

# **THE SEVERN FORUM**

***‘Conceiving Jesus: re-examining Jesus’  
conception in canon, Christology and creed.’***

**by**

**Professor Andrew Lincoln**

*Former Portland Professor of New Testament Studies,  
University of Gloucestershire*

**Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> March 2015**

**University of Gloucestershire, Park campus, Cheltenham**

Summary: For many Christians the belief that Jesus was conceived without a human father appears to be demanded by Scripture and creed but causes difficulty in the light of knowledge of ancient parallels about the conception of great figures and of modern biology. The lecture will survey some of the range of issues involved in attempting to negotiate confessional belief and critical enquiry on this topic. Does the New Testament contain other perspectives on Jesus' conception? Why did the virginal conception tradition become dominant and why has it become problematic? What are the implications for the orthodox view of the relation between Jesus' humanity and divinity and for saying the creed if one holds that in all probability Jesus did have a biological human father? [The lecture was accompanied by a hand-out, providing the references and bibliography in support of the points made and this is provided here on pp. 13,14.]

## **Introduction**

Many people automatically assume that to talk about Jesus' conception is to talk about his virginal conception, also called, more popularly but less accurately, his virgin birth. Most non-Christians (with the exception, of course, of Muslims) then tend to dismiss this as supernatural nonsense. This is often on the basis both that it makes no biological sense and that the ancients had plenty of stories about gods giving birth to heroes via virgins and so this is just another of those myths. Some Christians have no difficulty in similarly treating the stories announcing Jesus' conception in Matthew and Luke as legends, making a theological rather than historical point, but others think that a high view of the authority of Scripture and allegiance to the creeds demands a belief in Jesus' virginal birth. Some of the latter frequently assert, either you believe in miracles or you don't, and if as a Christian you are prepared to believe in God creating the world and raising Jesus from the dead, then there should be no problem about believing in a virginal conception (cf. e.g. N. T. Wright). But I have found that there is also a substantial group of Christians, including clergy, who feel the pull from both sides, don't know quite what to think, may not dismiss the miraculous in general but have difficulties with this particular miracle, and are sometimes made to feel that, if they have problems or doubts about a virginal conception, they are on the slippery slope to giving up an authentic orthodox faith. This then is the broad setting for my discussion this evening. It's asking - is there a way of holding together a serious reading of Scripture that takes account of critical scholarship, of the context of the ancient world, and of the present state of biological knowledge while still doing justice to the primacy of Scripture and the place of the classic creeds? Is there a way of thinking critically and confessing faithfully? The attempt at responding to those questions entails a whole range of issues and I shall only be able to sketch a few of these in what follows and set out briefly some proposals about them. My hope is that we shall discover that the topic, which may appear to be a narrow one, actually touches on quite a number of significant and interesting areas.

## **1. Conception and Incarnation**

It's worth starting by clarifying a basic linguistic and theological point. To raise questions about Jesus' conception is not to question the incarnation. The beginning of Jesus' earthly life, however it may have happened, is of course part of the incarnation but the incarnation classically refers to the second person of the Trinity – the Logos or the divine Son - identifying with, assuming the whole of Jesus' humanity and mission. So in discussing the conception, we are talking about how one aspect of the incarnation, its very beginnings, was imagined, articulated and portrayed. Questioning the adequacy of a particular mode of depicting this initial aspect is not to deny the reality of the incarnation itself. Indeed, Benedict XVI, in his earlier incarnation as Joseph Ratzinger, while obviously himself holding to belief in the virginal conception, recognized this remarkably clearly when he wrote, "According to the faith of the Church the Sonship of Jesus does not rest on the fact that Jesus had no human father: The doctrine of Jesus' divinity would not be affected if Jesus had been the product of a normal marriage. For the Sonship of which faith speaks is not a biological but an ontological fact, an event not in time but in God's eternity."<sup>1</sup>

## **2. Canonical Diversity**

My second point is a little more controversial and rather more lengthy. It's the claim that virginal conception stories are a minority report among the views of Jesus' conception in the NT. Frequently the NT is viewed as if contained one normative perspective on Jesus' conception. It might appear natural to give the virginal conception pride of place because it is found in actual narratives about Jesus' birth and then to read the rest of the New Testament either as if it were silent about Jesus' conception or in a way that consciously or unconsciously harmonizes its data with the notion of a virginal conception. But this does not do justice to first hearing the message of each of the New

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (London: Burns & Oates, 1969) 208.

