The Incarnation of God in the Holy Land

By Mark F. Fischer, St. John's Seminary

The University Series, St. Paschal Baylon Church, March 9, 2016

Introduction

In the fall of 2015 St. John's Seminary gave me a sabbatical which I spent at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem. It was my first visit to the Holy Land, and at Tantur I received a thorough introduction to biblical archaeology, to Judaism and Islam, and to the very concept of a Holy Land.

Today's land of Palestine roughly corresponds to the biblical Canaan, the land promised to Abraham and conquered by Joshua and by the Judges. But it is also the land from which the Jews were exiled to Babylon in 587 BC, and the land from which the Jews were expelled by the Romans in 135 AD. So the question of the Holy Land – the question of *for whom* the land is holy and *to whom* it belongs – is a complicated one. It was a privilege to be able to live there for three months and to visit the religious places and important archaeological sites. It is a pleasure to reflect with you tonight on the holiness of the land.

For us Christians, the Holy Land is holy because it is the place where Jesus was born, where he ministered, and where he died and rose from the dead. My topic this evening is "the incarnation of God in the Holy Land." The Holy Land is the place where God assumed our human nature as God's very own.

In ***Bethlehem***, for instance, the pilgrim can visit the Church of the Nativity. It is an ancient Church that was built at the request of the Empress Helena, the mother of Constantine, just at the time when the Roman empire was becoming Christian. The visitor enters the ancient Church through a low door, called the humility door, because he or she has to bend over to walk in. Once inside, you see a Greek Orthodox altar, surrounded by icons.

But the site of the nativity is actually in a cave below the altar. St. Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph journeyed to Bethlehem for the census. "She gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in a swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (Lk. 2:7). Our Palestinian Christian guide explained that there were no "inns" for poor travelers. One would lodge with relatives or even strangers, if need be. It was common for people to live in caves. Livestock were kept in the inner recesses of the cave, where they would be protected. At today's Nativity Church, the visitor descends into a cave by walking down some steps. There, underground, a silver star with fourteen points marks the traditional birthplace, with the manger a few feet away.

In ***Nazareth***, I visited the so-called "Synagogue Church," built above the ruins of an ancient synagogue. It is reputedly the synagogue that Jesus visited on the Sabbath, where he unrolled the scroll of Isaiah, and read, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me" (Lk. 4:18). Although the people of Nazareth did not care

for Jesus' message, and tried to throw him over a cliff, the story about the scroll shows his readiness to participate in the Sabbath.

It was on the Sabbath that Jesus and his disciples offended the Pharisees by plucking heads of grain. The Pharisees accused Jesus of not honoring the third commandment to keep the Sabbath holy. But Jesus replied that "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mk. 2:27). This event, taking place at the beginning of his ministry, foreshadowed the tension that would arise between Jesus and the Pharisees. They valued the Law of Moses and were suspicious of anyone, such as Jesus, who seemed to be relativizing it.

In ***Jerusalem***, the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre is built over the traditional site of Golgotha, the site of Jesus' crucifixion, and over the grave that was provided by Joseph of Arimathea. At the grave itself is a little chapel, situated under the dome of the basilica. The chapel shelters the tomb itself and the stone that was rolled across its entrance. The visitor lines up, enters the chapel, and quickly leaves, so that the next person in line can visit it.

In the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, one can also climb worn steps to an upper chamber. There, under an altar, is exposed the rock of Golgotha, the traditional site of crucifixion. Pilgrims bend down to reverence the spot. It was here, after the death of Jesus, a centurion said, "Truly this man was God's Son" (Mk. 15:39).

In visiting these sites, we honor the mystery that they represent. It is the mystery of how, in the words of St. Athanasius, God could become human so that humanity might be united with God.[1] It is also the mystery of how a man, Jesus, could freely obey his heavenly Father and accept the unjust punishment levied against him. We Christians say that Jesus is the incarnation of God and consubstantial with the Father. For us, the Holy Land is worth visiting because it helps us imagine what it meant for Jesus to be "one in being" with the Father. We too can hope that we too might be united with God.

