

He became man: Seeing through the birth narratives of Laozi and Jesus

Author: Bede Bidlack

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**HE BECAME MAN: SEEING THROUGH THE BIRTH NARRATIVES OF
LAOZI AND JESUS**

by

BEDE BIDLACK

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In those days, in the reign of Tanjia of Yin with the year star in *gengshen*, in the month [...], 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: “In heaven above, on the earth below, I alone am venerable. I shall reveal the highest law of the Dao. I shall save all things moving and growing, the entire host of living beings. I shall wander across the ten directions and reach to the dark prisons of the underworld. I shall lead all those no yet saved and all those lost in error to certain salvation.” (Kohn 1993, 72)

Introduction

Dialogue between religions can come to a halt, when scriptures provide clearly different teachings. However, what can be more troublesome are those passages that are similar—perhaps too similar—that force adherents of the different religions from the lines of dialogue back to the rhetoric of legitimacy, apologetics, and polemics due the threatening feeling of the other. But is this the only response? Can closer examination of similar texts lead to a reaffirmation and stability in one’s religion, so that dialogue and interest in the other religion can move forward?

After reading the birth narrative of the Highest Venerable Lord, or Lord Lao, in the *Huahu jing*, the Christian’s walls of faith commitments go up. Lao’s birth story strikes the Christian memory of Jesus’ birth, which is taken to be a unique event. These walls of commitment protect the Christian reader within his or her community—such as the Roman Catholic Christian community to which I belong—to allow for an examination of the other’s text. It also allows for a re-examination of Christian birth narratives. The most obvious match is the nativity story found in the Gospel of Luke.

Looking at Laozi's birth, the reader faces immediate questions: Where is this other text coming from? Why was it written? Who is being born? These same questions are then asked of the Gospel of Luke. In a third move, the reader can re-evaluate what at first glance appeared as a challenge to Christian claims that Jesus Christ is the only Divine Person and unique savior of the world.¹

Historical Background of the Texts

Huahu jing

In 386, the Toba, a Hunnish people, conquered northern China to establish the Wei Dynasty (386-535). They were small in number and unable to rule a large kingdom by themselves. Typical of colonialism, the Toba utilized the Chinese to officiate over their new lands. Thinking it unwise to empower Confucian bureaucrats, who swore an oath to the Chinese emperor, the Toba looked to the educated class of the other religions, Buddhism and Daoism, to run the country. In order to help the rulers choose, the Toba organized court debates between the Buddhists and Daoist, the first being in 520 (Kohn 2001, 101).

To prove the superiority of Daoism over Buddhism, the northern Celestial Masters—a school of Daoism still in existence today—looked to the *Huahu Jing* (化胡经, Scripture of the Conversion of the Barbarians). The Scripture is written from a tradition of transformations of Lord Lao, the deified Laozi, where the deity descends into the world on a regular basis to provide guidance to rulers and to transmit sacred scriptures.

Commonly known in the West simply as the author of the *Dao De jing*, Laozi goes through a metamorphosis in the Later Han Dynasty (25-220 AD) from sagely author to

¹ For hermeneutics of comparative theology, see *Seeing Through Texts* by Francis X. Clooney. On the question on the uniqueness of Christianity, see *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* by Jacques Dupuis, *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions* by Gavin D'Costa.

divinity, such that he is worshipped as Lord Lao by the second century AD (Kohn 1998, 2). Lord Lao comes down when the ways of humankind sufficiently wander from the Dao, fall into grave error, 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 vision of the deity.

Some accounts of Lord Lao's descent are accompanied by a story of his birth. The revelation of Lord Lao's birth was taken to be historical, but the version under examination here is intentionally polemical in character (Kohn 2000, 287). Both Buddhists and Daoists were competing for royal favor and the suppression of the other religion (Kohn 2000, 295).

