



Mantic Mary? The Virgin Mother as Prophet in Luke 1.26-56 and the Early Church

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Abstract

Scholars have noted that Luke's portrait of Mary, particularly in Lk. 1.26-56, characterizes her as a prophet. Nevertheless, the evangelist refrains from explicitly calling Mary a prophet. A case for the Lukan prophetic characterization of Mary is made on literary, lexical and thematic grounds. The connection between prophecy and virginity is examined in Judaism, Greco-Roman antiquity and early Christianity. Finally, the explicit characterization of Mary as a prophet in the early Church Fathers is demonstrated, and a hypothesis is offered to explain both Luke's reluctance and the later patristic readiness to identify Mary in such terms.

Keywords

Luke 1.26-56, Mary mother of Jesus, prophecy, prophetess, virginity

The title of George Tavard's book, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*, is indicative of the multiplicity of images and roles that have been envisioned for the mother of Jesus.¹ Among them one could list the following: handmaid of the Lord, matriarch, ideal disciple, the mother of God, intercessor, mediatrix, second Eve, eternal feminine, Queen of heaven, virgin and prophet. The present article is concerned with the last of these images (prophet) and its connection with the penultimate image (virgin). The image of Mary as prophet has been suggested by several authors, often in popular literature, but also in more technical studies.² Needless to say, the image of Mary as a virgin has a long

1. Tavard 1996. See also Pelikan, Flusser and Lang 1986, Cunneen 1996, Pelikan 1996 and Duckworth 2004.
2. The prophetic image of Mary has been explored at a popular level by Duckworth 2004: 7-32, Dear 2003, O'Donnell 1991 and Johnson 2001. See also Laffey 1994: 51-59 and

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pedigree, stemming from the New Testament infancy narratives themselves (Mt. 1.22-25; Lk. 1.26-35).³ The aim of this article is fourfold: (1) to present more fully and in a more unified fashion the case for Luke's portrayal of Mary as a prophet, (2) to explore the connection between Mary's prophetic role and her virginity, (3) to sketch briefly the patristic portrayal of Mary as a prophet, and (4) to offer a hypothesis to explain the disparity between the third evangelist's portrayal and that of the early church.

I. Mary as a Prophet in Luke's Infancy Narrative

The strongest support for viewing Mary as a prophet is found in the Lukan infancy narrative, especially the three components of Lk. 1.26-56: the annunciation, the visit of Elizabeth and the Magnificat. The literary characteristics of this text, its similarities to Old Testament narratives, and the theological motifs of Mary's speech are all suggestive of prophetic activity.

I.a. Announcing a Birth/Commissioning a Prophet

The literary form of Mary's annunciation contains unmistakable parallels to annunciations found in the Hebrew Bible. Form-critical analyses of annunciation scenes vary somewhat from one interpreter to the next,⁴ but Raymond Brown's commentary on the infancy narratives provides the most detailed description. Brown identifies the following components: (1) the appearance of God or an angel, (2) fear or prostration at the epiphany, (3) the divine message, (4) an objection by the recipient of the annunciation, and (5) the giving of a sign. Brown expands the third part, the divine message, into eight subpoints: (a) an address, (b) a qualifying description, (c) a command not to fear, (d) announcement of the conception, (e) prediction of the birth, (f) the name of the child, (g) etymology of the name, and (h) a description of the child's future deeds (Brown 1993: 156).

This literary pattern is seen in the birth annunciations of Ishmael, Isaac and Samson. New Testament examples include the birth of John the Baptist in Luke's Gospel and the birth of Jesus in both Matthew and Luke. Needless to say, not all elements appear in all the accounts, since a literary form consists of a typical configuration of features, not a rigid pattern. An adaptation of Brown's analysis is displayed in Table 1.

The annunciation to Mary in the Gospel of Luke clearly fits the pattern. It is, in fact, the most complete example of the literary form among those displayed in Table 1. All the other stories lack three or more of the components. Hagar, for example, exhibits no fear, voices no real objection, and receives no reassuring sign. In the case of Samson, it is not clear that the objection calls into question the possibility of the conception, nor that the sign has any relationship to the objection.⁵

Gaventa 1995. For scholarly discussions of virginity, see Sissa 1990 and Foskett 2002, esp. 14-16 and 128-32.

3. The idea that Luke's account may imply but does not require a virginal conception has been proposed. See especially Schaberg 2006: 80-82. These proposals have been successfully refuted by Brown 1993: 299-301 and 635-39. See also Seim 1994a: 201.

4. See Alter 1983: 115-30 and Fuchs 1985: 117-36.

5. The annunciation-like stories concerning Hannah (1 Sam. 1.1-20) and the Shunamite woman (2 Kgs 4.8-17) are *not* displayed in Table 1. Both of these fit the pattern poorly since they do not

Scholars have observed similarities between the Lukan epiphany to Mary and other literary type-scenes. Xavier Léon-Dufour has demonstrated that annunciation stories bear a resemblance to certain Old Testament commissioning stories.⁶ He compares the commissions of Isaac, Moses, Gideon and Samson to the annunciations at the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. Many of the components from Brown's morphology appear in these stories, except, for obvious reasons, the items having to do specifically with the birth of a child.

Another literary form that can be compared with the annunciation type-scene is the prophetic call narrative. Indeed, prophetic call stories may be viewed as a subset of commissioning stories, the difference simply being the nature of the task to which the person is called. Despite the fact that Moses is regarded as a prophet, indeed, unsurpassed as a prophet (see Deut. 34.10), in Exod. 3.1-12 he is commissioned to be the deliverer of Israel, not a prophet *per se*.

David Aune provides a six-part morphology of the prophetic call narrative.⁷ The call stories pertaining to Isaiah (Isa. 6.1-13), Jeremiah (Jer. 1.4-10) and Ezekiel (Ezek. 1.1-3.11) illustrate the form. These prophetic call narratives and Léon-Dufour's commissioning stories are displayed in Table 2 together with Lk. 1.26-38 for the purpose of comparison.

The Lukan annunciation clearly fits both the hero-commissioning and the prophetic call story patterns. This is not surprising since all three literary forms involve divine/angelic epiphanies, which typically evoke a response of fear, followed by a heavenly communication, reluctance on the part of the hearer, and so on. The primary difference between these related forms is the content of the divine communication, whether predicting the birth of a child or the emergence of a prophetic servant of God. What is remarkable is that the text we know as the Lukan annunciation arguably fits the hero-commissioning and prophetic call patterns better or more fully than the traditional Old Testament models from which those patterns are derived! The Lukan annunciation is a more complete example of a commissioning story than either the commissioning of Moses or Gideon. The Lukan annunciation contains more of the elements of a prophetic call narrative than either Isaiah's or Ezekiel's call. Compared to Jeremiah's call, the commissioning words in the Lukan annunciation are more appropriately futuristic, and the sign is more objective and dramatic.

