



## Augustus and Jesus – The Lucan Infancy Narrative in the Mirror of Roman Imperial Ideology

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The article considers the story of Jesus's birth, in the Gospel according to Luke, in the light of the propagandist rhetoric of early Roman hegemony, reading it as a conscious counter-stroke to the concepts of the Augustan Golden Age. This most familiar of biblical texts can only be deciphered in a way that transcends the simple Christmas idyll if one recognizes the keywords Luke uses to get his political message across, with its extraordinary claim.

This argument forms part of a joint project, currently being pursued with a Swiss colleague, which examines the historical background, along with the biblical and pagan roots, of the feasts of the liturgical year. Of particular importance is the interface between the New Testament texts and the world in which they arose. To what extent do they refer back to Jewish Old Testament tradition, or to the Greco-Roman world, and where do they diverge from and stand against these traditions? Only by setting the texts in the historical and religious context of the first century CE can their at times subtle message vis à vis the dominant ideologies and concepts of the time be detected.



Since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set it in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things; and since he, Caesar, by his appearance excelled even our anticipations, surpassing all previous benefactors and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings for the world that came on his account [... for all these reasons the proposal of the Proconsul to honor him is accepted and the following resolution passed ...].  
([www.masseiana.org/priene.htm](http://www.masseiana.org/priene.htm)).

The public proclamation in these lines of the “birthday of the god” as the “good tidings” (euangelion) of an age of peace and prosperity immediately evokes associations with the New Testament, especially with the narrative of the birth of Jesus (the so-called “Christmas story”) as told in the Gospel According to Luke (Lk 2,1-21). But the text printed above speaks not of Jesus of Nazareth but of Caesar Augustus. It stems from a Greek inscription found in the 19th century on two stones in the old town of Priene in Asia Minor (present-day western Turkey) and represents an excerpt from the official gazette of the Roman province of Asia proclaiming the introduction of the Julian calendar throughout the eastern provinces of the empire. The calendar set the beginning of the year to coincide with the autumn equinox – a globalizing measure which, among other things, standardized the entry into office of Roman administrators throughout the empire.

What is decisive here is that Augustus established his own birthday, September 23, as the beginning of the calendar year. This gave the basically administrative reform a politico-religious aura that is explicit in the preamble to the edict quoted above. This extols Augustus as a global player in the loftiest religious tones.

The inscription belongs in the context of the Pax Augusta, which ever since the highly symbolic opening of the Secular Games in 17 BCE – for which the poet Horace composed the official song – had been seen as the dawn of a new Golden Age (saeculum aureum, aurea aetas) identified with the name of the Emperor. It represented a new beginning after the tumult of civil war, a period of relative peace whose announcement to the people of the Roman Empire might well be called an euangelion – the word rendered in English as “good tidings” or “gospel” (good news). From the end of the first century BCE “euangelion” had been a common term of Roman political propaganda.

It can be no coincidence, therefore, that New Testament authors like Mark, Matthew or Luke, who had been socialized in the religious and political environment of the first century CE, should take up that term and reinterpret it for their own purposes. Their euangelion was not linked to the life of a Roman emperor; it was what the prologue to the Gospel According to Mark calls “the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mk 1,1). The designation υἱὸς θεοῦ (son of [a] god), however, has immediate associations with the title divi filius (son of a divine forebear) that Emperor Augustus claimed for himself.

That the evangelist Luke quoted a decree of the Roman emperor ordering a general ἀπογραφὴ (enrollment in taxation lists, see Lk 2,2), and thus chose to make an explicit connection between the reign of Augustus and the birth of Jesus, is a clear signal that the “Christmas story” should be read as a piece of political theology. The language of early imperial propaganda may in this sense serve as a useful key to the Lucan text, providing it with an impact that would otherwise be lost to the modern reader.

For Luke very skillfully constructs a counter-claim to the global euangelion of imperial ideology: a claim that is no less universal in outreach. On the one hand the emperor, son of the great Caesar, born in the imperial capital; on the other a carpenter's son, born in the provincial Jewish town of Bethlehem, in the remotest corner of the Roman Empire. On the one hand the *divi filius*, son of a divinized father; on the other the son of God, who treads the earth as man. On the one hand the great ruler whose decisions move the world; on the other a child whose birth will overthrow the world's established power structures: "he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree (Lk 1,52). Both men's birthdays are celebrated as an euangelion, and the actions of both are seen as the "fundament and beginning of peace" – on the one hand the *Pax Augusta*, on the other the messianic peace of Lk 2,14: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!" Augustus is glorified multi-medially by state heralds, official inscriptions, and regional celebrations; Jesus by angels from heaven and simple shepherds in the fields, of whom Luke writes that "when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them [by the angels] concerning this child" (Lk 2,17). On the one hand the commander in chief of the Roman army, on the other the "babe [...] in the manger" with the "heavenly host": "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God [...]" – a scene that may owe something to the practice of Roman triumphal processions, when the troops assembled early in the morning before the procession began to cheer the victorious leader.