First compiled around 300 AD, a version *Huabu jing* survived with other manuscripts at the famous caves of Dunhuang, where precious scrolls were hidden and sealed during the fall of the Tang Dynasty, which ended in the beginning of the 10th century (Kohn 1993, 71; Kohn 2000, 295). This scripture has gone through several versions over the centuries and has laid claim to all kinds of religious teachings from Confucianism to Manichaeism. However, it is primarily Daoist because the central story tells of how Lord Lao traveled West, transmitted the *Dao De jing*, then continued to convert the Indians to Buddhism, which is understood as a diluted form of Daoism.

The translation, from which our passage comes, is a version of the *Huabu jing* from the early eighth century. Its contents can be classified into three categories: Laozi hagiography, demonological and theoretical issues, and scholastic discussions on good government. Laozi is seen as the creator of the universe, a supporter of rulers, the source of scriptures, and the personification of the Dao² (Kohn 2000, 298). The rest of the story in the

² For a complete analysis of Laozi as the embodied Dao and the relation to Jesus as the embodied God, see Livia Kohn, "Embodiment and Transcendence in Medieval Taoism," in *The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ*, edited by Roman Malek, SVD. Netherlands: Institut Monumenta Serica and China-Zentrum Sankt Augustin, 2002.

Yuan period version of the *Huabu jing* (dated 1281) escalates the polemical character of the text: Laozi and his companion Yin Xi journey to the West; there is an exchange of banquets with the barbarian kings; Laozi and Yin Xi undergo ordeals; after emerging from the ordeals, they punish the barbarians for their unbelief; they try to civilize the barbarians with Buddhist precepts; Laozi leaves to convert other lands, while Yin Xi remains and is known as the Buddha (Kohn 2000, 295, 298-301).

While the birthing of Lord Lao contains many parallels with Luke, four immediate differences between Lord Lao and Jesus Christ 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 (Kohn 2002, 85). This is a monistic worldview. Dao is both the ordering principle and the underlying reality of all things. 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 (Kohn 2002, 85). Lord Lao is the Dao and the cause of his own birth. Third, Lord Lao descends many times, but Jesus comes only once. Forth, 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 mythological representation of the Dao with 72 signs and 81 auspicious marks. It is associated with mythology accompanied by markings—such as white hair at birth or bone protrusions on the forehead called the Sun Horn and the Moon Crescent—that are highly symbolic and points of meditation (Kohn 2002, 85).

At this point I must make a brief mention of Laozi's connection with the Buddha. The interaction with Buddhism in the court debates and elsewhere resulted in a free exchange between Buddhism and Daoism. For example, the 72 signs and 81 auspicious marks of Lord Lao can be traced to the 32 signs and 80 marks of the Buddha. The numbers were simply adjusted to fit Daoist numerology (Kohn 1996, 205). The birth narrative, too,

shows close links to the stories of Buddha's birth. By adopting the birth story and other elements of Buddhism, Daoism is claiming itself as a universal religion and Lord Lao as the seat of all creation and the source of all teachings, particularly of Buddhism (Kohn 2000, 299).

Luke³

Luke-Acts is dated about 85 AD plus or minus five to ten years (Brown 1997, 274). By the latter half of the second century Christians attributed Luke-Acts to Luke the physician and companion to Paul (Brown 1997, 267). There is some debate over the author's identity, but most agree that Luke was not a disciple of Jesus. Rather, he writes on the eyewitness accounts of others with regards to the life and ministry of Jesus (Brown 1997, 227). If we accept the tradition that Luke was a companion of Paul, Luke-Acts was probably written in and to an area of Greece and not to just one community (Brown 1997, 270f.), as with other New Testament writings.

The purpose of the writing of Luke was to help believers' self-understanding at a time of persecution. Christians in the Roman Empire needed to be reassured that there was nothing in their origins that could be construed as subversive to Roman authority (Brown 1997, 271). They needed to understand their relationship to the kingdom of God at a time when they lived in a kingdom of men.

The logical order of Luke-Acts and narrative style, help communicate the message that God has not changed His divine plan with the coming of Christ, but has fulfilled it. The people of Israel were longing for a messiah. Luke says that that longing is fulfilled in the person of Jesus of Nazareth (Brown 1997, 272).