The topic of "the incarnation of God" is complicated because incarnation is certainly not the way that the Jews of the first century regarded the birth of Jesus, and still less the Muslims of the seventh century. For many Jews and Muslims, Jesus Christ is a prophet, perhaps comparable to the other Hebrew prophets, but not the messiah. He is highly to be revered, but not the incarnation of God. In this we profoundly disagree with Judaism and Islam.

Yet we Catholic Christians are committed to interreligious dialogue. Since Vatican II we acknowledge the truth and holiness of these other faiths. We say that their "manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines" can "often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men" (Nostra aetate 2). So this raises a question that we will consider tonight. How do we continue to share our faith in Jesus Christ while, at the

[1] The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (at no. 460) quotes Athanasius (*De incarnatione*, 54,3; PG 25, 192B) as follows: "For the Son of God became man so that we might become God."

same time, entering into a conversation with others who frequently in the past have been our antagonists?

Official Catholic documents have posed this question, most recently the 1991 publication of the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, a publication entitled "Dialogue and Proclamation" (1991). The Pontifical Council stated that proclamation and dialogue are both components of authentic evangelization. To those who have not heard of Jesus, we proclaim the gospel of salvation. But we must also listen. Dialogue, according to the council, means reciprocal communication leading to "interpersonal communion."

Dialogue tries to create an attitude of respect and friendship. It aims at mutual understanding and enrichment "in obedience to truth and respect for freedom" (par. 9). So as Catholic Christians, we want *not only* to proclaim to Jews and Muslims what we believe, *but also* to establish a dialogue that will ensure solid relations, genuine friendship, and mutual respect. In a few moments, I'm going to ask you to consider what we might gain from the dialogue.

The Pontifical Council's "Dialogue and Proclamation" is the context for my remarks tonight. I'd like us to consider how Jews and Muslims in the Holy Land might approach our central truth, that God became incarnate in Jesus Christ. We shall see how Jews and Muslims might receive our proclamation, and what we might learn from a dialogue with them.

Dialogue with Islam

Let us begin with a Muslim reflection on the Incarnation. The central tenet of Islam is the oneness of God. Muslims proclaim that "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his prophet." In light of this, Christianity's teaching that God has an "only begotten Son" might sound mythological and polytheistic. In the Qur'an, for instance, we encounter the question:

> How could He [God] have a son when He does not have a companion and He created all things? (Surah 6:101).

There can be no son of God, according to Muslims, because God is not a person who engages in sexual relations. The teaching about the Son of God undoubtedly sounds to Muslim ears as if God married and had a child. For people of Islamic faith the incarnation of God detracts from the divine majesty and dignity.

In a conversation with Islam, however, we must try to understand our dialogue partners. And it is easy to see that Islam's insistence on the oneness of God reflects a central component of our faith. We profess, "I believe in one God." The oneness of God is part of Christian faith. No Christian imagines that God married and had a child. So Islam confronts us with our basic teaching. How can we proclaim the oneness of God when we also say that the Word became flesh in Jesus?

This leads us to reflect. We know what the gospel says. We already know what it means to proclaim the gospel. *But why does the Church recommend a dialogue with Islam, and what might we learn from it?*

*

For Muslims, any reference to a Son of God seems to rob God of dignity. Christianity dealt with this objection in its struggle against the heretical Arians two centuries before Mohammad. The struggle was a complicated one. The Christian reply to the Arians is subtle, and might have been clear only to the best-educated Christians of the fourth century. But it helps us see how we Christians can reply to Muslims offended by the idea of the Son of God.