With the utmost clarity Luke sets the savior Augustus, with his promise of a return of the Golden Age, over against the savior Jesus, who preaches the coming of the kingdom of God. By carefully connecting the birth of Jesus with an imperial tax assessment embracing "all the world" (πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην, Lk 2,1), the evangelist encourages his readers to set the two figures side by side. Doing so, he highlights the global political importance of Jesus' birth, which will also impact "all the world", as he will go on to relate in the Acts of the Apostles.

Other correspondences between the Lucan account of the beginnings of Jesus' rule and the topos of the Golden Age support this reading. Thus the shepherds, as the first recipients of the new gospel, are reminiscent of figures from Vergil's bucolic texts, especially the Fourth Eclogue, which in later Christian tradition was often considered a heathen prophecy of the coming of Jesus. Vergil's poems evoke a ▶paradisaal▶ world, and the recurrent figure of the boy possesses undeniable messianic features. Parallels range from a virgin birth to the advent of a divine child whose appearance is greeted by stars and who establishes an era of peace in which the earth bears fruit in abundance, cattle no longer fear the lion, and nature returns to a state of untroubled innocence. Vergil plays on the widespread oriental belief that a child will be sent from heaven to launch a new age of peace and happiness. When Augustus' rule seemed to fulfill this longing, it was received in many places, especially in the eastern parts of the empire, as a miracle of divine intervention.

The Augustan idyll of the Golden Age of nostalgic simplicity and archaic piety, although echoed in the pastoral motif of the shepherds (Lk 2,8–20), cannot simply be predicated of the Lucan story, for the peace of which the evangelist speaks has nothing to do with the pacification associated with Roman rule. This was a euphemism for suppression, whereas the peace Luke announced was for all "men with whom he [God] is pleased" (Lk 2,14). And it is God that legitimates and guarantees the new order. Luke expresses this in the topos of divine filiation: Jesus is "the Son of the Most High" (Lk 1,32), "the Son of [a] God" (Lk 1,35). That this is in accordance with the divine will is confirmed through the announcements of prophets, angels, and the Holy Spirit.

Further signs of divine filiation are the special gifts bestowed on the child. Such episodes, foreshadowing later deeds, are recounted of both Jesus and Augustus: the rhetoric of antiquity set great store on anchoring an historical person's rank and significance in their childhood. Luke, who saw himself as both an historian and a storyteller, was well aware of this. He shows Jesus' singular intellectual and religious talents at the early age of twelve in the episode when the boy debates with the teachers in the temple and "all who heard him were amazed at his understanding" (Lk 2,47). Augustus, too, demonstrated his precocity when – also aged twelve – he made his first public speech at the funeral of his grandmother (Suet., Aug. 8,1).

The images and topoi associated with divinely legitimated rule and the return of the Golden Age belonged to the cultural heritage of Luke's audience and would have conditioned their reception of his gospel, sensitizing them to the global significance of Jesus' birth. In the salvific plan of the God of Israel, Augustus and his provincial governor play only an instrumental role: it was because of the tax enrollment they set in train that the child was born in the theologically important city of Bethlehem.

In sum: Honored as *divi filius* for his wise political decisions and clever military strategies, Augustus, ruling from the center of the ancient world, the imperial city of Rome, inaugurates a new time system that includes a calendar reform. In Jesus, on the other hand, the Almighty God has appeared and become man – has become, in fact, a child. With Jesus, too, a new time system begins. But this child lives on the world's periphery, far from the center of power, and he will die on a Roman cross. Yet Luke's story in its entirety does not end there. Ironically enough, it ends with the good news spreading to the imperial center and conquering the world. For the sequel Luke wrote to his Gospel, the Acts of the Apostles, takes the story back to Rome, and ends there with the programmatic, future-oriented image of the Apostle Paul "preaching about the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered" (Acts 28,31)