The point here is not to suggest that Lk. 1.26-38 has been wrongly identified as an annunciation story. Its form and content clearly commend this classification. Nevertheless, it is possible that Luke intended to evoke multiple images. While its primary purpose is to announce a birth, the Lukan annunciation may also intend to depict Mary as a bearer of prophetic revelation. Brown rightly calls it 'a birth annunciation with secondary features of a call narrative' (Brown 1993: 630 n.148).

involve divine appearances: Hannah converses with God's prophet Eli; the Shunamite woman interacts with Elisha. A third account, that of Rebekah in Gen. 25.19-25, is also atypical. When she seeks out the Lord, she is already pregnant, and her objection to the pain and struggle of the pregnancy are the reason for her inquiry. She receives neither a sign nor any reassurance, quite the opposite actually: Rebekah's sons are to fight both in and out of the womb.

6. Léon-Dufour 1965: 65-81, especially 77. See also Hubbard 1977: 103-102 and the summary in Brown 1993: 157 n. 70.
7. Aune 1983: 97-99. Aune's analysis is based on Habel 1965.

Table 1. Biblical annunciations of birth (Adapted from Brown 1993: 156)

	Ishmael Gen. 16	Isaac Gen. 17	Samson Judg. 13	Jesus Mt. 1	Baptist Lk. 1	Jesus Lk. 1
1. God or an angel appears	v. 7 The angel of the Lord found Hagar by a spring.	v. 1 The Lord appeared to Abram.	v. 3 The angel appeared to Manoah's wife.	v. 20 An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph.	v. 11 An angel of the Lord appears to Zechariah.	v. 28 Gabriel came to Mary.
2. Fear or prostration	v. 13 Have I seen God and lived?	v. 3 Abram fell on his face.	v. 22 We shall surely die for we have seen God.	—	v. 12 He was terrified and fear overwhelmed him.	v. 29 Mary was perplexed by his words.
3. Divine message	v. 8 Hagar	(v. 15 As for Sarai your wife)	—	v. 20 Joseph	v. 13 Zechariah	v. 30 Mary
(a) address	v. 8 Slave girl of Sarai	(v. 15 Sarah shall be her name.)	—	v. 20 Son of David	—	v. 28 Favored One, the Lord is with you!
(b) person is described	—	—	(v. 23 If the Lord had meant to kill us...)	v. 20 Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.	v. 13 Do not be afraid!	v. 30 Do not be afraid!
(c) 'Do not be afraid!'	—	—	v. 3 Though barren, you will conceive.	v. 20 The child conceived is from the Holy Spirit.	—	v. 31 You will conceive in your womb
(d) woman is with child	v. 11 Now you (Hagar) have conceived.	—	v. 4 You shall...bear a son.	v. 21 She will bear a son.	v. 13 Elizabeth will bear you a son.	v. 31 and bear a son.
(e) she will bear a male child	v. 11 You (Hagar) shall bear a son.	v. 19 Sarah shall bear you a son.	—	—	—	—

Table 1. (Continued)

	Ishmael Gen. 16	Isaac Gen. 17	Samson Judg. 13	Jesus Mt. 1	Baptist Lk. 1	Jesus Lk. 1
(f) name of the child	v. 11 You shall call him Ishmael.	v. 19 You shall name him Isaac.	—	v. 21 You are to name him Jesus.	v. 13 You will name him John.	v. 31 and you will name him Jesus.
(g) name's etymology	v. 11 The Lord has given heed to your affliction.	v. 17 He fell on his face and he laughed.	—	v. 21 For he will save his people from their sins.	—	—
(h) future deeds of the child	v. 12 He shall live at odds with all his kin.	v. 19 I will establish my covenant with him.	v. 5 He shall deliver Israel from the Philistines.	v. 21 For he will save his people from their sins.	v. 15-17 He will turn people to the Lord, prepare the way, etc.	vv. 32, 33, 35 Great, Son of God, Throne of David, Holy, etc.
4. Person objects	—	v. 17 Can a child be born to a man who is 100 yrs old?	(v. 17 What is your name?)	—	v. 18 I am an old man; my wife is getting on in years.	v. 34 How can this be since I am a virgin?
5. A sign is given	—	—	(v. 20 Angel ascended in the flame.)	—	v. 20 You will be mute, not able to speak.	v. 36 Barren Elizabeth has conceived a son also.

Table 2. Commissioning and call narratives compared with the Lukan annunciation (based on Aune 1983: 97-99; Habel 1965; Léon-Dufour 1965)

	Moses (Exod. 3.1-12)	Gideon (Judg. 6.11-24)	Isaiah (Isa. 6.1-13)	Jeremiah (Jer. 1.4-10)	Ezekiel (Ezek. 1.1-3.11)	Mary (Lk. 1.26-38)
Divine encounter	v. 2 The angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire. v. 4 God called to him from the bush, 'Moses, Moses!'	v. 12 The angel of the Lord appeared to him. v. 12 mighty warrior	v. 1-2 A vision in the temple; smoke and seraphs; seeing the Lord of Hosts v. 6-8 A coal touches his mouth. The Lord says, 'Whom shall I send?' v. 9-10 'Go and say to this people...'	v. 4 The word of the Lord came to me... v. 5a 'Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you...' v. 5b 'I appointed you a prophet to the nations.'	1.1-28 The word of the Lord came to the priest Ezekiel. Vision of creatures, etc. 2.1-2 God said, 'Stand up on your feet, and I will speak to you.' 2.3-7 'I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels...'	v. 26-27 Gabriel was sent by God to a virgin named Mary. v. 28 'Greetings, Favored One! The Lord is with you.'
Introductory word						
Call or commission	v. 10 I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people Israel out of Egypt.	vv. 14, 16 Deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; you shall strike them down.				v. 31 'You'll conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.' v. 34 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'
Objection	v. 11 Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?	v. 15 How can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest; I'm the least in my family.	v. 11 'How long, O Lord?' (Not exactly an objection)	v. 6 'Lord, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.'	—	
God/angel reassures the person	v. 12 The Lord said, 'I will be with you.'	v. 16 The Lord said to him, 'But I will be with you.'	v. 11-13 'Until cities lie waste without inhabitant... (Not very reassuring)	vv. 7-8 'Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you.'	2.6 'Do not be afraid of them, and do not be afraid of their words...'	v. 35 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.'
A sign is given	v. 12 You will worship God on this mountain.	v. 21 Fire sprang up from the rocks and consumed the meat and the cakes.	—	vv. 9-10 The Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth. I give you...a written scroll.'	2.8-3:3 'Open your mouth and eat what I give you...a written scroll.'	v. 36 'Your relative Elizabeth in her old age has conceived a son also.'