In the fourth century, 200 years before Mohammad, an Egyptian priest named Arius challenged our understanding of Jesus Christ. Arius denied that Jesus was one in being with the Father. The Sonship of Christ, Arius said, meant that Jesus was subordinate to him. The Arians "solved" the problem of the unity of God by making Jesus Christ "other than" and "less" than God. The Arian subordination of the Son to the Father reminds us of how the Incarnation can offend Muslims. The struggle of Christian doctrine against the Arians can also clarify our understanding of the Father and the Son in a dialogue with Islam.

When the Arian Christians of the fourth century made the Son less than and subordinate to the Father, Orthodox Christianity opposed the Arian view. St. Athanasius of Alexandria championed orthodox Christianity. He condemned Arius for stating, first of all, that the divine Word "did not always exist," but was created in time (*Against the Arians*, Discourse I, chap. ii, no. 5).

Against this, Athanasius argued that the divine Word existed from all eternity. We say, "Born of the Father before all ages, God from God, light from light." There was never a moment at which God was without the divine Word. At one point in time, however, the Word became flesh, and was born of Mary. The eternal divine nature of the Word was joined to the human nature of Jesus. So we can say that Jesus "speaks" God's eternal Word, and is the "sacrament" of it. He is an outward sign of the Word, given by God, sharing with us the divine light.

St. Athanasius also shed light on the Arian understanding of Jesus. The Arians acknowledged that the Son of God had been "begotten," but they used the word "begotten" in a special way. "To beget" meant, in the Arian view, to be established for a purpose. The Word was begotten as an instrument [I, ii, 5]. The Arians taught that the Word was not God but rather a means for God to achieve something. The Word was spoken for a purpose, said the Arians, the purpose of creating human beings. God created by means of the divine Word. God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. The Word was, in the Arian view, God's instrument.

For Athanasius, this Arian teaching fell short of Christian truth. Yes, God spoke a Word, and by that Word, all things were created. But God's Word, the Son who became incarnate in Jesus, was not merely an instrument. The Divine Word is co-eternal with the Father because God has always been speaking a Word. God has always been communicating. In that Word or speech, God is not just "giving orders" as through an intermediary. By speaking a Word, God is sharing the divine life.

All of this is relevant for our Christian dialogue with Muslims. Islam is offended by the concept of a Son of God. But in the struggle against the Arians, Christianity clarified what the Sonship of God means. It is not that God engendered a Son. It is rather that God has been communicating from all eternity through a divine Word. This eternal Word is not just a vehicle for achieving a limited purpose, but is God sharing with human beings God's own life. And at one point in time, God's eternal Word took our human nature and became one with us. The life and work of Jesus became a sacrament of salvation (Catechism 774, LG 1). Jesus Christ is an outward sign that achieved God's desire to share with us the divine nature itself.

This should help us in a dialogue with Islam. When we proclaim that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, we do not mean that God fathered a child. No, we mean that God's very Word, the Word that was spoken from the beginning of creation, was spoken by Jesus of Nazareth. "The saving work of his holy and sanctifying humanity," we read in the *Catholic Catechism* (774), "is the sacrament of salvation." His humanity accomplished that sacrament. Such a statement might not win Muslims to Christianity. But it may well prevent a misunderstanding of our Christian faith as polytheistic.

Dialogue with Judaism

We Christians must also be prepared for a dialogue with Judaism. The Christian proclamation that God became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth may appear blasphemous or presumptuous to Jews. One Jewish professor told my class in Israel that Judaism regards Christianity in the same way that Catholics regard Scientology or Mormonism – that is, as Johnny-come-latelies who got some things right but who missed the big picture.

Part of the incomprehensibility of us Christians to Jews results from the Spirit-filled attitude that Jesus (and later St. Paul) took toward the Law of Moses. Jesus said that the Sabbath was made for us, not we for the Sabbath (Mk. 2:27). St. Paul said that the letter of the Law kills, while the Spirit gives life (2 Cor. 3:6). In both cases, the Holy Spirit has brought us to a new understanding of the Mosaic Law. The Law becomes part of what we Christians would call a more intimate experience of God. When Jesus said, "The Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath" (Mk. 2:28), he meant that obedience to the Law is a means toward obeying God, not a substitute for it.

