CHAPTER 1

BIRTH OF JESUS
Matthew 1–2; Luke 1–2

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THE ANNUNCIATION TO MARY IN THE QUR’AN

F. Volker Greifenhagen (Canada)

The annunciation by a divinely sent messenger to Mary of the birth of a special son is narrated not only in Luke’s gospel (1:26–38) but also in the Muslim scripture, the Qur’an, originating with the prophet Muhammad in the seventh century C.E. in Arabia. There the story is told not just once, but twice. In Surah 19 Maryam (“Mary”) 16–21 we read thus:

16 Relate in the book (the story of) Mary, when she withdrew from her family to a place in the East. 17 She placed a screen (to screen herself) from them; then We sent to her our angel, and he appeared to her as a man in all respects. 18 She said, “I seek refuge from you to (Allah) most gracious; (come not near) if you fear Allah.” 19 He said, “No, I am only a messenger from your Lord (to announce) to you the gift of a righteous son.” 20 She said, “How shall I have a son, seeing that no man has touched me and I am not unchaste?” 21 He said, “So (it will be); your Lord says, ‘That is easy for me, and (We wish) to appoint him as a sign to humanity and a mercy from Us’; it is a matter (so) decreed.” (Translation by ‘Abdullah Yusuf ‘Ali, 2001)

It is again found in Surah 3 Ali ‘Imran (“The Family of ‘Imran”—‘Imran is the name of Mary’s father according to Qur’an 66:12 and 3:35) 45–49:

45 Behold! The angels said, “O Mary! Allah gives you glad tidings of a word from Him; his name will be Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, held in honour in this world and the hereafter, and of (the company of) those nearest to Allah. 46 He shall speak to the people in childhood and in maturity. And he shall be of (the company of) the righteous.” 47 She said, “O my Lord! How shall I have a son when no man has touched me?” He said, “Even so: Allah creates what He wills; when He has decreed a plan, He but says to it ‘Be,’ and it is! 48 And Allah will teach him the book and the wisdom, the law and the gospel. 49 And (appoint him) a messenger to the children of Israel, (with this message): ‘I have come to you with a sign from your Lord, in that I make for you out of clay, as it were, the figure of a bird, and breath into it, and it becomes a bird by Allah’s leave. And I heal those born blind, and the lepers, and I quicken the dead, by Allah’s leave. And I declare to you what you eat, and what you store in your houses. Surely therein is a sign for you if you did believe.’ ” (Translation by ‘Abdullah Yusuf ‘Ali, 2001)

Furthermore, the Qur’an alludes to the annunciation in two other verses. Surah 21 al-Anbiya (“The Prophets”) 91: “And (remember) her who guarded her chastity: We breathed in to her of Our Spirit, and We made her and her son a Sign for all peoples.”
And Surah 66 al-Tahrim (“Prohibition”) 12: “And Mary, the daughter of ‘Imran, who guarded her chastity; and We breathed into (her body) of Our Spirit; and she testified to the truth of the words of her Lord and of his Revelations, and was one of the devout (servants).” (Translation by ‘Abdullah Yusuf ‘Ali, 2001.)

The Qur’anic versions of the annunciation to Mary accord with Luke’s story in many respects. An angel announces that she will bear a son, to which she responds with bewilderment since she is a virgin. Her virginity, however, is no obstacle, for God is able to create a child within her without a human father. The Qur’an unpacks the angel’s more terse assertion in Luke’s gospel that “nothing will be impossible with God” (1:37) by having the messenger explain that when God decides anything, God merely needs to say “Be!” and it is—it is thus easy for God to do what is impossible for mortals. God’s Spirit is involved in the miraculous conception in both the biblical and Qur’anic accounts, and in both versions the child will be named Jesus. Mary devoutly accepts the message in both Luke and the Qur’an, although her assent in the Qur’an is not explicitly verbalized as it is in Luke. Finally, like the account in Luke, both of the fuller Qur’anic accounts of the annunciation are preceded by the story of the annunciation to Zechariah, who, as in the biblical version, distrusts the announcement and is struck mute.