³ The following background of the Gospel of Luke follows Ray Brown's analysis.

A Comparison of Birth Narratives

What follows is a passage from the third version of the *Huabu jing* (early eighth century) that is compared with passages from the second chapter of Luke:

Luke	<i>Huabu jing</i>
<p>In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. (1:26-27)</p> <p>In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. (2:1-2)</p> <p>While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. (6-9)</p> <p>The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. (10)</p> <p>For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is messiah and Lord. (11)</p> <p>And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God...(12-13)</p> <p>After three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions and all who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers. (2:46-47)</p>	<p>In those days, in the reign of Tanjia of Yin with the year star in <i>gengshen</i>, in the month [...], 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.</p> <p>In the year <i>gengshen</i>, 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.</p> <p>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: "In heaven above, on the earth below, I alone am venerable. I shall reveal the highest law of the Dao. I shall save all things moving and growing, the entire host of living beings. I shall wander across the ten directions and reach to the dark prisons of the underworld. I shall lead all those not yet saved and all those lost in error to certain salvation." (Kohn 1993, 72)</p>

Huahu jing: the Birth of Laozi

The birth of Laozi is situated in history, even to the date and location, as is Jesus' birth in Luke (Luke 2:1ff). In contrast to the annunciation, Lord Lao's conception is told with a spectacle of light and energies, but he ends up, like Jesus, in a virgin's womb, where he became man. His birth is accompanied by dragons, which not only serve to represent nature—as do the presumed animals in the stable (Kohn 2002, 82)—but also angels, insofar as they are beings that travel between heaven and earth. Immediately at birth, Lord Lao is able to walk and talk. Finally, he is identified as the savior of the world.

Childhood of Jesus in Luke

The passages in Luke that parallel the birth narrative of the *Huahu jing* are not all found in one chapter, but are scattered among the events of Jesus' conception, birth and youth. Like Lord Lao, Jesus is divinely conceived (Luke 1:26-38), witnessed by nature by the supposed animals in the stable (Luke 2:7) and by heaven (Luke 2:9-14), proclaimed the savior of the world (Luke 2:11) and is recognized as having wisdom beyond his years (Luke 2:46-47).

Luke is often thought of as history in a way the other Gospels are not. However, as Raymond Brown notes, it is not the intention of the author to record history, but to provide notes about the messiah for the believing community (Brown 1997, 227). These notes are laid out logically and therefore read like a history book, with its order and richness. To begin, the conception is simply announced and accepted by Mary, there is no other explanation of how it took place than that. The narrative is placed in a historical context in 1:26, and proclaims Jesus as within the past history of Israel, by placing Him in the Davidic line (1:27

& 32). Jesus, by His divine birth, joins heaven and earth (Brown 1997, 229). The divine being born is the savior of the world, not just a heavenly visitor. However, the child is not surrounded by thrones and comforts, but is close to nature in the manger, surrounded by the animals of the stable. Even the skies give witness through the heavenly host (Luke 2:9-14).

At the end of chapter 2 (Luke 2:41-52), Jesus, while a human boy, is shown to have remarkable abilities. His questions reveal his human intellect, and his answers reveal divine interpretation. Again, the divine child exceeds expectations, as he does later in his public ministry. His miracles and spiritual insight beg the question as to when and where he acquired such abilities. This passage answers that he acquired them from an early age (Brown 1997, 234), and the reference to his Father points to his divine origins, as did the proclamation of Luke 1:35.

The Concepts of Savior, Lord, and Messiah

<i>Luke 2:10-12</i>	<i>Huabu jing</i>
<p>“Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.”</p>	<p>“In heaven above, on the earth below, I alone am venerable. I shall reveal the highest law of the Dao. I shall save all things moving and growing, the entire host of living beings. I shall wander across the ten directions and reach to the dark prisons of the underworld. I shall lead all those no yet saved and all those lost in error to certain salvation.” (Kohn 1993, 72)</p>

Authors of both Luke and the *Huabu jing* give images of events and characteristics of the descended deity to legitimate their claims that the child in each story will be different and will do something great. At this point the Christian reader is tempted by the easy answer: the stories of Luke actually happened but the Laozi story is not really true.