Testament documents on its own terms. And, in fact, those other documents are not, as is often claimed, simply silent about Jesus' conception.

(i) Rather a number of them are positive witnesses to an alternative perspective, which turns out to be the majority report, namely, that Jesus was a physical descendant of David through Joseph as his father. This view is found in references to the seed of David or straightforward acknowledgments of Joseph as Jesus' father. In the earliest NT writings, those of Paul, the wording of Rom. 1:3,4 is of particular interest. In introducing himself to the Roman Christians, Paul talks of the gospel that unites him with them as concerning God's Son, "who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh" and "was designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection of the dead." It is generally acknowledged that in doing so Paul here takes up and adapts an earlier Jewish Christian formulation about Jesus that included the clause –"who was born of the seed of David." So Paul and Jewish Christians before him show no reservation about employing the term *sperma*, "seed", in connection with Jesus' birth. That birth was the result of the continuity of the male seed in the line of David. The term frequently has the extended meaning of "descendant" but, unless used metaphorically, retains the connotation of being in the line produced by the male role in procreation. Interestingly, the later 2 Tim. 2:8 speaks of Paul's gospel in similar terms but reverses the order of Rom. 1 – "raised from the dead, of the seed of David." Almost certainly, no thought that Jesus was only Joseph's son legally or by adoption but not biologically would have crossed the mind of those who made the claim. Those who first formulated it and then passed it on had absolutely no reason to doubt that "born of the seed of David" conveyed what it normally conveyed, that the one of whom it was asserted was a physical patrilineal descendant of David. The same tradition is reflected in Luke's account of the earliest Christian preaching in Acts. Peter's Pentecost speech, with reference to Jesus, talks of God swearing to David that God would put one of David's descendants (lit. one of the fruit of his loins) on his throne (Acts 2:30). Paul's synagogue address in Pisidian Antioch says of David, "Of this man's seed God has brought to Israel a Saviour, Jesus, as he has promised." The promise to David that he would not see corruption is not fulfilled in the case of David but does come to realization in God's resurrection of this one who was David's seed (Acts 13:22,23, also 13:33-37). Whatever the historical core behind these speeches, Luke evidently thought they reflected earliest post-resurrection beliefs about Jesus. A passing reference in Hebrews also provides witness to Jesus' Davidic descent. In mentioning difficulties that could be raised against his proposal for viewing Jesus as the great high priest, namely that Jesus was not a Levite, its author can say, "For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah" (7:14) – he had patrilineal descent that went back through David to Judah. John's Gospel, which has no virginal conception of course, includes a discussion of the Messiah being "from the seed of David" (7:42) and contains the uncomplicated testimony found on the lips of Philip to Jesus' identity as "son of Joseph" (1:45) and then this identification is repeated by the Galilean Jews (6:42). That this was a common Jewish Christian assumption about Jesus' origins is also indicated by another Johannine writing - Revelation – "I am the root (offshoot) and descendant of David" (22:16, cf. 5:5 – "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David").

(ii) The virginal conception tradition. This may be the most frustrating part of my presentation, since it can't be in any sense a proper analysis of the annunciation stories in Matthew and Luke. Here I'm mainly interested in them as part of the diversity, shall assume you are basically familiar with the traditional interpretation of these stories, and can only sketch some interesting aspects of recent discussion about them that you may or may not know.

