

4. When Gods Talk to Men: Reading Mary with the Annunciations of the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East

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‘The Annunciation’ of Jesus’ birth to Mary by the Angel Gabriel is the beginning of an illustrious story indeed. It comes to us from the third Evangelist, Luke, and, paired with its precursor narrative which tells the story of John the Baptist’s birth, sets the stage for the entire gospel to come:

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.’ ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’ ³⁴Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’ ³⁵The angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.’ ³⁸Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her.¹

The whole episode is temporally oriented to Elizabeth’s pregnancy (Luke [Lk] 1.26), but quickly moves on to the messenger, the Angel Gabriel, and to the recipient of the

1 Luke 1.26-38, NRSV. All biblical quotations are derived from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

message, Mary, a virgin (Greek: *parthénos*) engaged to Joseph, a man of the house of David. The body of the exchange is the discourse between Gabriel and Mary: the former offering words of reassurance, the latter responding with perplexity. Because she has found favour with God (Lk 1.30), Gabriel informs Mary that she will give birth to a son named Jesus (Lk 1.31), who will grow in stature such that he will be given the throne of David (Lk 1.32) and will reign over Israel/Jacob in perpetuity (Lk 1.33). Though Mary initially responds with incredulity, Gabriel points to Elizabeth's mature pregnancy as a sign of divine potency (Lk 1.36), assuring Mary that 'nothing is impossible with God'. In response, she relents, commits to being a servant of God (Lk 1.38), and Gabriel duly departs.

Luke's annunciation is the foundation story of all foundation stories. To a young woman is revealed the destiny not simply of herself or even her extraordinary child (variously called 'great', 'Son of the Most High', 'holy', 'Son of God'), but that of the people to whom she belongs, the house of Jacob, who will see an ancient promise come to fruition. The particulars are grand to be sure — so much so that a new testament rests on its shoulders. But my hope here is to explore another story — in which the announcement that Mariam² will give birth to Jeshua³ (the *mashiah* [Messiah] and son of God) is in fact the last episode in an inherited story just as illustrious. My wish, in effect, is to explore how the 'Annunciation' functions within its own, original context as Jewish literature. After all, before Luke's story could become the springboard for Christianity — the *start* of Jesus' story — it was written to demonstrate that Jesus was the culmination of the Jewish story. Thus, before we look to how Christianity has used the Annunciation in the arts, my hope is to explore how it fits into the tradition from which it arose, and how it itself engages with a complex constellation of texts. Indeed, the Annunciation can perhaps act as an object lesson for the force, merit and value of artistic and theological play.

To this end I shall consider the relation between the Annunciation in Luke's gospel and the biblical 'annunciation type-scene', to which, I suggest, Mary's Annunciation does not altogether conform. Instead, I argue that Luke's narrative structure more closely follows the sequence and progression of theophany scenes in the Hebrew Bible, suggesting that Luke has narrated his annunciation to be the theophany of theophanies. Next I shall examine the second annunciation of Jesus' birth in the Gospel of Matthew. Conveyed to Joseph in a dream, Matthew's annunciation also follows a well-established literary pattern in the Hebrew Bible and the wider ancient Near East. A variation on a 'prophetic dream-vision', Matthew's annunciation functions to demonstrate that the events surrounding the birth of Jesus unfold so as to fulfil the promise of Jewish scripture. Finally, I turn to the 'why' of the Annunciation, arguing that Matthew and Luke are engaged not only in a theological discussion, but a literary one as well.

2 'Mariam' is the Greek rendering of the name Miriam/Mary.

3 'Jeshua' is the Greek rendering of the name Joshua/Jesus.