There are also differences. The Qur’an is not interested in details such as the town where Mary lives, and it omits entirely the sign of Elizabeth’s pregnancy and any mention of Joseph. The Qur’anic versions especially highlight the chastity of Mary by depicting her as withdrawing alone from her family and screening herself from them (19:16–17), a motif that leads to a heightened sense of Mary’s alarm when she is approached in her seclusion by the messenger, whom the Qur’an describes as appearing like a human man in all respects. Mary, fearing molestation, needs to warn him off by seeking refuge with God. In an atmosphere charged with sexual danger, more explicit than the confusion or perplexity she experiences in the Lukan account, Mary displays proper propriety. Finally, one of the titles to be given to her son in the Qur’an is “son of Mary,” a name that stands out as unusual in a patriarchal context in which descent was reckoned from one’s father, and thus it serves to emphasize even further Mary’s virginal status. (The title “Jesus son of Mary” appears in Mark 6:3, but seems there to be used as a slur against him.)

But the biggest differences lie in the description of the son that will be born to Mary. In the Qur’anic accounts, he is not named “son of God”; nor is his career portrayed as that of a king, although he is called Christ or Messiah. Rather, the Qur’an emphasizes his qualities of righteousness and honor, and describes his career in terms of learning the holy scriptures and being sent as messenger to the children of Israel with miraculous powers of healing, animation of dead matter, and foreknowledge. This depiction accords with the prophetic paradigm applied by the Qur’an to all those that it names prophets; namely, that they are righteous folk who function primarily to bring a message from God to a specific people, encapsulated in a book, and confirmed by miracles.

Interestingly, some Muslim commentators have discussed whether Mary herself functions as a prophet in that she receives a “word” from God (3:45). While this “word” is usually glossed as a mere reference to God’s command “Be!” by which
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Jesus is miraculously conceived, it bears an uncanny resemblance to the divine *logos* or word which is used of Jesus in the Gospel of John (1:1–18). Rather than some willful misunderstanding, the Qur’an has here redirected emphasis on Jesus as God’s word, and on his miraculous conception, away from indications or proofs of his divine status to demonstrations of the divine creative power of God. Even Jesus’ miracles, the Qur’an insists, are performed by God’s permission (3:49).

In shifting the focus in this manner, the Qur’an gets behind the postbiblical Christian doctrinal ideology of Christ’s status as God. Luke, for instance, depicts Jesus mainly as subordinate to God (see especially the early Christian preaching described in Acts, such as 2:22–24; 3:13, 17–26; 4:27–28), joined to God by the Spirit but not identical with God. Overall, the Qur’an attempts to steer a middle course between what it sees as the excessive claims made about Jesus by Christians, on the one hand, and the rejection of Jesus and his significance by Jews, on the other. The Qur’an rejects the interpretation, found in Jewish literature, of the story of Jesus’ birth from a virgin as a cover-up of fornication but it does not go as far as Christians in deifying Jesus even though Jesus clearly has a preeminent status among the prophets in the Qur’an. The Qur’an’s versions of the announcement to Mary, with their insistence on her chastity and virginity equally and her submission to God’s will, as also her son’s submission, can trigger a reading of Luke’s account of the announcement uncoupled from later theological overlays.

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Comparing the Birth Stories of Lord Lao and Jesus

Bede Benjamin Bidlack (United States)

Laozi was a philosopher of ancient China and is traditionally considered the author of *Daode jing* and the founder of Daoism (Taoism). Over time he became revered as a deity; indeed by the second century A.D. he was worshipped as Lord Lao. In Daoist beliefs, Lord Lao comes down when the ways of humankind fall into grave error, wander from the Dao—the Ultimate Reality in the Daoist worldview—and need instruction on how to get back into harmony with the Dao. He appears to the ruler or to a person who later becomes a religious leader as a result of the encounter.

