves in felt attunement to the story. Mary's words suggest both the grief of bereavement over a life arrangement now shattered and hope against hope rising to reassemble the broken.

**DIVINE PEDAGOGY**

Religious educators like myself are trained to think in terms of learning outcomes. If I ask, "Through all of this, what did God hope to teach Mary?" I could answer that God chose her to be the first witness to this good news and that God wanted her to respond well. If I suggest as a corollary that God was teaching Mary responsibility, it raises further questions about God's pedagogical strategy. Just how did God teach her responsibility? The
answer begins with a costly gift given. To receive it properly suggests a costly reception. That is, God first gives that which is profound and precious beyond explanation, which in turn evokes in Mary a correspondingly costly response. Luke’s text catches Mary in the process of bereavement over what can never be and in the movement toward hope over what may now come, beyond all human expectations.

The story hints that the cost to Mary will escalate. Just for starters, by receiving the gift, Mary will be regarded as an immoral woman, a sinner, perhaps forfeiting her life. (Immoral women were subject to execution by stoning in first-century Jewish culture.) If we wondered why Joseph takes Mary along to register (pay taxes) in Bethlehem, it is probable he’s not sure what might happen to her should he leave her behind. Beyond the routine courage of raising a peasant family, there will now be leveraged the pressing flight to Egypt and the insecure status of a refugee on foreign soil. This is only the beginning. Simeon’s dark blessing spoken over Mary frames Jesus and Mary’s journey within a stark prophecy: “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Luke 2:34–35).

When Mary says let it be, she agrees to be caught up in this enormously costly restoration. Readers who tune into Simeon’s dark prophecy understand why Lewis once described this atmosphere as “very militant; the hero, the ‘judge’ or champion or giant-killer, who was to fight and beat death, hell and the devils, had at last arrived . . .” Dorothy Sayers, one well acquainted with the feeling intellect as both reader and author, describes the gospel story as terrifying. It was J. R. R. Tolkien who coined the term eucatastrophe (good catastrophe) to depict the atmosphere of this tragic-yet-healing event of world history. He further notes (perhaps having his formerly atheist friend Lewis in mind) that many skeptical readers have come to accept it as true on its own terms. Yet for the past three hundred years the Enlightenment framework now native to Western culture has

15. I am indebted to the work of Kenneth Bailey, whose reconstructive explorations into the first-century world of the New Testament have been fittingly described by N. T. Wright as “eyes to the blind.” Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, 129. For the above reflections, see Bailey, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, 46.


made it far more complicated to read Mary's story with this felt awareness advocated by Lewis, Sayers, and Tolkien, much more than even reading *Beowulf* with the proper atmosphere of implicit terror.

As Luke's gospel proceeds, the atmosphere of danger mounts. Herod's jealousy launches an attack upon the village as a "nick of time" dream arouses Joseph to departure. Another dream, this time the Magi's, warns them to avoid Jerusalem and Herod and take a circuitous return home in order to buy the refugees precious time to escape. The emotion surrounding this narrative is nothing like Schleiermacher's Prussian family Christmas gathered 'round the decorated living room tree, pondering the innocent piety of children. More emotionally congruent is the hurried departure of Frodo Baggins in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*:

> For it seems to me that you have set out only just in time, if indeed you are in time. You must now make haste, and neither stay nor turn back; for the Shire is no longer any protection to you. 19

Echoing Luke's distant *evangelium*, Bilbo's birthday celebration vertiginously careens from joy to doom as black riders scour the Shire, seeking to destroy the Ringbearer before he threatens their power. Tolkien, of course, has confessed his belief that the writer of a good fairy tale effoliates the tale of the one great catastrophe (*eucatastrophe*), which has in the gospel incarnated itself in history, space, and time. 20 Echoes of a deadly but hope-filled birth frame the recent runaway best-selling Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling. Once again, a mood of *terror, grief, and hope against hope* is roused in us by the survival of infant Harry, even though the vicious attack of Lord Voldemort claims both his parents. This dark but hopeful launch sets the stage for the inevitable replay of Harry's initial encounter, yet offers hope that somehow Potter will be up to the task. Meanwhile, in the cold prose of human history and Luke's gospel, Mary, Joseph, and the child slip quietly out of Bethlehem to sojourn in Egypt, till Herod's time is up. 21

21. Once more a Pre-Raphaelite painter, this time Holman Hunt, has penetrated into the emotion embedded within the gospel narrative of the flight to Egypt. According to John Ruskin, Hunt's painting "Triumph of the Innocents" (1875) was the most significant religious painting of its time. Cf. Ruskin, v.33, 277.
Having read this far, I doubt the reader will expect that *indwelling* the text will spit out fast answers about applying this text for today's readers. Hopefully this chapter of prolegomena might rein in the habit of inattentive wandering off along the byways of importing meanings and moods that divert us from the ever-strange, ever-new text before us. So where have we got to thus far? While it is true that this story about Mary's response ought to arouse an echo in us when we read it today, it is even more true to see that Mary is far more than a good example who teaches post-modern readers the meaning of submission. This text claims to be *for us* the singular moment in history when the highly favored one and none other has been prophesied over. This unmarried young woman now throws her lot in as the handmaid of this project and kneels, turning herself toward this turning point in human history as through her, Israel's long story (with its history of unlikely birth stories, from Sara to Hannah to Rachel) finds fulfillment at last.

The ripple effect of this defining nativity propels further unexpected beginnings. Still to come is the unlikely birth of the church recorded by Luke in volume two of his narrative, where on Pentecost, despite every resistance, the Holy Spirit descends upon a fractured and fractious people. There at last they finally learn how to pray together as one body though having many members. The unlikely birth of the church sets in motion one more new beginning, which points toward both a final battle and a final birth. The closing chapters of the New Testament tell of the nativity of the new heaven and new earth, so utterly conclusive it inaugurates the moment when every tear shall be wiped from human eyes.

Of course, it's useless to speculate how much of all this Mary foresaw in the birth of the Christ child. But she sensed she was a partner in something definitive, in a most personal way and yet, as her sung response of *Magnificat* reveals, she was not unaware of the global implications for the whole human family:

> He has shown strength with his arm; He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever (Luke 1:51–55).
Some early editor no doubt lobbied to call this the astonishing news instead of the good news! Speaking as Western Christians at a time full of wars and rumors of protracted wars, in a culture where religion and the public life of nations has been both officially divorced since the Enlightenment and unequally yoked in malignant partnerships too many to name, we mustn’t ignore how Mary’s vision joins together God’s intention for her personal world with the public life of nations. This raises many questions about the mental and spiritual habits that keep these areas either neatly separate on the one hand or falsely wed together on the other. In hopes of remaining open to a response that reflects the global and personal sense of Mary’s own, let us close with a lone question of contemporary application: might God use this ancient story once again to “scatter the proud, lift up the lowly, fill the hungry with good things, and send the rich away empty”? Indwelling her response, there may come forth a new response in us that connects to the lowly and the hungry—for these are the people Mary carried in her heart as she pondered the gift given. Indwelling her response, we may come to hear and to speak a new warning to all who resist the gift she bears: the proud, the powerful, and the rich. My hope as a reader is this—that having indwelt the text and been changed as a result, I will turn toward the world with Magnificat lenses. Having taken a fresh look at the beginning of the gospel story, let us proceed to the climactic narrative.