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An exegetical study of the annunciation of Luke 1:26-38 through text and art

Kellie Costello

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Chapter V: Findings and Discussion

In the verses preceding the Annunciation pericope, the reader learns that Herod is king (Lk 1:5) and this provides an historical context for the angel Gabriel's appearance in Nazareth to a Jewish woman named Mary. In the chosen pericope the Lukan author gives no other details of when, where or how this event took place. This focuses the reader's attention on the event itself, on the two protagonists and what they say; thus, engaging the reader to contemplate the significance of the event.

When considering each of the artworks, it is important to remain cognizant of the fact that each portrays a specific moment in time of the Annunciation pericope. Prior to his announcement to Mary, the angel Gabriel was known for bearing good news to others in the Old Testament and his messages always pointed to the coming messiah.

The Rothschild Prayer Book *Annunciation* portrays Gabriel as he kneels before Mary who is being overshadowed by the Holy Spirit represented by a dove, and it presumes Mary's affirmative reply. The many symbols within the artwork are used to illustrate Mary's virginal state, and the consequences of Mary's "*fiat*" is represented by Mary being illustrated in the position of the tabernacle - the New Ark of the New Covenant. There is also an oblique allusion to Nazareth but no mention of Joseph.

Nicolás Falcó's altarpiece "*The Madonna Annunciate; The Angel Gabriel*" portrays the angel Gabriel halfway through his dialogue with Mary, whose expression could be interpreted as one of "pondering." The Holy Spirit, also portrayed in the form of a dove, is hovering between the two figures of Mary and Gabriel. Like the pericope itself, there is no detail of when or where this event occurred; however, the close association of Mary with the Eucharist that the Franciscans promoted, can be seen in the fact that the artwork is a panel of an altarpiece. There is no reference to Joseph in this artwork either.

The moment depicted in the artwork *Ante Lucem* by John Paul shows a Maori warrior-like angel Gabriel, whose arrival is dynamic and purposeful in contrast to the figure of Mary who is sitting in a chair, gazing out to the left of the viewer, beyond the frame.

There is no traditional artistic reference to the presence of the Holy Spirit, or any other characters relating to the pericope. At the time of this artwork's creation, the concept that the Annunciation was a theologoumenon was embraced and promoted by many prominent theologians, challenging the Church to move with the cultural trends. I believe that the artist also wanted to challenge the viewer's traditional understanding of the Annunciation and to consider it from the perspective of Mary and from the contemporary perspective of the viewer. Thus, the artist's unconventional composition evokes from the viewers questions like, "did this really happen?" or "how would I respond if an angel approached me?" or "did Mary really have a choice in being a part of God's plan?"

Alan Oldfield's central artwork of the *Triptych of the Annunciation* makes only a subtle reference to the Holy Spirit, through the use of a diagonal light beam. The presence of the branch in the lower left-hand corner could be a reference to the "shoot from the stump of Jesse" or the "tree of knowledge," or the "tree of life" in Genesis. The vase and lilies allude to Mary's virginity, and the setting is an indoor-outdoor space. Once again, no reference is made to Joseph. Gabriel hovering to the viewer's left above Mary suggests no interaction between the two figures. Mary's pose is ambiguous because she could be contemplating the Christ Child already within her or she could be resting against a table, oblivious to the arrival of the angel Gabriel and their encounter is yet to take place. Having the *Annunciation* as the middle panel of this triptych, communicates to the viewer the pre-eminence of the Incarnation in salvation history. By positioning Mary in the very middle of the entire work, the viewer can see that the role of Mary was central to God's plan.