How would Jews receive this teaching? In Jerusalem, I met Professor Edward Breuer of the Hebrew University. One day, he was lecturing on the Prophet Isaiah. He quoted the prophet's warning to Jerusalem. In the eighth century BC, he said, the city trembled before the threats of neighboring Assyria. The prophet spoke on God's behalf:

> Bring no more vain offering; incense is an abomination to me . . . . even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; . . . . Cease to do evil, learn to do good" (Is. 1:13, 15-17).

Professor Breuer presented these words to us very sympathetically. Listening to him, I thought I detected a political message. I sensed that the professor was suggesting a way out of Israel's political troubles. He seemed to be alluding to the tension between Israel and its neighbors, tension stemming from the State of Israel's appropriation of land that formerly had belonged to Palestinians. It struck me that Professor Breuer was proposing the words of Isaiah – "Cease to do evil, learn to do good" – as a warning to the state. The prophet was saying that the state cannot continue to marginalize Palestinians, or confine them to enclaves behind a dividing wall.

At the coffee break, I shared my thoughts with Professor Breuer. But he brought me up short. He warned me not to make the mistake common to first-time visitors to Israel. It is the mistake of thinking that they understand the conflict between the state and Palestinians. He said that his three sons have served in the Israeli Defense Forces with distinction. He is proud of them. "They stand between us," Professor Breuer said, "and those who would destroy us."

In short, Professor Breuer was not proposing the first chapter of Isaiah as a solution to political problems in Israel. Later he offered a further clarification. He praised the Prophet Isaiah, but noted that he was only a prophet. The books of the prophets, he said, are less important to the Jews than the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. Those books contain the Law. The Law instructs Jews on how to live. The Pentateuch, Breuer said, is the basic "canvas" on which the portraits of the prophets are "painted." Without the canvas of the Pentateuch, he said, the prophets are without support. Isaiah inspired Breuer, he said, because the prophet built upon the Pentateuch. In a similar way, he added, the "prophet Jesus" built on it. Prophets are important, but not as important as God's Law.

Judaism may speak of Jesus as a prophet, but never as the "incarnation of God." Jesus' interpretation of the Law of Moses was the flash-point between him and the Pharisees. For the Jews, fidelity to God's Law is primary. God "spoke" to Israel through the giving of the Law. Jews today show their fidelity to God by obeying the Law. Jesus' spirit-filled interpretation of the Law, his teaching that the Sabbath was made for man, affronted the Pharisees then. It affronts Jews to this day.

I experienced this with another Jewish professor, Deborah Weissman. During one of her lectures, a student said, "We Christians believe that we should obey the Law according to the counsel of our heart." But Professor Weissman was not impressed. "Sometimes a person just doesn't 'feel' like obeying the Law," she said. "It's important not to be ruled by feeling, but by a sense of religious obligation." This, she said, is a guiding principle of Judaism. One obeys the Law of Moses, not because one subjectively feels that it is good, but because God has commanded it.

This brings us to a second point of reflection. The Jews, we know, are offended by Christians' spirit-filled interpretation of the Law of Moses. It subordinates the Law, they would say, to one's feeling about the Law. We Christians do not see things this way. We know what Jesus proclaimed. The Sabbath was made for us, and we were not made for the Sabbath. That is our proclamation, our gospel. But what about dialogue? *What can we learn about God's Law in a dialogue with Judaism?*

*

Some Christians may be tempted to speak as if, with the coming of Jesus Christ, the Law of Moses has somehow been superseded by the new law of love (Rom. 13:8). It is tempting to suggest that the God of the Old Testament is no longer relevant, and has given way to the God of Jesus Christ. After all, Jesus angered the Pharisees specifically by his treatment of the Law. His seeming willingness to break with the Law may suggest to us that the law has been abrogated.