1b. Lexical Considerations

There are also lexical clues in the Magnificat and its preceding narrative that suggest Mary is being characterized as a prophet, for example, Luke's designation of her as the Lord's slave. Slavery was the status quo in antiquity, and the institution provided both Jews and Christians with a metaphor of singular devotion and obligation to God.⁸ Various persons in early Christianity are called 'slaves of God', including prophets. In Rev. 10.7 προφήται and δούλοι stand in apposition, and in Rev. 11.18 the servants of God comprise the prophets, the saints and those who fear God's name. The Old Testament seems to treat the prophets as the Lord's slaves par excellence, the appositional construction being quite common: 2 Kgs 9.7; 17.13, 23; 21.10; 24.2; Ezra 9.11; Amos 3.7; Zech 1.6; Jer 7.25; 25.4; Ezek. 38.17; Dan. 9.6, 10. In addition, individual prophets are dubbed the slave of the Lord: Moses (2 Kgs 18.12; Dan. 9.11), Joshua (Josh. 24.29), and Jonah (Jon. 1.9 LXX). As mentioned earlier, Mary is twice called the δούλη of God/the Lord in Luke's infancy narrative (1.38, 48). While this expression is not necessarily a synonym for prophet, its application to Mary may evoke the prophets as the quintessential δούλοι of God in the Old Testament. This possibility is strengthened by the fact that Luke uses δούλη again in Acts 2.18 and directly links the term with prophecy. Given Mary's place in the New Testament narrative, Turid Karlsen Seim rightly refers to her as 'the very prototype of the Lord's servant' (Seim 1994a: 175).

The angel's words in the annunciation are also suggestive of prophetic endowment. In Lk. 1.30-33 Gabriel announces that Mary will conceive and bear a son. Mary's response is more a well-reasoned inquiry than a cowardly objection: 'How will this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel's response involves a Hebrew parallelism (1.35):

The Holy Spirit
the power of the Most High

will come upon you (ἐπελεύσεται ἐπὶ σέ), and
will overshadow you (ἐπισκιάσει σοί).

Commentators have often noted that the language is restrained and discreet.⁹ The evangelist clearly did not envision the divine enabling of Mary as involving a sexual or even overtly physical act. Elsewhere Luke uses the verb 'to come upon' in conjunction with the Holy Spirit's empowerment of the disciples for witness (Acts 1.8; cf. Isa. 32.15). In the second half of the parallelism 'overshadow' stands in the place of 'come upon'. The verb ἐπισκιάζω occurs in all three Synoptic accounts of the transfiguration (Mk 9.7; Mt.17.5; Lk. 9.34; cf. Exod. 40.35). Thus the key verbs, both compounds with ἐπι-, denote a transcendent, empowering presence descending on Mary from above. The primary result of this act in Lk. 1.35 is, of course, the conception of Jesus. But given Luke's use of these words elsewhere and the fact that Mary's empowerment results not only in the birth of Jesus, but even more immediately in the delivery of prophetic-like speech (Lk. 1.46-55), a secondary association of this verse could be the divine endowment typically given to a prophet. Indeed, Seim notes that 'It is generally accepted that the Spirit

8. Among the many studies, see Martin 1990, Byron 2003, Harrill 2006 and Glancy 2006.

9. Brown 1993: 290-91; Schürmann 1969: 52-53 n. 86.

in Luke is to be understood primarily as the prophetic Spirit... [T]hose who express themselves in the Spirit are to be understood prophetically, even if the terminology of prophecy is not used' (Seim 1994a: 179 n. 44).

1c. Literary Connections and the Content of the Magnificat

Even more persuasive than the lexical matters discussed above, the literary connections and the content of the Magnificat are unmistakably prophetic. Hannah's song in 1 Sam. 2.1-10 is widely recognized as the model for the Magnificat.¹⁰ Hannah's song not only redounds with the social and political agenda common to the prophets, but Hannah was explicitly identified as a prophet by Philo, an early contemporary of Luke. Likewise, the similarities between the Songs of Moses and Miriam (Exod. 15.1-21) and Mary's Magnificat are significant. The fact that Miriam, the first and most famous woman in the Hebrew Bible to be called a prophet, is also the namesake of Mary surely casts a hue on Luke's portrayal of the mother of Jesus.¹¹ Another, more proximate literary connection with the Magnificat is the Benedictus, coming just a dozen verses later (Lk. 1.67-79). When Zechariah utters the Benedictus, it is said that he 'prophesied' (ἐπροφήτευσεν, Lk. 1.67). If the Benedictus is prophecy, on what grounds would one deny this classification to the Magnificat, which is so similar in content, setting and function?

The prophetic themes of the Magnificat are so manifest as to require little more than listing: vindication of the weak, judgment directed against the arrogant, exaltation of the lowly, reversing the fortunes of the poor and rich, God's fidelity to the covenant, and so on.¹² These themes are both echoes of past divine acts as well as anticipations of the ministry of Jesus in the chapters to follow (cf. Lk. 4.16-19). Ben Witherington draws the evident conclusion: 'The Magnificat has become a song of promise, prophetic protest, and powerful deliverance by the Lord of the poor and oppressed... Mary is thus portrayed by Luke as a type of OT prophetess who proclaims OT hopes as the salvation of God breaks in; however, she differs from the OT prophetesses in that she herself helps bring in salvation.'¹³

The question arises, then, why Luke would portray Mary as a prophet and yet fail to call her one. Why does he infuse the annunciation with overtones of a prophetic call narrative, employ language that suggests prophetic endowment, and have Mary deliver a canticle redolent with prophetic motifs, but still decline to identify her explicitly as a προφήτις? The answer may have something to do with the fact that Mary *is* explicitly identified as a virgin.

10. See the analysis and parallels in Brown 1993: 357-65.

11. See Foskett 2005a: 63-74, esp. 64-65. For parallels between Mary and both prophetesses and prophets of the Old Testament, see Laffey 1994: 39-71, especially 51-59.

