

Notes on the virginal conception of Jesus Christ,

by Brian McKinlay

Now 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. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Matthew 1:18-21 (NRSV)

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. [...] The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. [...] Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The 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.

Luke 1:26-7,30-31,34-35 (NRSV)

"Virginal conception" is the term preferred to "virgin birth" as the precise question at stake is whether Jesus was conceived without a human biological father?

"This belief maintains that Christ's incarnation did not follow the ordinary innerworldly laws of procreation but was the fruit of a special intervention by the Holy Spirit." (O'Collins 1995, p.273)

O'Collins goes on to categorise difficulties with this belief as philosophical, historical, hermeneutical and theological (p.273). We begin with the historical and hermeneutical concerns, by addressing ourselves to the Biblical texts, their meaning and their interpretation.

A. THE BIBLICAL TEXTS AND THE HISTORICITY OF THE VIRGINAL CONCEPTION

Primary import for Matthew (1.1-25) and Luke (1.20-56 and 3.23-38) is theological, not historical. Historicity not a primary question for the writers. Luke is a story centred on Mary. Matthew speaks of Joseph, not mentioning Mary. The two accounts have little common content and sometimes contradict each other (Matthew: Joseph and Mary lived in Bethlehem; Luke: they went there from Nazareth because of the census) But the two accounts agree on the event of the virginal conception.

1. Disagreement as to the nature of the texts

a) *Are they factual narration?*

Richardson (1958, p.172) asserts that Matthew and Luke state the fact of Christ's birth to a virgin in a straight forward way, with no embedded motives.

"The truth is that is very difficult to suggest any motives which prompted the invention of the story of the Virgin Birth, if its not an historical fact." (Richardson 1958, p.172)

b) *Are they myth or legend?*

Moltmann (1993) is an example of a notable contemporary theologian who concludes that the virginal conception narratives are legend. However he discusses in depth their significance to an understanding the birth of Jesus in the Spirit (p.82ff.).

Because these narrators [Matthew and Luke] make no distinction between history and legend in the modern sense, no objection can be made to the designation "legend" for the stories about Christ's nativity." (Moltmann 1993, p.82)

Spong (1992) discusses the conception and birth narratives as in the tradition of *midrash* - a reinterpretation and extension of earlier text and tradition.

c) *Are they also an account of an illegitimacy?*

"My claim is that the texts dealing with the origin of Jesus ... originally were about an illegitimate conception and not about a miraculous virginal conception. It was the intention - or better, an intention - of Matthew and Luke to pass down the tradition they inherited: that Jesus the Messiah had been illegitimately conceived during the period when his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph." (Schaberg 1987, p.1)

- By the time of gospels, the birth already was being explained as due to intervention of the Holy Spirit.
- It has been suggested that the Gospel writers wrote carefully to take account both of this explanation and that Jesus was conceived before Mary and Joseph" slept together.

2. The rest of NT is silent

"When the time was fully come, God sent forth his son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law." (Galatians 4:4-5) This text is the nearest reference in the New Testament letters to the details of the birth of Jesus. Yet it speaks of birth not conception. It emphasises the birth of

Jesus from a human mother - not the manner of his conception. At what date the story of the virginal conception found its way into Christian confession is unclear. Does the silence of the New Testament other than Luke and Matthew) show the virginal conception story not to have been part of the original *kerugma*?

3. Other comments

- A clear fact seeming to arise from the accounts is that Mary became pregnant before she cohabited with Joseph. This is not likely to be an early Christian invention as a less scandalous scenario could easily have been invented.
- On the other hand, it has been suggested that the intention is that Jesus be shown as being born in scandal just as he died scandalously on a cross.
- Hellenistic and other pagan stories of births due to intervention of the gods in the lives of humans are not true parallels as most involve sexual intercourse and even rape.
- Modern scholars suggest that the conception stories were not explicitly invented to fulfil Old Testament types (Richardson, p. 173).
- Luke and Matthew both accounts make specific reference to the Holy Spirit. This can be cited as a "trinitarian" evidence. But the crucial idea is that the incarnation of Jesus was a work of the Holy Spirit, involving a working together and participation of both the human and the divine.

4. Conclusion?

After a massively detailed study, well regarded by conservatives and liberals alike, Brown sums up:

"I have come to the conclusion that the scientifically controllable evidence leaves the question of the historicity of the virginal conception unresolved."
(Brown 1977, p.527)

B. THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

1. A great degree of controversy.

We have seen that there is controversy about the importance, meaning and form of the texts. There is also much theological disagreement on the virginal conception, its importance, value (or dangers) and meaning.