First, a reminder of their setting in the infancy narratives and the nature of those narratives. Apart from their possible agreement about a virginal conception, there are major and probably irreconcilable differences between Matthew and Luke and there is general agreement that these narratives are the least likely part of the Gospels to provide reliable historical information. But this should not be surprising because, like the canonical Gospels as whole, they correspond most closely to what readers would have expected to find in ancient biographies, of which they can be considered a sub-set. And in ancient Greek and Roman biographies the depiction of the subject's birth and early years was the most legendary part of the portrayal. Most subjects of biographies did not come to public attention or achieve greatness until later in life, so there was usually little information about the beginnings of their lives. For birth and infancy biographers relied heavily on finding or inventing anecdotes that would be in line with or anticipate their subjects' future greatness. So you find predictions, prophecies, dreams and omens surrounding the birth of the subject, stories of the precocious wisdom of the child, indicating that the child must already have been what the man was known to have been, genealogies tracing family lineage, and sometimes stories of origins with the gods. It's among the last that you find miraculous elements surrounding the subject's conception. These can be in accounts of legendary figures from the distant past or of rulers and philosophers of more recent times, where subjects, such as Alexander, Augustus Caesar or Plato, have a human mother but one of the gods, frequently Apollo, as the father. The greatness of the biography's subject is such that the gods must have been involved in his origins. Similarities with the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke will be readily apparent. Two major factors make the canonical accounts distinctive, however. First, they build up the plot and characterisation of

their narratives through retelling of parts of Jewish Scripture. Their annunciation stories follow the pattern of the announcements of births in Scripture, with Matthew especially using elements of the traditions about Moses' birth and Luke employing Abraham and Sarah and Elkanah and Hannah as the models for John the Baptist's parents, and Hannah again and her son, Samuel, for Mary and her son, Jesus. Second, the future greatness that is read back into the infancy narratives is what was believed about Jesus' status and mission in the light of his resurrection. So from conception and birth he is already Messiah and Lord, Son of God, the one who will save his people from their sins. Indeed, in both annunciation stories the holy Spirit, who had been at work in the raising of Jesus from the dead (cf. Rom. 1:3,4), is now seen to have also been operative in Jesus' life from its conception (Matt. 1:18, 20; Luke 1:35). But in both annunciation stories we have, as in some Graeco-Roman biographies about great figures, a conception in which no human father is involved – or do we? Well, unfortunately it is not quite that simple. The interpretation of Matthew has become highly disputed and Luke's much less disputed account has, I suggest, its own twist.

In the case of Matthew there is a very plausible reading of the annunciation in 1:18-25 that takes it to be not about a virginal conception but an illegitimate one. This reading says, in brief, that this is a story about suspect paternity – Joseph knows that he is not the cause of his young betrothed's pregnancy, so some other male must be. He initially decides to divorce her but to do so quietly to avoid the humiliation of her having to recount how this pregnancy had occurred. The angel's announcement does not tell him he is wrong in his suspicion but that he is wrong in wanting to divorce Mary. He is to go ahead with the marriage because, despite the scandal about the conception, the Spirit is at work in all this, the child will have a special role in Israel's history and by taking him as his own Joseph will give him the necessary Davidic descent. When Matthew describes Mary's pregnancy as "from the holy Spirit" (1:18,20), nowhere else in Jewish Scripture does such terminology about divine begetting indicate a birth without a human father and when Matthew cites LXX Isa. 7:14 about a young woman conceiving he is employing the term *parthenos*, which could technically mean "virgin", in the sense of the original passage where it clearly has the more general meaning of "young woman." I am almost persuaded by this reading, which fits well with the unusual inclusion of the four women in Matthew's genealogy whose sexual activity was irregular, and it may well be that a story about a suspect paternity is the tradition Matthew uses but has then given it a spin in the direction of virginal conception. I come to that tentative conclusion for two main reasons. (a) It's in Matthew's probable editorial additions to the underlying story that what have traditionally been viewed as the indicators of virginal conception are found – his underlining of conception from the holy Spirit before the angelic announcement (1:18), his use of the LXX Isa. 7:14 passage (1:22,23) and his adding to Joseph's obedience the comment that "he had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son" (1:25a). (b) Once you take account of the similarities between this Gospel and ancient biography, it becomes clear that language of divine begetting was used to refer to birth from a god without human male involvement. In a Hellenistic Jewish context, such as Matthew's readers inhabited, those stories would be known. And in fact we have evidence from the writings of a Hellenistic Jew, Philo, who knew these stories and applied their language when he interpreted the Scriptures allegorically. In order to explain divine generation of the virtues, he depicts female characters in Scripture, such as Sarah, Leah, Rebecca and Zipporah, being made virgins and then becoming pregnant by God's seed without the aid of their husbands (cf. esp. *De Cherubim* 40-50). Again Graeco-Roman biographies about birth from the gods come closest to Matthew's additional statement about Joseph having no marital relations with Mary before the birth. So, for example, the various accounts of the birth of Plato all mention that the god, Apollo, who had intercourse with Plato's mother, Perictione, appeared in a vision to his father, Ariston, and ordered him to have no intimacy with Perictione for ten months until after she had given birth. The upshot of all this, then, is that I think Matthew, as has traditionally been thought, but not necessarily for the traditional reasons, probably does count as a witness to the virginal conception.