12. See Malone 1994: 73-105 and Civit 1986.

13. Witherington 1988: 137. If it is objected that Mary cannot be understood as a prophet since she is not portrayed in Luke-Acts as having a subsequent prophetic career, one should note that the pattern for female prophets in Israel was often ad hoc. See Ackerman 2002: 80.

2. Connections between Prophecy and Virginity

2a. Prophecy and Virginity in the Hebrew Bible and Judaism

There is little precedent in ancient Judaism for the collocation of prophecy and virginity. On the one hand, there is more than ample evidence that women exercised the prophetic office in ancient Israel and Second Temple Judaism. The Hebrew Bible names four prophetesses: Miriam, Deborah, Huldah and Noadiah.¹⁴ Miriam is the first woman in the Bible to bear the title of prophet (Exod. 15.20; cf. Philo, *Vit. Cont.* 87).¹⁵ Deborah, a prominent figure in the battle between Israel and the Canaanites recounted in Judg. 4–5, is identified as both a prophet and one who judged Israel (Judg. 4.4). Huldah prophesied during the reign of Josiah and predicted the fall of Jerusalem (2 Kgs 22.14-20; 2 Chron. 34.22-28; cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 10.59-62). Noadiah is mentioned among the prophets who discouraged Nehemiah from rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem (Neh. 6.14). The rabbinic tradition omits Noadiah but adds Sarah, Hannah, Abigail, and Esther, resulting in a heptad of prophetesses (*b. Meg.* 14a-b; Epstein 1938: 83). Hannah, the wife of Elkanah and mother of Samuel, is particularly important for our purposes, in part because of her description in later sources. As mentioned above, Philo identifies Hannah as both ‘a prophetess and the mother of a prophet’ (*Somn.* 1.254). The Targum of 1 Sam. 2.1 affirms that ‘Hannah prayed in a spirit of prophecy’, and thereafter uses the verb ‘prophesied’ several times to describe her utterances.¹⁶

On the other hand, the biblical tradition says little about the marital or sexual status of women who are explicitly called prophetesses. No mention is made of Miriam having a husband or children. That omission was apparently intolerable to Josephus, who supplied Miriam with Hur as a husband (Josephus, *Ant.* 3.54; cf. Exod. 17.10-12). Gregory of Nyssa made the opposite assumption, suggesting that Miriam was the Old Testament prototype for Mary and that she was unmarried, that is, a virgin, because she is always associated with her brother Aaron (*On Virginity* 19).¹⁷ Deborah’s marital status is uncertain. Although nearly all English translations refer to her as the ‘wife of Lappidoth’ (Judg. 4.4), it has been argued that ‘lappidoth’, which is simply the plural of the Hebrew word ‘torch’, could be a place name or a personal description rather than the name of Deborah’s husband. Deborah is also called ‘a mother in Israel’ (Judg. 5.7), which might be a literal description, but is more often taken symbolically to refer to her parent-like role in the administration of the people.¹⁸

An exception to the general disconnect between prophecy and virginity or sexual status is found in the mysterious figure who appears in Isa. 8.3: ‘And I approached the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son. And the Lord said to me, Call his name Maher-shalal-hash-baz’ (‘swiftly savaged and rapidly ravaged’; Gafney 2008: 104). The

14. The precise number varies depending on whether one includes anonymous prophetesses and women who are characterized as prophets but not given the explicit title. See Jarick 1994, Bronner 1991 and Gafney 2008.

15. On the name ‘Miriam’ and the mother of Jesus, see Good 2005.

16. Harrington and Saldarini 1987: 105. On the various treatments of Hannah, see Cook 1999.

17. Tribble 2000: 127-28. On Miriam generally, see Tribble 1989: 14-25, 34 and Burns 1987.

18. Meyers 2000: 331-32; Frymer-Kensky 2000: 66-67.

woman is presumably Isaiah's wife, since an act of procreation ensues, but we will see that patristic writers often gave this verse a Christological interpretation, finding in the words, 'she conceived and bore a son', an anticipation of the annunciation (Lk. 1.31).

Thus, although women exercised prophetic gifts in ancient Israel, and the biblical authors did not scruple to name them and describe their work, the explicit association of prophecy and virginity is absent. In the Hebrew Bible virginity had no essential relationship to prophetic aptitude, but the picture differs somewhat when we turn to Greco-Roman religion.

2b. Prophecy and Virginity in Greco-Roman Antiquity

There are numerous, intriguing links between prophecy and sexual continence in the classical and Hellenistic eras.¹⁹ The Mediterranean world was spotted with oracles, special sites at which the will of the gods could be divined. The most famous of these was the oracle of Apollo at Delphi. Among the personnel at the Delphic oracle, a woman known as the Pythia was especially important. The Pythia was originally a virgin, drawn from the populace of Delphi, probably neither well educated nor from an elite family.²⁰ It was her job to speak the words of the deity. She would purify herself, enter the temple, and mount a bronze tripod situated over a fissure in the earth. Under the influence of the deity and perhaps some sort of emanation from the fissure, the Pythia would deliver the oracular message.²¹ According to Plutarch, who himself had served as a priest at Delphi, the oracle had once employed two prophetesses, working in alternate shifts, with a third held in reserve. But in Plutarch's day, allegedly due to a declining population, one prophetess sufficed.²²

Diodorus Siculus, writing in the mid-first century BCE, notes that the original practice of employing a virgin as the Pythia had been discontinued prior to his day.²³ A certain Echecrates who had beheld the beauty of the virgin Pythia became enamored with her, carried her away, and violated her. As a result, the Delphians decreed that virgins would no longer be employed, but would be replaced by women of fifty years of age. The older women would be adorned with the accoutrements of a virgin, however, as a reminder of the prophetess of old.²⁴

What, then, was the connection between the virginity of the Pythia and her prophetic role? Again, Diodorus provides some insight:

But it is said that long ago virgins prophesied because of the uncorrupted state of their nature (τὸ τῆς φύσεως ἀδιάφθορον) and their affinity with Artemis (τὸ τῆς Ἀρτέμιδος ὁμογενές); for these were well suited to guard the ineffable secrets of those who deliver oracles (16.26.6).²⁵

19. See Foskett 2002: 36-44, whose helpful treatment parallels this section of our article.

20. Bowden 2005: 16; see also 25. On the Pythia's virginity, see Sissa 1990: esp. 33-40. Lucian gives an astrological explanation of a virginal Pythia (*Astr.* 21).