1. Mary and the Annunciation Type-Scene

The contours of Mary's story are by no means unique. Each element of the exchange between Gabriel and Mary is intimately related to a group of texts in the Hebrew Bible, which when taken together form what many now refer to as the 'annunciation type-scene'; the function of which is to recount how a woman gives birth to a child (inevitably a son) because of the direct pronouncement and/or promise of God. Scholars disagree on the precise conventions of the type-scene — the arguments range across the spectrum from the overly simple⁴ to the overly complex⁵—but most are happy to acknowledge five component parts to the type-scene: 1) plight of a woman; 2) prayer or appeal made to God; 3) annunciation scene proper; 4) birth report; 5) concluding statement.⁶

With this set of conventions in mind, one can identify seven annunciation type-scenes in the Hebrew Bible, used to initiate the narrative lives of Hagar (Genesis [Gen] 16), Sarah (Gen 18), Rebekah (Gen 25), Rachel (Gen 29-30), Manoah's wife (Judges [Jdg] 13), Hannah (1 Samuel [Sam] 1), and Elisha's Shunammite Woman (2 Kings [Kgs] 4).

- 1) The plight experienced by all but one woman is barrenness (Sarah, Gen 18. 11; Rebekah, Gen 25.21; Rachel, Gen 29.31; Manoah's wife/Samson's mother, Jdg 13.2; Hannah, 1 Sam 1.2; the Shunammite Woman, 2 Kgs 4.15). Here Hagar is the outlier — her plight is Sarah's wrath (Gen 16.8).
- 2) The prayer or appeal to God underpins Rebekah's type-scene (even if it is Isaac who prays in Gen 25.21), Rachel's lamentation of her continued infertility (Gen 29), as well as the narrative structure of Hannah's temple scene (1 Sam 2.13). Prayer, loosely conceived, provides some kind of pretext in the dealings between Abraham and Sarah in Gen 18. And yet again, Hagar appears to be the outlier.
- 3) There is a report concerning all seven of the women that they will either conceive and/or bear a son. A divine figure (be it God or an angel) pronounces the coming male child to Hagar and Manoah's wife. The respective narratives of Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah all report that their wombs have been opened. More straightforwardly, Sarah and the Shunammite Woman simply fall pregnant.

4 Robert Alter, 'How Convention Helps Us Read: The Case of the Bible's Annunciation Type-Scene,' *Prooftexts*, 3 (1983), pp. 115–30; Esther Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman*, JSOTSupp 310 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

5 James G. Williams, 'The Beautiful and the Barren: Conventions in Biblical Type-Scenes,' *JSOT*, 17 (1980), 107–19; Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, AB Reference Library, 2nd edn. (New York: Doubleday, 1993).

6 Timothy D. Finlay, *The Birth Report Genre in the Hebrew Bible*, FATII 12 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

- 4) All seven scenes contain a birth report, even if at times truncated and interwoven with the pronouncement of the child's name: Hagar and Ishmael, Sarah and Isaac, Rebekah, Esau and Jacob; Rachel and Joseph; Manoah's wife and Samson; Hannah and Samuel. The outlier here is the Shunammite Woman, though all minor characters in the story appear anonymous, suggesting that the type-scene plays second fiddle to Elisha the prophet.
- 5) All good stories must come to an end, as all seven of our type-scenes do.

Working with this set of conventions for an annunciation type-scene, one can also include the precursor story to Mary's: Elizabeth's narrative that begins the gospel, which follows each convention perfectly. Elizabeth is barren (Lk 1.13, 25) despite the prayers of Zechariah (Lk 1.13). Gabriel announces that she will bear a son, John the Baptist (Lk 1.13), which in due course she does (Lk 1.57); the story ends with a report of how he grows and thrives to adulthood (Lk 1.80). Elizabeth's annunciation type-scene is, therefore, the most pristine in the biblical corpus. Though Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah, acts as a model of what *not* to do as recipient of an annunciation (Lk 1.8-23), the larger narrative typifies the conventions of the scene to perfection.

What does not typify the conventions of the type-scene, however, is Mary's own version of it. She is neither barren, nor in plight. She does not pray to God in the initial iteration of the type-scene. There is no birth report. And while all good stories must come to an end, the concluding statement, 'Then the angel departed from her' (Lk 1.38), hardly relates to the nature or instantiation of the annunciation.⁷

The scholarly escape routes from the problem are diverse, though all in some way tweak the convention to keep Mary's Annunciation as part of the type-scene. Robert Alter, for example, suggests that it is the nature of type-scenes to 'surprise' the reader, subverting expectations by means of purposefully breaking the established convention.⁸ Athalya Brenner nuances the convention itself, arguing that deviation is allowed if and when it is concerned with pre-conception difficulties.⁹ And James G. Williams argues that the discord between Mary and her putative type-scene is evidence of innovation, 'which manifests the concerns of a newly formed religious tradition that is still partially linked to its parent tradition'.¹⁰