There is only one other possible witness – Luke's annunciation story – and here, despite a few doubters, I think the case is pretty clear. It's sometimes argued that Mary's response to the announcement that she will bear a child who is to be Son of God and Davidic king makes little sense on a traditional reading. She says, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" (1:34). Some have argued that this question must be purely a literary device in line with the pattern of other annunciation stories where humans raise objections to an angelic revelation. After all, she is betrothed to Joseph, as the narrator has made clear (1:27), and therefore should be expected to think that, although they have not been intimate yet, intercourse will take place and the child who is to be Davidic king will be the fruit of their future union. But it not too difficult to make sense of this if Mary takes the announcement to be about a conception that is to happen shortly and before the second stage of betrothal when Joseph could take her to his home. In any case, the qualifying phrase "who has not known a man" when attached to "young woman" in the Jewish Scriptures clearly denotes a virgin (cf. e.g. Gen. 19:8; 24:16; Num. 31:18, 35) and is surely Luke's signal to his readers that this *parthenos* or young woman is to conceive without the help of a male. So, as in other accounts of great figures in the Graeco-Roman world, Luke depicts Jesus as Son of God with a divine conception. Any doubts that Luke's Gospel fits this convention should be dispelled when we remember how Luke completes his life of

Jesus. His is the only one of the Synoptic Gospels to end with an explicit ascension (24:51,52), bringing his narrative as a whole into line with that of a number of other ancient historical and biographical depictions of those who were considered to be among the immortals and who have both a divine conception at the beginning and an ascension to heaven at the end of their lives.

But here's the twist with Luke. Astute listeners may have spotted that Luke's Acts was one of the witnesses for the "seed of David" tradition in the speeches of Peter and Paul. Not only so but also in the rest of his infancy narrative and later in the story the references to Joseph, Mary and Jesus show no knowledge of the announcement of a virginal conception. Instead Jesus' Davidic descent through Joseph is underlined and Joseph is straightforwardly referred to as Jesus' father (e.g. 2:33,48). The people of Jesus' hometown, Nazareth, respond to his synagogue sermon with "Is not this Joseph's son?" (4:22). There is no mention in Luke of anything like adoption as an explanation; in this account it is Mary and not Joseph who is to do the naming of Jesus (1:31). Now those who have noticed this sometimes suggest that, unlike Matthew, Luke rather naively does not realise that virginal conception and Davidic descent through Joseph are conflicting traditions or, slightly more generously, that Luke has taken over traditions that knew nothing of a virginal conception and somewhat carelessly failed to bring them consistently into line with his own annunciation story. But once we remember ancient conventions and literary genres, a better explanation lies to hand. Biographers and others were sometimes content to do just what Luke does - to juxtapose two different sorts of accounts, one natural and one miraculous, about their subjects' origins and to leave readers to make of the relationship what they will. So, for example, Plutarch does this with the conceptions of Romulus, Theseus and Alexander (*Romulus* 2-4; *Theseus* 2,3,36; *Alexander* 2,3) and Suetonius does it with Alexander (*Divus Augustus* 4,94). Evidently it was thought not to be inconsistent or inappropriate simultaneously to entertain different stories about the origins of a great figure, one involving ordinary physical lineage and the other, suitable in the light of the later heroic achievements of such a figure, involving a miraculous conception and an origin with the gods. It may well be, then, that Luke-Acts contains both a virginal conception and the tradition of the seed of David through Joseph not because the evangelist is a hopeless editor or unable to see what to us is a blatant inconsistency but because ancient conventions about dual paternity allow him and his readers to be quite comfortable juxtaposing both notions. If so, Luke-Acts reflects both the early Christian majority report and the virginal conception minority report.