21. Diodorus Siculus 16.26; Plutarch, *Def. orac.* 437C-D; Strabo, *Geogr.* 9.3.5.

22. Plutarch, *Def. orac.* 414B.

23. Diodorus Siculus 16.26.6.

24. A similar violation of a virgin priestess of Artemis Hymnia led to her replacement with 'a priestess who had finished association with men', namely, an older woman, or symbolic virgin (Pausanias VIII.5.12).

25. Diodorus Siculus 16.26.6. Artemis was the virgin goddess associated with fertility, childbirth, animals and hunting. She presided over various life transitions, especially the transition of the

The connection between virginity and prophecy, at least according to the tradition related by Diodorus, is a sort of ritual purity that was thought to enhance communion with the gods.

A second instance of virginity, or at least quasi-virginity, in the context of prophetic activity is the Sibyl, a pagan prophetess of antiquity (Parke 1989). Originally the Sibyl seems to have been the name of an individual. A fragment from Heraclitus (c. 500 BCE) preserved by Plutarch says, 'But Sibyl, with a raving mouth, uttering words without laughter and without adornment and without perfume, reaches through a thousand years with her voice for the sake of the deity'.²⁶ By the fourth century, however, there were multiple claims for the birthplace of Sibyl, and the name evolved into a generic term for a woman who utters ecstatic prophecies. Eventually there were catalogues of Sibyls, such as that of Varro in the first century BCE, who lists ten Sibyls in such diverse places as Persia, Libya, Delphi, Italy and Phrygia. Two collections of Sibylline oracles are extant, and their contents combine pagan, Jewish and Christian materials.²⁷

But was the Sibyl regarded as a virgin prophetess? In fact, she was generally depicted as an aged woman.²⁸ The poet Ovid relates a story that Sibyl was granted endless life by Apollo, but because she failed to ask for perpetual youth, she endured life as an elderly, feeble woman.²⁹ But as an aged woman, she is a functional virgin. Moreover, she is referred to as a 'virgin' (παρθένος) by some ancient sources.³⁰ The most significant of these occurs in a collection of marvels attributed to Aristotle which says, 'In Cumae in Italy there is a display of a certain underground chamber, apparently of Sibyl, the speaker of oracles, who they say remained a virgin despite having aged exceedingly'.³¹

In these two instances—the Pythia and the Sibyls—there seems to be a connection between prophetic activity and the state of virginity.³² What exactly was that connection? A.D. Nock observed that 'The ancients believed that numerous sacred functions could only be performed properly by one who was qualified for them by perfect continence' (Nock 1972: 9). Thus many cults required persons serving as priests, prophets and ministers to be eunuchs, virgins, prepubescent children or married persons who practiced

young maiden (παρθένος) to an adult woman (γυνή). Although statuary of Artemis sometimes portrays her with multiple protuberances (breasts? eggs?) on her upper body, she is not associated with promiscuity. For a period of time in Ephesus the cult of Artemis was tended by a virgin priestess assisted by a college of virgins. See Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 1.21-22, Euripides, *Ion* 466 and Ferguson 2003: 154, 175, 198-99.

26. Plutarch, *Pyth. orac.* 397A. See Aune 1983: 36-38.

27. For an English translation and introduction, see Collins 1983.

28. Note that the seer in the Shepherd of Hermas assumes that an elderly woman in his vision is the Sibyl. See Hermas, *Vis.* 8 (II.4).

29. Ovid, *Metam.* 14.101-53.

30. Lycophron, *Alexandra* 1279; Pausanias, *Descr.* 10.12.6.

31. [Pseudo] Aristotle, *Mir. ausc.* 95. On the Pythia and the Sibyl, see Streete 1999: esp. 338-39.

32. One might also think of the vestal virgins, the only female priesthood in Rome, who were required to maintain sexual purity during their time of cultic service. Their job, however, was to preserve the sacred flame of Vesta; they did not serve as spokespersons for the deity. For other examples of sexual continence and cultic service, see Nock 1972: esp. 10, Kearns 1996 and Spicq 1994: III, 44-47. Herodotus (1.182) mentions Babylonian and Egyptian temple priestesses who are forbidden to engage in intercourse.

abstinence during their time of service (cf. 1 Cor. 7.5). Of these various groups, virgins in particular were revered. 'The virgin priestess, who by continual continence remained able to render fit service, was honoured in antiquity and is honoured in countless places' (Nock 1972: 14). Virginity is often associated with purity in Greco-Roman texts. The closer communion one had with the deity, the greater the need for sexual purity, and nothing could guarantee purity quite as effectively as virginity.³³

In the case of women in cultic service, whether girls or adult virgins, the prophetic function may have been enhanced by the possession of an open, untainted womb. An oracular speaker was thought to be inspired or possessed by the deity, and in the case of virgin prophetesses portrayals of ecstatic possession sometimes contain sexual overtones. Dale Martin observes that 'one can hardly read accounts of the physiology of prophecy, especially descriptions of prophecy enacted by a male god on a female seer, without detecting the sexual connotations of the language... [P]rophecy was thought of as the penetration of the body of the priestess by the god or some other, perhaps inanimate, invading force' (Martin 1995: 239, 241).

In Virgil's *Aeneid* the protagonist sails to Cumae and appeals to the Sibyl in behalf of the Trojans. When the prophetess comes under the power of the deity, her countenance changes, her hair flies about, her breast heaves, and her untamed heart swells with ecstasy (*Aen.* 6.45-51). After Aeneas makes his request, the prophetess is described as 'not yet submitting to Phoebus (Apollo), if perhaps she might shake the powerful deity from her breast. But all the more he exhausts her raving mouth, overpowering her wild heart; and he manages her by pressing upon her' (*Aen.* 6.77-80). This is mantic possession with overtones of a sexual conquest (Kleinknecht 1968: 345-52, esp. 345-46).

Even more graphic is Lucan's description of the Delphian prophetess Phemonoe, who was coerced into prophesying by Appius Claudius. When she finally entered the cavern, she was overpowered by the god Apollo, who possessed her as fully as ever before and penetrated her body. The priestess rushed wildly about the cavern in a frenzy, her hair in disarray and her breast heaving. Eventually she utters a prophecy, and then Apollo closes up her throat and allows her to regain her composure after a period of time (Lucan, *Bellum Civile* 5.120-97).