All three of these avenues of argument are troublesome, because each forces Mary into a type-scene into which she clearly does not fit. I do not take issue with the existence of a type-scene that might tie together all of the biblical matriarchs (as we will see later, on some level, I think this *is* what the text is attempting to do), nor with the reconfiguration of conventions so as to allow for variation. Profound transformation can

7 Ending the type-scene as some do in Lk 1.56 and thus including the Magnificat and the report that Mary returned home does not rehabilitate the convention.

8 Alter, 'How Convention Helps Us Read', pp. 127-29.

9 Athalya Brenner, 'Female Social Behaviour: Two Descriptive Patterns within the "Birth of the Hebrew" Paradigm,' *Vetus Testamentum*, 36 (1986), pp. 257-73.

10 Williams, 'Beautiful and the Barren,' p. 113.

occur as a result of adaption — as evidenced by most of the biblical canon. Instead, the issue lies with the title — the Annunciation — that we employ, inasmuch as it leads the type-scene to be defined by an episode that runs contrary to the scene's conventions. Because the announcement of Jesus's birth to Mary is considered to be *the* ultimate and greatest annunciation, the type-scene is determined by the subject of the announcement (birth of a child) rather than its narrative conventions, which overwhelmingly point to the barrenness of the woman. In fact, there appears no benefit in referring to the child-miraculously-born-to-barren-woman type-scene in the Hebrew Bible as a 'type-scene' to *the* Annunciation (i.e. Mary's annunciation in the New Testament); to do so is to collapse two different narratives onto one another for the sake of raising the New Testament iteration, that is, the Christian iteration, over the Old Testament, that is over the Jewish iteration.

If, however, we excise Mary from the barren-woman type-scene, we must also excise Hagar. But it is precisely in the similarities shared by these two women, long noticed by Islam,¹¹ that the importance of Mary's type-scene begins to emerge: both are young women; both are promised a son whose destiny is fixed; both are commanded to give the child a predetermined name. Both women converse directly with, and see, a divine being, moving our type-scene away from barren mother to that of theophany, where, perhaps, the Annunciation is most at home.

2. Mary's Annunciation and the 'Theophany' Type-Scene.

George Savran has explored the various conventions that make up the theophany type-scene in the Bible.¹² Also opting for five conventions, Savran lays out the theophany type-scene as follows: 1) scene setting wherein the protagonist is separated (intentionally or unintentionally) so as to experience the theophany; 2) the appearance and speech of Yahweh (YHWH) (or his representative); 3) human response to the presence of the divine; 4) expression of doubt or anxiety; 5) externalization, wherein the protagonist re-enters the external realm and is reintegrated into society.

Mary's story gains new life when we read her as the protagonist of a theophany before the recipient of a divine promise. Gabriel is sent by God to Mary, and she encounters the angelic figure whilst alone (convention 1). He speaks to her and relays an announcement built upon Mary's status as a favoured one (Lk 1.28; convention 2). Mary, initially perplexed by the angel's greeting, is told not to be afraid (Lk 1.20; convention 3). Indeed, after the first pronouncement concerning her as yet unborn son, Mary asks the question upon which the entire theophany turns, 'how can this be, since I am a virgin?' (Lk 1.34). Somehow satisfied with Gabriel's response (that she will be overshadowed by the power of the Holy Spirit), Mary accepts her future,

11 For a larger discussion, see Robert C. Gregg, *Shared Stories, Rival Tellings: Early Encounters of Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 543–91.

12 George W. Savran, 'Theophany as Type Scene,' *Prooftexts*, 23 (2003), pp. 119–49.

self-identifying as ‘the servant of the Lord’ (Lk 1.38) and handing over agency to Gabriel (convention 4). Finally, Mary is externalized first with the departure of the angel and then with the next step she takes, which is to leave Nazareth in search of Elizabeth (Lk 1.39; convention 5). Whereas Mary was an awkward outlier for the conventions of the ‘annunciation type-scene’, she is fully accounted for when we evaluate her according to the conventions of a theophany type-scene.