Another option is to acknowledge that the experience of a deity 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 (Clooney 1996, 266). A common device is the virgin birth story. Indeed it is so ubiquitous that early missionaries concluded that Satan was planting these stories before them in order to mock them and undermine their efforts (Campbell 1949, 309).

Rather than being distracted by the particularities of the images, the reader is better served by considering more closely what these images are trying to say. The images are drawing attention to the special identity of these people. But who is Jesus? Who is Lord Lao? And why are they here? The texts identify them as savior, lord, and in the case of Jesus, messiah. What do these words mean?

Though Lord Lao and Jesus appear to be competing for the title of savior of the universe, such a competition may not be the case. A closer look at the key claims of the passages of the *Huanhu jing*—Lord Lao as the bringer of salvation—and those cited in Luke 2:10-12—Jesus as savior, lord and messiah—bring into question whether Jesus and Lord Lao are competitors. This is to ask: Are the *Huanhu jing* and Luke competing revelations?

Lord Lao as the Bringer of Salvation

Salvation as the end of earthly struggles was such a radical movement from Chinese thought up to the Han that an outside influence cannot be ruled out (Kohn 1998, 308 fn 22). 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* (德)⁴, 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 (cf. Ivanhoe 2000).

In contrast, Lord Lao, in texts like the *Huahu jing* above, brings salvation to all of the cosmos. He does so by making several appearances to rulers at times when they have fallen significantly from the Dao. Upon following his divine teachings, the kingdom regains harmony with the Dao. In this way, Lord Lao brings salvation one piece at a time until the eschaton of Great Peace (*Taiping*) blooms and a perfect harmony with the Dao endures on earth (Kohn 1998, 291 ff.). In this way the Daoism of the *Huahu jing*, and of the Celestial Masters, is millennial in character. Norman Cohn cites five notions surrounding salvation in millennialism:

1. collective: it is to be enjoyed by the faithful as a group
2. terrestrial: it is to be realized on this earth and not in some otherworldly heaven
3. immanent: it is to come both soon and suddenly
4. total: it will utterly transform life on earth, so that the new dispensation will be no mere improvement on the present but perfection itself
5. supernatural: it is accomplished by agencies that are consciously regarded as beyond the confines of the phenomenal world (Cohn as cited in Kohn 1998, 307f)

Thus Lord Lao was adopted by millenarian cults as a savior. However, the *Huahu jing*'s focus is not on the eschaton, but on the claim of the conversion of the barbarians, as its title states, thereby establishing Daoism as the superior religion to Buddhism in the court debates. Lord Lao's appearance on earth, acceptance of disciples and movement to the West was, according to the *Huahu jing*, for the purpose of moving the cosmos along towards the

⁴ This is the same *de* (德) as the famous *Dao De jing* (道德經), *The Book of the Way and Its Power*.

Great Peace promised to the first Celestial Master, Zhang Daoling, in 142 CE (Kohn 2001, 70).

These attributes—savior, advisor to monarchs, and divinity—are reflected in the many titles given to him in the *Huahu Jing*:

Highest Venerable Lord
Perfect Divine Wisdom
All-Highest Worthy
Teacher of Emperors and Kings
Great Officer
Great Immortal Worthy
Father of Gods and Peoples
Highest One of Nonaction
Great Compassionate and Benevolent One
Heavenly Worthy of Primordial Beginning (Kohn 1998, 249)

Jesus as Savior, Lord and Messiah

In Luke 2:10-12, Jesus is given fewer titles than Lord Lao in the *Huahu jing*, but still has three very important ones that tell the reader who Jesus is: savior, lord, and messiah. The first title, savior (σωτηρ) appears here in reference to Jesus for the first time. The title combines elements of the sacred and the secular (Coleridge 1993, 140). The sacred element relates Jesus to God as referred to in Luke 1:47 and 69, while the secular element refers to this title as one used for rulers in the Greek speaking world and applied specifically to Caesar Augustus, the emperor at the time (Luke 2:1). The message here is that Jesus is to bring peace to heaven and earth.