The act of possession can thus be depicted as sexual penetration: the god invades the womb of the prophetess and speaks from within her.³⁴ This image is encapsulated in the ancient Greek word for ventriloquist: ἔγγαστρίμυθος (or its rare synonym, ἔγγαστρίμαντις). The etymology of the word is evident: 'speech in the belly/womb' (or 'diviner in the belly/womb'). Rarely did the word refer to entertainers who 'threw their voice'. More often it denoted a diviner, especially a woman who delivered oracles by means of a deity who had entered and possessed her. In Jewish authors in particular, ἔγγαστρίμυθος frequently had a negative connotation.³⁵ Since possession by the

33. See Foskett 2005b: especially 71; Foskett 2005a: especially 70.

34. See Sissa 1990: 36-40; Martin 1995: 240.

35. In a lexical work explaining expressions used by Hippocrates, Galen, the second-century CE physician, defines the term as 'those who speak with the mouth closed, because they seem to speak from the belly'. See Kühn 1965: XIX, 94. In the more common sense of 'diviner', see Philo, *Somm.* 1.220; Josephus, *Ant.* 6.327-330; Lev. 20.27; 1 Sam. 28.3-9. On the latter text in particular, see the helpful treatment by Greer and Mitchell 2007: especially xi-xviii.

deity was sometimes depicted in sexual terms, how would this affect early Christian writers, particularly Luke, when they portray the virgin Mary?

2c. Prophecy and Virginité in Early Christianity

In early Christianity prophecy was understood as a charism given by the Holy Spirit rather than a function determined by an institution. In principle, then, anyone might receive this gift, regardless of social class, gender or even literacy. 'So it is not at all surprising to find that one of the major religious experiences of early Christian women was that of ecstatic prophecy.'³⁶ Indeed, 'prophecy provided perhaps the most prominent mode in which women exercised leadership, from the outset of the movements and continuing well into the second century'.³⁷ Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians gives evidence of women's exercise of prophetic gifts in public worship (see esp. 1 Cor. 11.2-16), and it seems likely that Paul recognized the fundamental right of the Corinthian women to do so.³⁸

Luke-Acts also bears witness to thriving prophetic activity in early Christianity. Zechariah's song, the Benedictus, is characterized as prophecy, and his soon to be born son, John the Baptist, is designated a prophet (Lk. 1.67, 76; cf. 7.26; 20.6). Jesus implicitly describes himself as a prophet and is regarded as such by others (Lk. 4.24; 7.16; 13.33; 24.19). Several prophets in the early Christian communities are mentioned by name: Agabus, Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen, Saul, Judas and Silas (Acts 11.27-28; 13.1; 15.32).³⁹

In Luke-Acts the names of women prophets or generic references to them are regrettably scarce. The only named prophetess is Anna (Lk. 2.36). It is significant that the only named female prophet in the entire Lukan corpus occurs in the infancy narrative. The identity of Anna as an elderly widow may also be relevant to the connection between prophecy and virginité. She is called a prophetess who 'had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage', literally, seven years 'from her virginité'. Then she was a widow until the age of 84. Although virginité in the physiological sense cannot be regained, Anna could have been viewed as a functional virgin after many years of sexual abstinence. As Giulia Sissa has argued, 'The body of a woman who no longer makes love is threatened by the same forms of uterine suffocation as the body of a woman who has never made love'.⁴⁰ Thus Anna, the chaste widow, may approximate virginal status through the closure of her womb and the practice of sexual continence.

In Acts 21.9 Luke mentions that the evangelist Philip had 'four unmarried daughters who engaged in prophecy' (θυγατέρες τέσσαρες παρθένοι προφητεύουσαι). The use of a present participle suggests ongoing, characteristic activity rather than a single event, but whether Luke has in mind a function or an office is unclear.⁴¹ This *explicit* association of prophecy and virgins is unique in the New Testament (if we exclude for the moment

36. Kraemer 1992: 145. For thorough documentation of women prophets in early Christianity, see Eisen 2000: 63-87, esp. 78-79 n. 45.

37. Rossing 2005: 262.

38. On the topic in general, see Kraemer 1992: 128-56 and Wire 1990.

39. On early Christian prophecy in general, see Aune 1983 and Forbes 1995.

40. Sissa 1990: 122. See also Foskett 2002: 40.

41. Witherington 1998: 633. See also Corssen 1901.

the functional virginity of the prophetess Anna in Lk. 2.36). Scholars have pondered the possible relationship between the two ideas. Ceslas Spicq writes that, 'there is a certain connection between virginity and prophecy', although he fails to identify what that connection is (Spicq 1994: III, 50). Eugene Jacquier opines that 'As virgins, they were better suited to carry out their function as prophetesses', but he does not specify how that is so (Jacquier 1926: 627). Gerhard Dellling is more circumspect on the matter: 'Against the background, though with no New Testament attestation, it is possible that the author thought celibacy might be helpful in the prophetic ministry'.⁴² We hear nothing more about Philip's daughters in the New Testament (Eisen 2000: 69).

Apart from the descriptions of Anna and the daughters of Philip, the most significant statement about women and prophecy in Luke–Acts occurs in the context of Peter's speech at Pentecost (Acts 2.14–36; Seim 1994a: 164–68). The quotation of Joel 2.28–32 in Acts 2.17–18 is remarkably inclusive with regard to gender, age and social status. Both sons and daughters will prophesy; both young and old will receive revelations; both male and female slaves will receive the Spirit. The most important aspects of this text for our purposes are (1) the twofold mention of women as recipients of the Spirit and prophetic revelation ('daughters' and 'female slaves'), and (2) the possible echo between 'female slave' in Acts 2.18 and the double reference to Mary with the same word in Lk. 1.38, 48. These three verses contain the only uses of *δούλη* in the entire New Testament. Mary, as a prophesying servant of the Lord, can be seen as proleptically fulfilling the prophecy of Joel cited in Acts 2.18. The motif of virginity, however, is absent from Acts 2.

So what can be said in summary about a possible connection between virginity and prophecy in the New Testament? There is no explicit *causal* linkage in any New Testament author. Prophecy and sexual continence (and/or unmarried status) are *correlated* phenomena in the case of Philip's daughters (Acts 21.9), but no logical connection is asserted. Paul suggests that remaining sexually abstinent or unmarried enables one to pray more earnestly and have unhindered devotion to God (1 Cor. 7.5, 32–34), but the rationale is more practical than theological; moreover, this discussion does not touch on the matter of prophecy. Sexual activity was not regarded as inherently defiling by any New Testament author, except when virginity is used metaphorically to denote abstention from idolatrous liaisons (2 Cor. 11.2; Rev. 14.4; cf. *4 Macc.* 18.8). The New Testament thus stands in tension with certain strands of thought in the Hellenistic world. In the patristic era, with the emergence of asceticism, virginity was sometimes associated with enhanced receptivity to the divine, but traces of this nexus in the New Testament are meager at best.⁴³ We now turn to the patristic era to observe a remarkable difference in the prophetic portrayal of Mary.