In sixth-century China, Daoists and Buddhists were competing for royal favor and met in a series of court debates. The question concerned who was prior: Laozi or Buddha. The tradition with the older religious founder was considered the superior religion. To prove the superiority of Daoism over Buddhism, Daoists looked to the *Scripture of the*
Conversion of the Barbarians (Huahu Jing). The Scripture was written from a tradition of transformations of Lord Lao when he descended into the world on a regular basis to provide guidance to rulers and to reveal sacred scriptures.

The central story of the Scripture tells of how Lord Lao traveled West, transmitted the Daode jing, then continued to convert the Indians to Buddhism, which Daoists understood as a diluted form of Daoism. A later version of the story escalated the polemical character of the text: Laozi and his companion Yin Xi journeyed to the West; there was an exchange of banquets with the barbarian kings; Laozi and Yin Xi underwent ordeals; after emerging from the ordeals, they punished the barbarians for their unbelief; they tried to civilize the barbarians with Buddhist precepts; Laozi left to convert other lands, while Yin Xi remained and was known as the Buddha. In these narratives, Lord Lao was the creator of the universe, a supporter of rulers, the source of scriptures, and the personification of the Dao. The Scripture describes the arrival of Lord Lao this way:

In those days, in the reign of Tanjia of Yin with the year star in gengshen...the Highest Venerable Lord came down from the eternal realm of the Dao. He harnessed a cloud of three energies and strode on the essence of the sun. Following the rays of the nine luminaries, he entered into the mouth of the Jade Maiden of Mystery and Wonder. Taking refuge in her womb, he became a man.

In the year gengshen, on the fifteenth day of the second month, he was born in Bo. Nine dragons sprinkled water over him to rinse and wash his body then they transformed into nine springs.

At that time, the Venerable Lord had white hair. He was able to walk upon birth. A lotus flower sprouted under each step he took. After nine steps, he pointed to heaven with his left hand, to the earth with his right hand and announced to the people...“I shall reveal the highest law of the Dao, I shall save all things moving and growing, the entire host of living beings.”

While the birthing of Lord Lao contains many parallels with that of Jesus, four differences are apparent at the outset. First, Dao is not equivalent to God, as it is impersonal and not above the universe, but it is the universe. This is a monistic worldview. Therefore, Lord Lao, the embodiment of the Dao, is the universe as well. Second, Lord Lao is not the son of the Dao, as Jesus is the Son of the Father. Lord Lao is a particular divine person who is accessible to the world. Third, this is one of many of Lord Lao’s appearances, but Jesus comes only once. Fourth, Laozi’s body itself is different from any person’s body, although it is very real and of flesh and bone. His body is the representation of the Dao accompanied by mythical markings—such as white hair at birth or bone protrusions on the forehead—that are rich symbols and points of meditation. The marks are similar to those attributed to the body of the Buddha in Mahayana Buddhism.

The interaction with Buddhism in the court debates and elsewhere resulted in a free exchange between Buddhism and Daoism. The birth narrative shows close links to the stories of Buddha’s birth. By adopting the birth story and other elements of
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Buddhism, Daoism claims itself as a universal religion and Lord Lao as the seat of all creation and the source of all teachings, particularly of Buddhism. But what about the similarities with Jesus?

The birth of Laozi is situated in history, even to the date and location, as is Jesus’ birth in Luke. In contrast to Jesus’ annunciation, Lord Lao’s conception is told with a spectacle of light and energies, but he ends up, like Jesus, in the womb of a woman of cosmic importance (Luke 1:26–27), where he became man. His birth is accompanied by dragons, which not only serve to represent nature—as do the presumed animals in Jesus’ stable (2:7)—but also angels, insofar as they are beings that travel between heaven and earth (2:9, 13). Immediately at birth, Lord Lao is able to walk and talk—an image analogous to Jesus’ advanced wisdom at a young age (2:46–47). Finally, he is identified as the savior of the world (2:11).