"It very surprising that the doctrine of the virgin birth should arouse such controversy. No one, indeed, should be deterred from the Christian faith thorough inability to accept this doctrine [...] The question to be considered is whether this doctrine helps to explicate the person of Christ, whether it enables us better to see Jesus as the incarnate Word." (Macquarie 1977, p.280)

2. Dogmatic arguments supporting the virginal conception - the doctrine of the virginal conception held by some to be essential.

In the absence of historical agreement, some argue, we must resort to dogmatics.

"Here we enter a region of acute and most perplexing controversy. But there is one proposition on which all parties ought to be able to agree, namely, that doctrinal considerations must be the determining factor in our belief on the subject. The strictly historical evidence is ... quite insufficient to satisfy anyone the Virgin Birth is a fact, who is not already at least strongly inclined to believe in the truth of the incarnation." (Quick 1938, p.164)

"The final and proper decision is whether in accordance with the demands of church dogma this testimony [ie the Luke and Matthew accounts] is to be heard, and heard in the emphatic statement of the new Testament message or whether it in defiance of Church dogma it is not to be heard, i.e. only to be heard ... [as a statement which] is not binding. [...] It certainly was not their age and source-value that brought these narratives of the Virgin birth into the text of these gospels and out of this text into the creed. But a certain inward, essential rightness and importance ..." (Barth 1956, p.176)

Four arguments in favour of dogmatic affirmation (Quick 1938, p.166):

- There is an unbroken and universal tradition of the church from 2nd century onwards.
- The belief is affirmed by most truly authoritative creed;
- One should take accounts reverence held for the Virgin Mary in devotion;
- The virginal birth is such a special sign and expression of the new creation of humankind by divine act in the person of Jesus, that it is practically inseparable from a genuine and full belief in the incarnation.

This last argument, of the relationship between the virginal conception and the incarnation of Christ, is the most fundamental and pressing.

"The doctrine of the Virgin Birth of Christ is an integral part of the theology of the NT. It expresses the truth that God has set in motion the train of event which will culminate in the final judgement of the world and the salvation of his elect; it is a biblical and Jewish as any belief that can be found in the NT.

[...] It is a unique event ... Reluctance on the part of some modern Christians to believe in the Virgin Birth of Christ has been due to a failure to understand the Bible and the nature of its testimony; ignorance of scriptural meaning always results in failure to perceive the wonderful activity of God ..." (Richardson 1958, p.175).

"The truth of the conception of Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit and of his birth of the Virgin Mary points to the true Incarnation of the true God achieved in his historical manifestation, and recalls the special form through which this beginning of the divine act of grace and revelation, that occurred in Jesus Christ, was distinguished from other human events." (Barth 1949, p.95)

Barth (1956, p.177) argues that the doctrine of the virgin birth upholds the divine initiative in the incarnation. The appearance of the Christ is not just the evolution or unfolding of "natural" human tendencies, but is God's work. In the case of Christ, divine action is so integral to being that we think of him bringing together in the divine and the human in one person.

3. Contrary arguments - the doctrine not held by some to be essential.

The virgin birth is not one of the pillars that sustains the New Testament faith in Christ. The confession of faith in Jesus, the Son of God, the Lord, is independent of the virgin birth, and is not based on it. (Moltmann 1993, p.79)

- There is no attempt in the NT to show any link between saving faith in Christ and belief in the virginal conception.
- Mention of the virgin birth in the creeds is there more emphasises Jesus' humanity as such, rather than a virginal conception.
- Some argue that if Jesus has taken complete humanness, this should involve a completely natural conception and birth. An act of "new creation" is difficult to reconcile with Christ's true humanity.
- There are philosophical objections to God continuing to intervene in the world with new acts of creation, as this may be seen as interfering with the autonomy conferred on the creation at the beginning.
- Much contemporary devotion to Mary is dependent on ideas such as her perpetual virginity, status as co-mediatrix, and her immaculate conception.. There is no biblical evidence whatsoever and some of these are relatively recent doctrines.

4. Ideas the virginal birth does not usually convey.

- It is not generally held to account for Christ's sinlessness as such
- It not essential to account for divine sonship. John and Mark don't see a need to mention it.