42. Dellling 1967: V, 834. With reference to the prophetess Anna, Raymond Brown reservedly expresses a similar notion: 'We may speculate whether in Luke's view the celibate status had something to do with the ability to prophesy' (Brown 1993: 467 n. 68).

43. Seim asserts that 'Women's gift of prophecy is presented by Luke most often as a charismatic privilege of virginity: the women prophets are often either widows or virgins'. While it is quite correct to note a correlation, 'privilege' suggests an integrally related right stemming from virginity. This is at best implicit in Luke. See Seim 1994b: 756.

3. Mary as Virgin Prophet in the Early Church

If the third evangelist hesitated to call Mary a prophetess, the church fathers had no such reluctance. Repeatedly they identify Mary as a prophetess, sometimes in the context of an interpretation of Isa. 7.14 or 8.3, sometimes in expositions of the Lukan infancy narrative.⁴⁴

In Eusebius's writings this identification is made several times. In his *Commentary on Isaiah* (1.48) he argues that Mary is the prophetess of Isa. 8.3 because the Holy Spirit comes to her in Lk. 1.35. It is, in fact, the Holy Spirit speaking in Isa. 8.3 when it is said, 'I went to the prophetess'. Similarly, in his *Demonstration of the Gospel* (7.1.135) Eusebius notes that Isa. 9.1-7 is the third prophecy in Isaiah about the Christ child. The first was the reference to Immanuel, born of a virgin (Isa. 7.14). The second was the child of the prophetess and the Holy Spirit (Isa. 8.3). The third is the reference to a child whose name will be 'the Messenger of Great Counsel' (Isa. 9.6 LXX). Finally, in his *Eclogae Propheticae* or *Extracts from the Prophets*, Eusebius again connects Isa. 8.3 with Lk. 1.35 and concludes, 'It was said to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." Therefore even she would not unreasonably be called a prophetess.'⁴⁵

Theodoret, fifth-century bishop of Cyrrhus, also sees Isa. 8.1-3 as a prophecy of the birth of Christ. He glosses the phrase 'I went to the prophetess' with the words, 'that is, to the virgin', thus not only giving a Christological interpretation to Isaiah, but also identifying the virgin Mary as a prophetess.⁴⁶

In a commentary on Isaiah attributed to Basil of Caesarea (fourth century) Mary is identified as the prophetess of Isa. 8.3. The commentator explains: 'This means, "I drew near to the Prophetess in the Spirit and in the foreknowledge of things that would come about... And I saw her conception from afar."' Several lines later the writer asserts, 'That Mary is the Prophetess...no one will deny, if one remembers her words, which she uttered prophetically, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, because he has looked upon the lowly estate of his handmaid. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed."' In this way Mary's prophetic status is confirmed by the first few lines of the Magnificat (Lk. 1.46-48).⁴⁷

The tractate 'On the Trinity', attributed (perhaps falsely) to Didymus of Alexandria, a fourth-century theologian, speaks of some of the prophetesses that are known to Scripture: the four daughters of Philip, Deborah, Miriam the sister of Aaron, and Mary the θεοτόκος, because she said, as the Gospel has recorded, 'From now on all women and all generations

44. On the general topic of Mary in the Fathers, see Gambero 1999 and Cunneen 1996: esp. 59-140. On the specific topic of Mary as prophetess in the Fathers, see Grillmeier 1956 and Scheffczyk 1988-1994.

45. Gaisford 1842: 180. For an English translation of *Dem. ev.* 7.1.135, see Ferrar 1920: 73. See also the comments in Grillmeier 1956: 302-303.

46. Theodoret, *Explanatio in Canticum Canticorum* (PG 81.192). See also his *Commentaria in Isaiam* (PG 4.361).

47. Trevisan 1939: 233-35; ch. 8, §209, lines 1-27.

will call me blessed'. The addition of 'all women' is curious, but the argument clearly establishes Mary's prophetic status by an appeal to Lk. 1.48.⁴⁸

Epiphanius, fourth-century Bishop of Salamis, also interprets Isa. 8.3 as a reference to Mary and refutes in some detail the suggestion that the prophet was referring to the wife of Ahaz. Mary is the prophetess, he argues, for she predicted that all generations would call her blessed. The Spirit who had spoken through Isaiah was the same Spirit by whom Mary was enabled to conceive and bear Jesus.⁴⁹ In a short writing entitled 'Concerning the 72 Prophets and Prophetesses', attributed to Epiphanius, the names of ten prophetesses are included: Sarah, Rebekah, Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Hannah, Judith, Elizabeth, Anna and Mary the θεοτόκος (Schermann 1907: 3). Whether the attribution of authorship is accurate or not, the list indicates that by about the fourth or fifth century Mary had joined the official roll call of biblical prophetesses.

Cyril, fifth-century Patriarch of Alexandria, reaches a similar exegetical conclusion concerning Isa. 8.3. He notes that Isaiah calls 'the holy Virgin a Prophetess, for she prophesied while she was pregnant with the Christ'.⁵⁰ In perhaps the early sixth century Severus of Antioch appeals to the same text: '[T]he Mother of God, after she had conceived and begun to serve the mystery of the economy, was also full of the Holy Spirit and knew what was going to happen in advance. Indeed, she was a prophetess, as Isaiah says: "And I was approached by a prophetess" (Is 8.3)' (Gambero 1999: 318).

An anonymous sixth-century dialogue with the Jews explicitly calls Mary a prophetess and justifies this on two grounds. The first is the familiar argument that in the Magnificat Mary foresees her own blessedness. The second is that she also anticipates 'the fall of Israel according to the flesh' and 'the prophesied invitation of the Gentiles' (Lk. 1.52-53). Whether or not the author has properly or felicitously construed the Lukan text, the attribution of the prophetic role to Mary is clear.⁵¹

The patristic testimony, of which the above is only a sampling, is summed up well in the statement of Ambrose: 'We have not easily found anyone to have prophesied more fully than the mother of the Lord'.⁵² Significantly, all these patristic voices are post-Nicene and therefore rather distant from Luke. In this later era, Christian testimony contrasts sharply with the reluctance of the third evangelist to use the designation 'prophet' for Mary.