Authors of both Luke and the Scripture tell of events and characteristics of the descended deity to express that the child will be different from ordinary people and will do something great. The experience of the divine coming into our world is too fantastic for common words. The event is beyond our normal experience, so special words or literary devices are necessary to tell it. The images draw attention to the special identity of these people. Noticeably, both are identified as saviors. But what does it mean for Lord Lao to be a savior and is that the same role that Jesus has?

Salvation as the end of earthly struggles was such a radical departure from Chinese thought that an outside influence cannot be ruled out. Up until that time, dynasties were empowered by a Heavenly Mandate that bestowed on the sovereign, and therefore the entire kingdom, the power to provide prosperity, security, and integrity. A dynasty rose by receiving de, “virtue” or “power,” from Heaven. Upon wandering from the Dao, the Heavenly Mandate and its de would be rescinded by Heaven, causing the downfall of the kingdom. It would be given to the next dynasty, which would follow the next predictable fate of rise and fall.

In texts like the Scripture, Lord Lao brings salvation to the kingdom, which was the cosmos to the ancient peoples of China. “Salvation” does not mean redemption from sin, but harmonization with Dao. Lord Lao harmonizes by making several appearances to rulers at times when they have wandered from the Dao. Upon following his divine teachings, the kingdom regains harmony with the Dao and is on the right track for reaching the final age, the Age of Great Peace. In this way, Lord Lao saves little by little until the Age of Great Peace blooms and a perfect harmony with the Dao endures on earth forever.

The Scripture’s focus is not on the final age, but on the claim of the conversion of the barbarians, as its title states, thereby establishing Daoism as the superior religion over Buddhism. In the court debates, Lord Lao’s dramatic birth, acceptance of disciples, and movement to the West were primarily for the purpose of converting those beyond China’s borders.

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**HEROD’S SLAUGHTER OF THE CHILDREN AND OTHER ATROCITIES**

*Néstor O. Míguez (Argentina)*

The Feast of the Holy Innocents was established in the Christian calendar in memory of the slaughter of the children of Bethlehem, which was ordered by Herod upon hearing of the birth of the one who would be Messiah, as we read in Matthew 2. In the story, Joseph receives a warning in a dream and flees with Jesus and Mary, but the remaining children in the village are murdered.

Matthew did not allow the memory of the homicidal Herod to be erased. Herod repaired the temple but destroyed the people. He obtained the throne, backed by the (Roman) Empire, and ends up killing the children of his own people to avoid losing his own unjust power. Soldiers against children, weapons against weeping: terror as the king’s method. He who fears losing his throne cannot help but see threats at every turn. But what of the mothers of the innocent who refuse to be comforted.

From my Argentina, I stand alongside Matthew as he writes his gospel. I sit at his worktable and say to him: “For centuries, the commentators will debate if your account is historical dear Matthew, if it squares with the facts, or how theologically to justify the death of the innocent to save the life of the savior. Go ahead and include these details, brother. History will prove them true. I can tell you, from my sad experience that the facts align with your account. Time and again the unjust allies of the Empire—the powers that be—perpetuate their power by killing the innocent. They call it ‘preemptive war’ or ‘collateral damage.’ Sad copies of Herod.”

I go on, “What is more, Matthew, I know those mothers who refuse to be comforted. They have names: Azucena Villaflor, Adela Antokoletz, Nora Cortinas, Hebe de Bonafini, Estela Carlotto. Some have suffered the same fate as their children; some have died. Others live on, refusing to be consoled, refusing to lower their hands—ceaselessly marching in circles in front of Herod’s home, in the town square of uprisings and deaths, the square of the people and of treasons, demanding on behalf of their children. Their white headscarves are an emblem of pain turned to struggle—those mothers who refuse to be comforted because their pain is a part of their struggle. They are the untiring grandmothers who trace the footprints of horror because they know that there they may find, hidden away, the heirs of their dreams.”