Suggesting we read Mary as a theophany heroine is not to jump out of bed with one type-scene and back into bed with another for the sake of theological warmth. It is to offer a wider textual canvas with which Luke’s Mary is in conversation, hopefully bringing her out from under the weight of the promise given to her and into a context in which she acts with other protagonists of the theophany tradition(s). The promise that she will conceive and bear a son unquestionably tethers Mary to the great women of Jewish scripture — Hagar, Sarah, Samson’s mother, Hannah, and the mother-to-be of Isaiah [Isa] 7.14. But Mary’s *story* tethers her to the great heroes of that very same scripture (Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, Gideon) and to YHWH’s prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel), all of whom are recipients of a divine annunciation. With a simple statement, conveyed by the single Greek word *idou*, Mary’s response to Gabriel, ‘here I am’, evokes the Hebrew *hinnenî*, and with it the response of Jacob (Gen 31; 46), the response of Moses (Exodus [Exod] 3), and the response of Samuel (1 Sam 3) to a divine call. Through this one word, Akedah itself (Gen 22) — the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, without which Jesus would mean very little — is called into the constellation of Mary’s theophany.

The greatest dividend of reading Mary’s story as a theophany is the transformation she undergoes. Theophany type-scenes are most often used to recount first-time encounters with the divine (e.g. Isa 6), functioning not just as the preface to a major change in the life of the protagonist, but as the narrative transformation of that protagonist from one stage to another, one person to another (e.g. Abraham; Jacob; Moses). And so, the importance of the Annunciation is not what, or even that, God pronounces something to Mary, it is that she meets Gabriel as God’s messenger and takes up the unthinkable (even unfathomable) commission that he has for her, transfiguring from a young woman to the mother of God.

3. Joseph’s Annunciation and the Prophetic Dream Vision

I have purposefully ignored Mary’s second annunciation scene, as found in Matthew [Mt] 1.18-25, because it is not an annunciation to Mary at all, but a divine dream given to Joseph. It shares certain similarities with the Luke passage, but is logically distinct:

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' ²²All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.' ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

The Matthean 'annunciation' has a number of similarities with its Lukan counterpart: there is a Mary, a child conceived from the Holy Spirit, a prediction of the son and his function, and an angelic figure with whom Joseph converses as a proxy for God. Here is where the similarities end. While there is a 'Mary', this story of the 'birth of Jesus' hovers around and is concerned solely with the actions and reactions of Joseph. Like Rebekah's barren-wife variation, which is told initially in relation to Isaac (Gen 25), Mary's inexplicable pregnancy is resolved between the divine representative and Mary's betrothed, against whom presumably the offence has been committed. Moreover, though the pericope ends with the statement that Joseph named the child 'Jesus', at no point does Joseph speak. No one in this version, bar the divine messenger, utters a word. One supposes, then, that it is a true 'annunciation'.

The story stands out in two further, and much more significant ways. Firstly, the knowledge that Joseph receives is conveyed in the format of a dream. Two of the Bible's early protagonists experience life-changing dreams: Jacob (Gen 28) and Abimelech (Gen 20). When implicitly associated with prophetic revelation (e.g. Joseph, Daniel), divine revelation through dreams appears to be the textual and revelatory canvas for royalty (e.g. Solomon in 1 Kgs 3; Pharaoh in Egypt).¹³ Moreover, it is in this scene, and this scene alone, that we find larger, ancient Near Eastern conversation partners.¹⁴ Both the Legend of King Kirta and the Aqhat Legend, known to us from the Levantine Ras Shamra archive, begin with a royal protagonist whose dynasty is either under threat or entirely compromised.¹⁵ Each king induces a dream through ritual and receives

13 Koowon Kim, *Incubation as a Type-Scene in the Aqhatu, Kirta, and Hannah Stories: A Form-Critical and Narratological Study of KTU 1.14 I-1.15 III, 1.17 I-II, and 1 Samuel 1:1-2:11*, VTSupp 145 (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

14 On the discussion more broadly, see Scott A. Ashmon, *Birth Annunciations in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East: A Literary Analysis of the Forms and Functions of the Heavenly Foretelling of the Destiny of a Special Child* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2012).