48. *De trinitate*, book 3; PG 39.988, lines 42-47. See also the possibly spurious 'Dialogue of a Montanist and an Orthodox' in Ficker 1905: esp. 456, lines 24-34. For English translations of both texts, see Heine 1989: 125, 145.

49. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 31.9. For the Greek text, see Holl 1915-1933. For an English translation, see Williams 1987: 147-48.

50. *Paschal Homilies*, PG 77.780, lines 24-26. See also Cyril's *Commentary on Isaiah*, PG 70.221, lines 14-17, and the comments in Grillmeier 1956: 303-304.

51. Declerck 1994: commentary on cxxxii; text on 52, caput VI, lines 45-67.

52. 'Nec facile ullam prophetasse uberius quam matrem domini repperimus' (Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke II.35). See Adriaen 1957: 47.

4. A Concluding Hypothesis

In the strictest sense, Luke never conjoins the words ‘virgin’ and ‘prophetess’. Anna is explicitly the latter but only symbolically the former. Mary is explicitly the former but only implicitly the latter. Luke conjoins the ideas, if not quite the titles, when he describes Philip’s four virgin daughters as ‘exercising the gift of prophecy’ (Acts 21.9). Karen Jo Torjesen articulates the discrepancy: ‘Mary herself prophesied, and her oracle, the Magnificat (Luke 1.47-55), is perhaps the most loved and recited prophecy delivered by a woman prophet. Mary’s words...resound across the centuries as authoritatively as the oracles of Isaiah, Amos, or Ezekiel, *yet Luke does not call her a prophet*’ (Torjesen 1993: 26; my emphasis).

Why the apparent reluctance on the part of the evangelist to designate Mary as such, when his characterization so strongly suggests it? It is not likely that the reason was a general reluctance to attribute the title of prophet to women in early Christianity. Both Luke and Paul provide evidence to the contrary. Beverly Gaventa suggests that ‘Luke may refrain from identifying Mary’s speech as prophetic since she will appear among those who experience the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost (see Acts 1.14; 2.1-4); that is, while Mary functions prophetically in the Magnificat, Luke reserves the reference to the Spirit for its decisive appearance at Pentecost’ (Gaventa 1995: 58). While this might be a factor in Luke’s failure to use the specific words ‘prophetess’ or ‘prophecy’ in regard to Mary, the evangelist has no hesitation about referring to the Holy Spirit prior to Pentecost. Indeed, John the Baptist, Mary, Elizabeth, Zechariah and Simeon are all recipients of the Spirit (Lk. 1.15, 35, 41, 67; 2.25-27).

Mary Rose D’Angelo has observed that ‘Mary and Elizabeth both are given long and powerful prophetic utterances, but they are not explicitly said to prophesy’ (D’Angelo 1999: 186). D’Angelo explains that one of the guiding principles in Luke’s deployment of gender is ‘the desire to tame and limit prophecy’. Ancient prejudice associated oriental religion in general and Judaism in particular with magical practices, especially among female adherents. Hence, D’Angelo argues, Luke presents a delimited portrait of early Christian prophecy (D’Angelo 1999: 188). If, in fact, Luke was so motivated, his aim was poorly executed, given the prominence of prophecy in Luke–Acts. But D’Angelo’s mention of women and magic suggests a more fruitful avenue of inquiry. Could the association of women, especially virgins, with magical and mantic phenomena explain Luke’s hesitance explicitly to conjoin the two?

Our hypothesis is that Luke was sensitive to the pagan overtones of associating prophecy and virginity. Specifically, two related concerns may underlie the avoidance of the terms *προφήτις* and *προφητεύω* with respect to Mary. First, explicitly designating Mary as both virgin and prophetess might imply that a sexual act was involved in her being endowed with the Holy Spirit. As seen above, ancient descriptions of the prophetic inspiration of women often had sexual overtones. This was a very real liability with Mary given that her reception of the Spirit is directly related to her conception of a divine child! Secondly, the explicit convergence of virginity and prophecy might imply a causal, or at least facilitating, connection between the two, that is, that Mary’s virginal condition enhanced her receptivity to the divine. Although this idea was popular in antiquity, it is not clear that Luke subscribed to it.

We know from Acts 16.16 that Luke is familiar with the tradition of the Pythian spirit of divination. In that passage he does not use *παρθένος* or *δούλη* (the girl is a *παιδίσκη*); neither does he use *προφητεύειν* (the girl engages in *μαντεύεσθαι*). Luke keeps a clear distinction by his vocabulary. He does not want the slave girl of Philippi to be mistaken for a true prophet, nor to evoke even a faint linguistic echo of the virgin Mary. Luke obviously does not cast Mary as a practitioner of divination, and even the avoidance of the term *παιδίσκη* for Mary is probably deliberate. For Luke the latter term denotes one's socio-economic role. One is not a *παιδίσκη τοῦ κυρίου* in Luke; the terms *δούλος/δούλη* are used for that. The young woman in Acts 16.16 is *possessed* by the Pythian spirit, as the subsequent exorcism makes clear (16.18). Mary's endowment with the Holy Spirit is quite different; she fully retains her rationality and volition. Hers is not mantic possession but a voluntary reception of the Spirit (Vande Kappelle 1984: especially 91-92).

For Luke, Mary is a virgin (explicitly) and a prophet (implicitly), but she does not seem to be a virgin *because* she is a prophet, nor vice versa. Her virginal status creates the 'step parallelism' that exalts the miracle of Mary's conception over that of Elizabeth. But designating Mary as a prophet was not necessary, and it may have carried the liabilities mentioned above. Although Luke stops short of using the title, he does, nevertheless, thoroughly *characterize* Mary as a bearer of prophetic speech (Foskett 2002: 14). The later patristic authors, who were for the most part writing in a post-Constantinian world, lived in an era in which paganism was in decline and Christianity was gaining dominance. The Pythian oracle was obsolete, and the tradition of the Sibyls had largely been Christianized. The association of virginity and prophecy carried far less risk in fourth- to sixth-century Christendom than it did for a first-century evangelist and his Greco-Roman readers.

Mary was not a Pythia or a Sibyl. Luke asserts that she was, however, overshadowed and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be 'the servant of the Lord'. If it is the task of a prophet to speak and act in ways that further revelation and redemption, one might say... Mary delivers.

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