The second element mentioned in Luke 2:10-12 is Jesus as lord (κυριος). Likewise this has a sacred and secular element. The sacred element is similar to that of savior in the Jesus and God are connected by this title, and likewise, it is used in reference to both gods and rulers as the source of power (Coleridge 1993, 141).

The third element, messiah (χριστός), however, is entirely Jewish and wholly sacred. What is unusual is how it is linked with lord. Until this point, lord, has only been used in reference to God. Savior and lord were used widely in the Greek world with reference to imperial power, which throws a striking contrast to the Davidic messiah (Coleridge 1993, 141). What is also unusual is the connection with glory: glory of the angels, its references to Isaiah 40, and elsewhere in Luke-Acts. It is this connection which is peculiar to Luke. Glory and salvation lead the reader to consider a kingly reign (Leany 1966, 36). For Luke “glory means kingly reign, a king who is also a servant. He delegates his kingdom, enters his glory by his death and resurrection, and rises to his throne” (Coleridge 1993, 140). So up to that time, scripture was to pre-figure the long awaited messiah (Leany 1966, 36). The term messiah is placed in juxtaposition with the terms savior and lord. Luke portrays Jesus as the king of Israel and of the universe, due to the bi-valence of the two terms savior and lord and due to the meaning of messiah, which is specific to Israel.

This messiah, Jesus, has come down with the intention of bringing the good news of his kingdom, a kingdom of peace in a new heavens and a new earth. He establishes it through his salvific death and resurrection. However, even though the kingdom is established, it will not be fully realized until the end of time, and he will not come again until then.

Lord Lao and Jesus Compared

In these texts, Lord Lao and Jesus both share salvific roles, and therefore both Celestial Masters Daoism and Christianity share a linear movement towards an eschaton. In neither is there the cyclical concept of time as one finds in early Chinese thought and elsewhere.

However, the similarities end there. In the *Huahu jing*, Lord Lao’s appearance is just one of

many. He appears to give history a push towards the eschaton, whenever it needs it. The emphasis in the *Huabujing* is not on Lord Lao's salvific role, but on his conversion of the Indians. By contrast, Jesus appears once until the eschaton. Rather than pushing history along now and then, he makes one, history-changing appearance that ripples through all time. This does not happen as a surprise to Israel, but Jesus is the fulfillment of an expectation of a Messiah (Leany 1966, 34). Lord Lao, however, comes completely unannounced.

Conclusion

Initially when Christian readers come across stories that are uncomfortably similar to those found in the Bible, the first response is a defensive one. Our community teaches to read the Bible as unique events in the relationship between God and humanity. Hopefully, the defensive move will cause the reader to pause—rather than simply attributing the story to the work of the devil, as did the early missionaries—and take a closer look at the basic questions asked of a text: who wrote it? To whom was it written? Why? Where? The listing of similarities and differences is helpful, but the comparison should lead to recognition of elements taken for granted in the reader's own tradition (c.f. Clooney 1996).

In the case of the birth narrative of Laozi and Jesus, the most numerous and striking similarities have to do with the fantastic people, events and circumstances surrounding the births. Noticing these, we are reminded of why they are there: to give witness to the hallowed person coming forth. Our attention is then focused on who is Lord Lao, who is Jesus and what do they do?

The answer reveals that they are not claiming the same thing, and therefore neither are these narratives. Laozi moves this world along towards an era of Great Peace; Jesus is the savior of both Heaven and Earth who entered our world to heal a cosmic wound.

Such a crossing of texts reveals the common need to religious traditions to assert the legitimacy of their founders and their truth claims. In this case, the Christian reader reaffirms the uniqueness of Christ. Self-assured the Christian can return to the boundaries of his or her community and is ready to venture further now with deeper roots grown by the work of comparison.

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