(iii) Illegitimacy. There is one other possible minority report and, in discussing Matthew, I have already introduced this third view - Jesus was conceived by natural means but illegitimately. For some, as I've said, this is how Matthew itself is to be read at the canonical level, though I think in the end that it is pre-canonical, part of the tradition the evangelist inherited and then exploited and elaborated in terms of a virginal conception. The main other canonical reference supportive of this tradition is Mark 6:3, where the unusual designation "son of Mary" for Jesus is interpreted by many as a slur on his legitimacy by his townspeople. It does seem significant that Mark's earliest interpreters felt it necessary to change the wording. So Matt. 13:55 modifies it to "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary?" and Luke 4:22 to "Is not this the son of Joseph?" Why make such changes unless the original were understood as being offensive by suggesting Jesus had no legitimate father? But matters are rarely as straightforward as one might like. Other explanations have been offered for this unusual use of naming a son through his mother; Mary's name is employed because Joseph had died or because he had more than one wife and these needed to be distinguished. But in the former case of a widow, there is no extant use of the mother's name to identify the son elsewhere and though the latter usage - more than one wife - can be found in some Scriptural lists, how come none of Jesus' brothers are identified in this way in Mark 6:3? What is more, both of these explanations rely on much later extra-biblical speculation about the life of Joseph. There is also, however, no other clear usage of the formulation "son of a mother" where odium is attached to the phrase. This might not be that surprising, given that the comparative evidence is from official lists and formal identifications that do not reflect the popular usage Mark purports to describe. A scurrilous comment on Jesus' legitimacy fits the context in Mark where people are casting aspersions on his less than exalted artisan status and his family origins and, if this is what Mark intended, then he also intended it to be seen as a popular rumour in Jesus' hometown. Mark, then, remains a likely, but less than certain, canonical witness to the suggestion that Jesus' origins were suspect.

Let me conclude this whole section on diversity by underlining how it subtly but significantly changes the nature of much of the usual discussion of this topic. If we are right that there are at least two, possibly three, strands, then clearly one can no longer assume that the NT has one uniform view - virginal conception - and that readers are simply left with the options of either affirming, discarding or revising it. So it's not first of all a question of having to decide what we make of the virginal conception historically and thus our probable historical reconstruction being determinative for Christology - the usual way the discussion has gone. It's recognising that, whatever one makes of issues of historicity, the canon itself makes the situation more complex because of its diversity and this inevitably pushes its readers to become discerning interpreters. Of course, that's not to say that the historicity question is

unimportant and in fact canonical diversity obviously raises that question – the three different strands cannot all have been what was the case historically! But I cannot pursue that part of the puzzle here. For the purposes of this lecture, as my title indicates, I’m staying primarily at the level of the NT canon, although what has already been said about each of the strands will indicate where I think that historical discussion most probably leads.

**3. From Minor Report to Official Creed.** But now two other obvious questions arise - not from going back behind the diverse NT writings but from going forward from them. Is there evidence that the diversity continued into the second century? And how is it that second and third century Christian interpretation and tradition soon made one strand, the virginal conception, dominant and any divergent NT material was made to fit this model? Again the reply to these questions can be no more than an inadequate overview.

First, the illegitimacy tradition. Christian writings remain aware of this but now always as a charge made by non-believing opponents. *Gospel of Thomas* 105 – “he shall be called the son of a harlot” - in all probability reflects this charge. Other sources show the tradition remained alive among Jews antagonistic to Christian claims about Jesus, particularly later claims about a virginal conception. Details now get added to the charge in an attempt to discredit Jesus’ origins. So Origen (*Cels.* 1.28-39, 67) responds to the earlier work of Celsus and his Jewish informant, whose information in all probability goes back to before the middle of the second century and contains the assertion that Jesus’ mother was driven out by her carpenter husband because of her adultery with a soldier named Panthera who fathered her son. There is some consistency about calling Jesus the son of Panthera or a variant of that name in a range of rabbinic sources from the Tosephta to the Babylonian Talmud to the later Toledot Yesu that tell stories designed to counter Christian readings of Matthew’s narrative.