15 For the texts, see the various entries in *Context of Scripture. Volume 1: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, ed. by W. W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, 3 vols. (Leiden and New York: E. J. Brill, 1996).

divine assurance from the head of the pantheon (the God El) regarding the birth of a child. Of King Kirta, we read:

As he wept, he fell asleep,
 As he shed tears, he slumbered.
 Sleep overcame him and he lay down,
 Slumber and he curled up.
 In a dream Ilu descended,
 In a vision, the father of mankind.
 He came near, asking Kirta:
 Who is Kirta that he should weep?
 Should shed tears, the goodly lad of Ilu?
 ...
 What need have I of silver and of yellow gold?
 ...
 [Permit] me to acquire sons,
 [Permit] me to multiply [children].
 ...
 Rather, you must give what my house lacks:
 Give me maid Hurraya,
 The best girl of your firstborn offspring;
 ...
 That she might bear a scion for Kirta, a lad for the servant of Ilu.

 Kirta looked about and it had been a dream,
 The servant of Ilu, and it had been a vision.¹⁶

The second aspect that distinguishes Matthew's annunciation is more obvious: why does Joseph find himself with a soon-to-be wife impregnated by the Holy Spirit? All this took place, claims the evangelist, 'to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophets' (Mt 1.22). For Matthew, there is no question of agency on the part of either Joseph or Mary. God may speak and pronounce, but even divine speech in the present is tethered to an earlier promise once given to Ahaz through Isaiah, concerning Hezekiah (Isa 7.14). History unfolds, and God communicates so as to enable promises of the past to be fulfilled.

4. Theophanies and Cognitive Dissonance: The Problem of Mary

But what does all of this mean? What is the purpose of an annunciation? In short, why have Matthew and Luke gone to the trouble? Unfortunately, we do not have anything even approximating a foolproof answer.¹⁷ The enterprise of identifying type-scenes,

16 Dennis Pardee, 'Kirta Epic,' in *Context of Scripture*, Vol. 1, pp. 333–43.

17 Ashmon is the most comprehensive in his list of "functions" served by annunciation narratives from the ancient Near Eastern and the Hebrew Bible (*Birth Annunciations*, pp. 277–321; pp. 328–30). By

and assessing biblical narratives according to their conventions, was intended to avoid questions of genre, historical priority, and causation. Yet such evasions are frustrating, skirting as they do the ever important question, 'why?'. Allow me then to offer two possible answers to the 'why' of the Annunciation: one historical, the other literary.

Let me turn first to the historical. In the textual world of the ancient Near East, Gods talk to men when there is a problem, most usually concerning the men themselves. Divine speech is used time and again to smooth over and alleviate cognitive dissonance. Positively, the outcome for the men to whom Gods speak is a change in their person: a new name and thus identity in the case of Jacob (from Jacob to Israel [cf. Gen 32]), and a new vocation or calling in the case of Moses (from run-away shepherd to the leader of God's people [cf. Exod 3]). For Mary, then, as a result of God's speech to her, she is called to take on the task of all tasks, the vocation of vocations — to be, as we noted earlier, *the* mother of God.

Negatively, however, we might query what the cognitive dissonance is that Luke and Matthew endeavour to assuage in the first place? One option that immediately comes to mind is the problem of Jesus' origins. In accounting for Jesus, the gospels do not sing from the same hymn sheet. Mark, for one, is not compelled to muse on the birth of Jesus (nor, for that matter, is Paul). By contrast, John masterfully weaves Jesus into the very fabric of creation: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (John 1.1). But whatever soteriological function Jesus has for either Mark or John, it is not one based on his human lineage or the nature of his birth.