5. Feminist focus

"Feminists will more quickly than non-feminists pose the question "why?" about any difficulty that befalls an individual woman " (Schaberg 1987, p.5)

- Feminist focus on social structures at the time.
- Read as accounts of an illegitimate conception, the biblical narratives are a mixture of liberating and sexist elements.
- Macquarie notes that action of the Holy Spirit calls for the free response of the one to who it is addressed - Mary indicates consent in Luke 1.38. (My comment: could she do else?)
- The image of Mary as virgin mother of God is seen by feminists as a tool of institutionalised sexism - a "myth of women preached to women by men." (Schaberg 1987, p.12)
- Mary is portrayed as ideal, yet:
 - she did not enjoy the fulfilment of sexual relationship (at least in and prior to the conception of Jesus);
 - she is also portrayed as submissive to males - Joseph and even her own son - "the supreme masculine victory" (Simone de Beauvoir).
- One understanding sees the motherhood of the Holy Spirit behind Mary's motherhood of Jesus, (*see* Moltmann 1983, pp.83-4). This is an ancient idea seen, for example, in the writings of Julian or Norwich.

6. Birth in the Spirit

Jürgen Moltmann (1993) draws attention to the principle that the virginal conception stories are as much or more about the Holy Spirit as they are about Mary. It is the Holy Spirit who works with Jesus to redeem the world, not Mary. Moltmann suggests we speak of Jesus' "birth from the Spirit" in preference to a virgin birth. If we take the birth of Christ seriously, then much that the church has ascribed to 'the Virgin Mary' is transposed to God the Holy Spirit himself, and Mary can once again be what she was and is: the Jewish mother of Jesus.

Moltmann's view, I suggest, does not degrade Mary as a woman. Rather, he releases her to be truly and simply human, in the way that feminist writers such as Schaberg seek. I find myself in sympathy with Moltmann's argument. In contrast to the historical/textual or dogmatic approaches outlined above, Moltmann's discussion might be characterised as kerygmatic.

C. PERSONAL CONCLUSIONS

For myself, I am comfortable in accepting the Biblical accounts, if not strictly literally, then at least at face value as narratives declaring the virginal conception of Jesus as a simple God-caused fact. However, I am critical of the ways in which the figure and story of Mary have been used adversely to the well being of women. I suggest that extra-biblical traditions, myths, superstitions and doctrines surrounding Mary could be discarded with impunity. Further, though I am able to accept it myself, I am persuaded by the arguments that the virginal conception is not an essential creedal doctrine of the Christian faith. The virginal conception is, however, important for its declaration of the overshadowing and indwelling of Jesus by the fullness of the Spirit. (The title *Christ*, refers to him as the anointed, Spirit-indwelt one.) Exactly *when* and *how* this occurred is less important than that it *did* occur - though some authoritative scholars have held the virginal conception to be essential to the incarnation of Christ. It *is* vital to know that Jesus was truly human, yet his incarnation and empowerment involved the whole of God. This is the truth inherent in the virginal conception.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barth, Karl. (1956). *Church dogmatics: vol. 1, The Doctrine of the Word of God - second half-volume*. - Edinburgh: T & T Clark (tr from German).
- Barth, Karl. (1949) *Dogmatics in outline*. - New York: Harper, 1959 (tr from German and first published in English: London: SCM, 1949).
- Boslooper, Thomas. (1962). *The virgin birth*. - Philadelphia: Westminster.

- Brown, Raymond E. (1979) *The birth of the Messiah: a commentary on the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke*. - New York: Doubleday (first pub. 1977). Appendix IV
- Macquarie, John. (1977) *Principles of Christian theology*. - rev. ed. - London: SCM.
- Moltman, Jürgen. (1989) *The way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic dimensions*. Minneapolis, Fortress, 1993 (Eng. trans. first publ. London : SCM, 1990, from the German publ. Munich 1989).
- O'Collins, Gerald. (1995) *Christology: a Biblical, historical, and systematic study of Jesus*. - Oxford: OUP.
- Parrinder, Geoffrey. (1992) *Son of Joseph: the parentage of Jesus*. - Edinburgh: Clark.
- Quick, Oliver C. (1938) - *Doctrines of the Creed: their basis in Scripture and their meaning today*. - London : Fontana, 1963 (first publ., London: Nisbet, 1938).
- Richardson, Allan. (1958) *An introduction to the theology of the New Testament*. - London: SCM.
- Spong, John Shelby. (1992) *Born of a woman: a Bishop rethinks the birth of Jesus*. - San Francisco : Harper Collins.
- Schaberg, Jane. (1987) *The illegitimacy of Jesus: a feminist theological interpretation of the infancy narratives*. - San Francisco: Harper and Row.
- von Campenhausen, Hans (1962) *The virgin birth in the theology of the ancient church*. - London: SCM, 1964 (from the German publ. Heidelberg, 1962).