Among Christians the two other traditions about Jesus’ conception did remain in circulation. What we have called the majority canonical report - that Jesus was of Davidic descent and this was through Joseph as his father - did not simply disappear. It was maintained, mainly among Jewish Christians, into the fourth century. In particular, the group of Jewish Christians that get called Ebionites are depicted by patristic writers as asserting Jesus was the son of both Joseph and Mary (cf. e.g. Justin, *Dial.* 48.4-49.1; Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 5.1.3; Epiphanius, *Adv. Haer.* 30.14.4). Irenaeus, towards the end of the second century, holds that “they assert he was begotten by Joseph,” because they follow the reading of Isa. 7.14 that has “young woman” instead of “virgin” and thereby “are setting aside the testimony of the prophets” (*Haer.* 3.21.1). Tertullian (*Carn. Chr.* 14, 18), at the beginning of the third century, reports that they believe Jesus was only of the seed of David. Epiphanius is still worried about refuting this view in the fourth century. Because most of this evidence comes from those who were apologists for the virgin birth, this can sometimes make this view appear to have been formulated in opposition to the idea of a virginal conception. Its adherents, however, would have seen themselves simply as continuing witnesses to what we have claimed was the dominant tradition about Jesus’ birth in the first century. In other circles this tradition is found in the *Gospel of Thomas* 101,105, which appears to claim that, because Jesus knows his true heavenly father and mother and is dismissive of his human parents, he lays himself open to the charge of illegitimacy from those who fail to understand this. The Gnostic *Gospel of Philip* has both Joseph and Mary as Jesus’ natural parents (55.23; 73.8) and Origen in the third century knows of Gentile Christians who do not believe Jesus was born of a virgin (*Comm. Matt.* 16.12). The tradition about Joseph as father also surfaces in a different form in the late fourth century when in the *Acts of Pilate* 2.2-4, a sufficient response to the charge of Jesus’ illegitimacy is not that he was miraculously born of a virgin but that there were witnesses to the betrothal of Joseph and Mary who could vouch for the fact that he was not born illegitimately.

Most of the earliest Christian writings in the second century, such as *1 and 2 Clement*, the *Didache*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Epistle of Polycarp* and the *Epistle to Diognetus* do not mention the virginal conception even in discussions of Jesus’ origin or of the incarnation where they might have been expected to do so. There are two notable exceptions from the first half of the second century. The first is the letters of Ignatius, where the tradition of a virginal conception had already become a highly significant element in their stress on Christ’s incarnation. Ignatius appears to know the content of both Matthew’s and Luke’s annunciation stories, interprets the former in the light of the latter, and links both with John 1:14 –“the Word became flesh.” This enables him to employ the virginal conception in warnings against false teachers who claimed that the Christ was incompatible with the sphere of the flesh and that his earthly life constituted no more than an appearance of reality. Ignatius’ counter-assertion is that the birth from Mary the virgin secures Christ’s real humanity and therefore his ability to heal and save other humans (cf. Ign. *Eph.* 7,18,19; *Magn.* 10,11; *Trall.* 9). The second exception in the first half of the second century, like Ignatius, also comes from Syrian Antioch and is the *Ascension of Isaiah* (11:1-14). But, unlike Ignatius, it takes Matthew’s account and a virginal conception in a more legendary and docetic direction, because here Jesus does not experience a real gestation in Mary’s womb – her pregnancy only lasts two months - nor a normal birth – he suddenly appears as a fully formed baby, there have been no labour pains, and Mary’s womb is found to be in exactly the same condition as it was before the pregnancy.