I carry myself away with my own words, forgetting Matthew and going on: I see those beloved faces—some known, some unknown—equally lovable in their expression of terror. I, like Matthew as he writes, am a witness of the facts even as I speak. “Cry out, mothers of pain and of hope. Do not cease to cry out throughout the centuries, you mothers of Rama and Bethlehem. Alongside the mothers of Iraq and Gaza, and again of Bethlehem. With the mothers of Auschwitz or of Armenia, and the mothers of all the genocides of humanity’s senseless history. Weep and cry with the mothers of all our indigenous peoples of America, decimated in their own lands by the homicidal zeal of the conquistador in search of gold and power. Cry with the mothers of Soweto, of Hiroshima, with the millions of mothers of the holocausts of the innocent that pride, ambition, and prejudice sow in our history. With the mothers of Biafra and Haiti,
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seeing their children die from imposed hunger, from calculated misery. Join your worn voices with the mothers of children born with deformities due to senseless pollution of lands and waters, or in the hells let loose by the napalm of Vietnam. Join together with millions upon millions of those voices that have witnessed the crushing of the heads of children by the homicidal hordes that the empires and their allies, stocked with arms and money, have unleashed time and again on defenseless peoples. May your cries of terror resound forever, without ceding to the offers of comfort from those who purchase consciences. Do not listen to the sweet words with which those preachers of undignified reconciliation wish to soften you. May you never cease in your determined lament, that unceremonious demand for life, the endless marches around the town squares; may the demand for justice that rises from the bottom of the centuries and remains to this day never be silenced, so that the Empire may never sleep without feeling, even if it covers its ears, that its massacres have not been forgotten.”

Matthew looks at me, astonished. The names are strange, the situations familiar. “Write, dear Matthew, brother. Write. Your words call out to thousands throughout time. History will sadly corroborate your story, your gospel encouragingly faithful. Keep writing this mirror of the human soul, keep going and don’t stop until the necessary resurrection,” I say to him, as if the Spirit had not already told him.

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READING LUKE’S CHRISTMAS STORY WITH THOSE IN HAITI

_Kent Annan (Haiti)_

It was Christmas Eve in Haiti seven years ago. My wife, Shelly, and I were living there and had gathered on our porch under the palm trees and starry sky with a dozen friends and neighbors. We’d shared a meal of rice and beans and all the fixings. The plates had been cleared away.

Dusk settled, conversation continued, and someone suggested reading the Christmas story. We got our Creole Bible, lit a kerosene lamp, and one of our neighbors, a young man with a strong clear voice, read aloud the narrative of Jesus’ birth from the gospel of Luke. The story was read a couple of times and then Shelly or I (can’t remember who) asked what stood out to people.

We were informally using _lectio divina_, an ancient approach to reflecting on Scripture that we had adapted and were using as part of a Christian education program with churches and schools in Haiti.

After hearing the story a couple of times, everyone was invited to share their thoughts on what they heard. And everyone did, from young (seven years old) to not-so-young (a couple in their late sixties) to in between.
There were comments about Christ entering the world as a child, comments about Joseph and Mary’s faithfulness, and then the discussion began to focus on the phrase: “There was no room for Mary at the inn.” Except in the Creole version this read, “There was no place for Mary at the inn,” a slight variation that seems inconsequential.

At least it did to me. When I heard the verse read that night I understood, as I always had, that literally the inn had no rooms left—a full house, a first-century version of a flickering neon “No Vacancy” sign.

But our friends on the porch understood it a little differently. To them, “No place for her in the inn” didn’t so much mean that there wasn’t a vacancy, but that there was no place for someone like Mary in the inn. There was no place for someone who had just ridden in on a donkey. There was no place for someone dressed in peasant clothes. No place for someone who came from the nowheresville of Nazareth. No place when you don’t have money, because, let’s be honest, if you have enough money you can always find a place.