But that is not what the Church teaches. St. Paul himself sounded the decisive note in speaking of his Hebrew kin:

> They are the Israelites; and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. (Rom. 9:4-5)

One cannot take from Judaism the special dignity of God's election. But in the second century, a Christian named Marcion,[2] the son of a bishop, rejected the teaching of the Old Testament. Marcion argued that Old Testament teaching is incompatible with the teaching of Jesus. Jesus, he implied, has made it irrelevant. But the ancient Church would not accept Marcion's argument. St. Irenaeus and the theologian Tertullian countered that the Hebrew Bible is the revelation of God. It must be rightly interpreted, they said, but it can never be superseded. Jesus himself testified to this. He said he had not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them (Mt. 5:17).

The Church has always insisted on the relevance of the Mosaic Law. The 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* for example, organized the greatest part of the morality section, entitled "Life in Christ," upon the framework of the Ten Commandments. In any dialogue with Judaism, we Christians should be quick to acknowledge our debt to what Pope John Paul II called our "elder brothers"[3] in the faith. Judaism has given us monotheism. It received from God the covenant of election. From Judaism we know about creation, about God's expectations regarding moral behavior, and about providence and the unity of history. In any dialogue with Judaism, we

---

[2] On Marcion, see Epiphanius, *Panarion*, XL, i, 3-8; cited in Hans Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church*, trans. Bertram Lee Woolf (Guildford and London: Lutterworth Press, 1961), vol. I, p. 248 ff.
[3] Pope John Paul II, "The Roots of Anti-Judaism in the Christian Environment," from the pope's discourse during his visit to the Rome Synagogue on 13 April 1986. www.vatican.va, accessed on 02.06.16.

Christians must emphasize what our faiths have in common. It is simply false to say that, with the arrival of Jesus, the Law given to Moses is no longer relevant.

Conclusion

When we Christians speak of the great mystery of the incarnation, we have to speak carefully. We have to express ourselves within the proper boundaries of Christian faith and tradition. We differ from Jews and Muslims, and cannot minimize the differences, but we don't want to be misunderstood by speaking imprecisely.

The incarnation, the central doctrine of Christian faith, can be easily misunderstood. It is the doctrine of how God shares with us the divine life. We Christians affirm that God also share this life with us in the person of Jesus. God also shares the divine live in the midst of our daily existence. We call that divine life grace.

God does not want to be eternally distant from us, like a remote and frightening force before which we crouch in fear. No, God wants to be the innermost heart of our existence. God chose to be one with us. That is the good news of our salvation. We are saved because God has taken our human nature to be God's own. God has drawn us into the divine life of light and peace, of goodness and of generosity and of love. The Son of God became man so that we might participate in God.

That does not mean, as Islam reminds us, that Jesus the divine Word, is somehow a second God. The Catechism makes this clear by speaking of Jesus Christ as a sacrament. "The saving work of his holy and sanctifying humanity," we read, "is the sacrament of salvation" (no. 774). God is one. It is in the human nature of Jesus, the very nature through which we encounter salvation, that we find the holiness and sanctity that belong to the one God.

No less does the incarnation of God mean that Christians can dismiss the Law of Moses. That Law called the Hebrew people to be stewards of the earth. They were called to be fruitful on the land, the land established by God at the moment of creation. After God created the heavens and the earth, Adam and Eve were told to be fruitful. And we, who count ourselves the New Israel, have the same obligation. We too are stewards.

Fruitfulness is to take place on God's earth, not just the land called Canaan or Palestine, but everywhere. That was God's original covenant with us. Jews and gentiles have this obligation. The Law by which God taught this always remains in force. And with the incarnation in Christ, God has planted the Spirit in us and invited us to embody the divine Word. That, I submit to you tonight, is a good starting point for dialogue with Muslims and Jews.