Matthew and Luke, on the other hand, orient Jesus into the history of Israel, each providing a genealogy for Jesus which ties his salvific function to lineage. For Luke, the genealogy begins with Jesus (Lk 3.23) and works itself backwards, weaving through King David (albeit through an obscure son¹⁸), the royal tribe of Judah, Abraham and Adam, and ending with God: 'son of Adam, son of God' (Lk 3.38). Matthew's approach travels in the other direction, beginning with Abraham and weaving through King David and his most prominent sons. For Matthew, Jesus is the latest and last king of Judah; the genealogy demonstrates precisely what it claims of itself in Mt 1.1, that Jesus is 'the Anointed One, the son of David, the son of Abraham'. Perhaps the annunciation scenes are meant to act as further justification — lending both heroic and scriptural weight to the contested royalty of a man of no known origin, ignominiously put to death by Rome for political insurrection.

Ashmon's count, the former grouping of texts serves twenty different functions, the latter twenty-two, the two corpora sharing approximately seven elements (e.g. Legitimate Destiny[ies]; Show God's Character; Elevate Mother's Status; *et. al.*). I am very much in favour of allowing annunciation texts to serve a diverse set of different, even unique purposes, but we must be careful not to freight the biblical version with more theological importance than other ancient Near Eastern texts. The promise that a son will be born to a young woman in Isa 7.14 is no less political than the announcement of a coming, salvific king in the Egyptian *Prophecies of Neferti*, for example.

18 Nathan as David's son as distinct from his admonishing court prophet is attested only in 1 Chron 3.5; cf. 14.4.

However, Matthew's genealogy gives further pause for thought, not because of the genealogical route by which he traces Jesus' lineage, but because of the five women he mentions in that lineage: Tamar, a woman who pretends to be a prostitute; Rahab, a prostitute; Ruth, a widow who arguably prostitutes herself; the wife of Uriah, a woman taken and impregnated in adultery; and Mary. Matthew's genealogy therefore draws our attention to Mary herself. Is it possible that she is the problem the annunciation must tackle?

If so, how does each of the annunciation scenes address the problem of Mary's putatively illegitimate pregnancy? Matthew is the most straightforward and the least subtle of the two. Mary is pregnant because scripture said she must be so: 'All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet' (Mt 1.22). One might also suggest that Matthew's Mary is made a virgin for the same reason, to fulfil every aspect that might point to Jesus as *christos* even at the expense of the integrity of his mother. Mary's agency is eclipsed by the demands of fulfilment of prophecy and scriptural allusion. By contrast, Luke appears to take on the question of Mary's integrity through Mary's own actions. By accepting the call to divine servanthood through a proclamation of existence — *hinneni/idou*/I am here — Mary becomes a member of a rich constellation of servants to God. For Luke, then, Mary's scriptural pedigree renders void any doubt over her virtue.

Now, the second of the two explanations for the 'why' of the Annunciation — the literary. Whatever we decide about a possible historical 'why' for the Annunciation texts, their rich textuality is undeniable. Each engages with scripture in complex ways that — at least in this initial iteration — do not seem to 'replace' the scriptural antecedent, but endeavour to demonstrate that Mary stands in relation to an expansive hinterland of texts. The historical problem of Mary in Matthew was *created* by the demands of scripture. In Luke, by contrast, the historical problem of Mary was *resolved* by the fluidity of scripture. Addressed from a different perspective, each Annunciation text is in complex conversation with the multiple stories of the Hebrew Bible. As Yair Zakovitch reminds us:

The Bible's profusion of interpretative strategies testifies to its being a branching network of relationships that connect distant texts, binding them to one another. Writings from different historical periods and a variety of literary genres call out and interpret one another, with the interpreted texts being reflected back — somewhat altered — from a multitude of mirrors. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration when I propose that no literary unit in the Bible stands alone, isolated and independent, with no other text drawing from its reservoir and casting it in a new light.¹⁹

19 Yair Zakovitch, 'Inner-Biblical Interpretation,' in *Reading Genesis: Ten Methods*, ed. by Ronald Hendel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 92–118 (p. 95).

What goes for the Hebrew Bible continues into its next iteration, the New Testament.²⁰ The profusion of interpretative strategies testifies to the Bible being a branching network of relationships that connect texts, binding them to one another. So, let me encourage you to read Mary at the end of the story, concluding that God talks to women and that the art of reworking a biblical text can act as a model for us all.

²⁰ See, for example, Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Gregory K. Beal, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).