One neighbor who is a farmer said, “If Mary and Joseph would have been wearing nice clothes and had lots of money, there would have been a place for them. They would never have made her give birth with the animals.”

“Yes,” someone else said, “they would have treated them differently if they had money.”

“And that is just how it is for us too,” said the farmer, speaking again. “If we tried to go to one of the good hospitals in Port-au-Prince, there would be no place for us. If we tried to go to one of the hotels in the city, they would see our clothes and shoes, and they would know we’re peasants. There wouldn’t be a place for us either.”

The conversation paused, a silence acknowledging the truth of his words.

“But isn’t it amazing,” spoke up another friend, “that our Lord chose to come to this earth through a woman who had no place, who was given no place. And even more amazing, God came to earth with good news to tell us: that we do have a place! He came to tell us, ‘You have a place here as a child of God. And you have a place after this. In fact, right now my Father is preparing another place for you too.’ ”

There was another pause, but this time it was a silence of peace and of hope.

It was a holy moment I’ll remember for the rest of my Christmases. It permanently changed how I hear that phrase in Jesus’ birth story. So what happened?

We listened with people who were, in many ways, different from us. Our economic, racial, educational, national, and cultural backgrounds are very different from the friends we were sitting with. Some of these neighbors had no formal education and lived close to the edge of survival. Something happens—or at least can happen—when we listen together. The hermeneutic imagination expands. I then hear not only as myself, but also have a chance to hear through the ears/experience of the person sitting next to me. This can happen in another country or in a small group in your neighborhood. For example, I hear with increased intensity and specificity if listening to a Psalm of lament while sitting next to a woman whose husband just died. If we also listen to each other’s reflections on the Bible, this possibility opens up even more.
We listened in another language. Our experience reflected what Frederick Buechner wrote in Wishful Thinking, “If you have even as much as a nodding acquaintance with a foreign language, try reading the Bible in that. Then you stand a chance of hearing what the Bible is actually saying instead of what you assume it must be saying because it is the Bible.”

We listened to Scripture. There are so many differences, but we were brought together by a common story: the story of Jesus. That’s the reason we were gathered on that eve. That’s what led us to open a book that everyone, despite our differences, holds dear.

We listened in a way that ensured everyone present could participate. Some literate and some not. I don’t think anyone there had finished high school, and at least a few were illiterate and probably had never spent a day in school. But we didn’t think about education levels when it was happening. We had been (and continue to be) carefully developing how to approach Christian education in a country where about 50 percent of people are illiterate, so there is pedagogical strategy behind using lectio divina, which can be done by listening even if you can’t read. But as it happened, we were just there with friends, thinking about Jesus’ birth, and finding a way to share a meaningful moment together.

We listened to each other. Really listened.

We listened for God. This feels like an outrageous move of faith sometimes, but also the reason to go to the Bible. Since my faith wavers at times, I’m glad we can listen for God together, lean on each other. Maybe I’ll hear something of God, but if not, maybe someone else will hear a whisper and let the rest of us know.

It’s not that you couldn’t get this insight sitting in your church or reading alone at home. But that didn’t happen for me. It happened with these friends on that porch in Haiti.

The night was meaningful, hopeful, and peaceful, but the undercurrents of what is radical and gritty about faith were also right there in the midst of the story and the interpretation. In the shared reading. In the shared lives. In the work for justice that was—and is—ahead.

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QUESTIONS

1. How do the biblical details, in contrast to the sparse nature of the Qur’an, influence one’s reading experience?

2. Bidlack states that one of the purposes of the Scripture was to convert those outside China’s borders. What was Matthew’s and Luke’s purpose in composing their birth narrative (they may be different)?

3. Imagine Matthew’s response to Míguez. What is your response to Míguez’s imagined conversation?

4. What other elements in Luke’s story—besides Mary and Joseph having “no place”—might resonate with Annan’s group?