It's in the second half of the second century that the virginal conception tradition really begins to dominate in the extant literature. First of all, Justin Martyr in his *Dialogue with Trypho* (43,48,66-68,100) concedes that there are Jewish Christians who hold that Jesus had a natural birth but he himself is convinced of the virginal conception tradition primarily because of his view of prophecy. In particular, he believes Isa. 7:14 to have been a straightforward prediction of Jesus' birth. Trypho responds, of course, that the passage has reference to Hezekiah's time and is about a young woman not a virgin and asks the obvious question – if Jesus was born of a virgin, how could he be the Davidic Messiah who was to come from David's loins? Justin's answer is that the prophecy was directed to David's house, so Mary the virgin must be of Davidic descent. A generation later than Justin's writings, those of Irenaeus (c. 180) have even more references to the virgin birth. Irenaeus has the same arguments about Isa. 7:14 and prophecy, challenges those who believe Jesus was Joseph's son by drawing the analogy with Adam who had God and no human male as his maker, employs virginal conception against Gnostic and docetic views of Jesus, and makes it part of his universal rule of faith and integral to a true doctrine of incarnation. This is because, in showing Christ's human nature was generated from Mary, it secures Christ's solidarity with humanity and at the same time is a sign that that which was born was not merely a man but "God with us." (*Haer.* 1.10.1; 3.19.1,3; 3.21.6). Irenaeus' catholic vision for the whole church soon began to prevail both in the Latin West and in the East and so by the beginning of the third century the virgin birth tradition had become the clearly dominant and official one.

Among the factors that brought about this change, one basic one was that the four Gospels were now being produced together in one codex and becoming widely known. And once the four Gospels were seen as the authoritative sources for the life of Jesus, it became natural, when thinking about Jesus' birth, to assume that these were the only relevant sources within the apostolic writings. And, despite the preservation of four different Gospels rather than one, the drive was to stress the unity rather than to appreciate the diversity within the unity. It should not be surprising, then, that the dominant way of interpreting a unified Gospel was to read the four Gospels in a harmonizing fashion. On the topic of Jesus' birth Luke provided the larger framework and into this framework the key elements of Matthew's story could be fitted. Luke's dominance in harmonizing interpretations of the birth stories no doubt also owed something to the Christian movement having become a predominantly Gentile one. His presentation of the annunciation in terms of what would have been expected of great figures in the Graeco-Roman world soon became the determinative one for Gentile Christians. Instead of this perspective sitting side by side with the more Jewish one of descent in the patrilineal line of David without the need for explanation, it became the single lens through which other perspectives were interpreted. References to Jesus as "the seed of David" continued to be taken in their natural sense by Jewish Christian groups and others but in the prevailing harmonizing tradition Davidic descent could now be interpreted either, in the way Matthew had done, by making Jesus Joseph's son through some form of adoption, or, as in Ignatius, Justin and Irenaeus, by still assuming that "David's seed" required a physical reference but holding that this was provided through Jesus' mother's side of his genealogy, a notion of which there had been no hint in the earliest writings (if anything, Luke suggests she was a Levite). So we have the narrowing of incarnation to the one means, that of the virgin birth, the harmonizing readings of the New Testament documents that facilitated this, the insistence that Isa. 7.14 was originally predicting this one means, and the virginal conception seen as crucial for combatting docetic views that Jesus was less than fully human. This development from Ignatius to Irenaeus put in place the major elements that would ensure the central place of the virginal conception in future belief about Jesus' birth, including its incorporation into the rule of faith and then the creeds.

#### **4. Ancient and Modern Views of Procreation**

I think it should be clear why most of the specific arguments used to justify this development are problematic on a critical reading of the biblical material. But there is, of course, a much bigger problem – the major difference between the assumptions of the ancient world and those of our own about procreation, about how babies are made. The dominant ancient understanding of conception, influenced by a patriarchal culture, was some variation of the Aristotelian theory, whereby the male semen provided the formative principle, while the female menstrual blood supplied the matter for the foetus and the womb the medium for its nurture (cf. e.g. Aristotle, *Generation of Animals* 2.4.738b20-23). The man's seed transmits his *logos* or *pneuma*, for which the woman's body is the receptacle. Whether in the medical writings of Aristotle, the Hippocratic Corpus or Galen and whatever the small variations, the male functions as the active, efficient cause of reproduction and the female functions passively as the provider of the matter to which the male seed gives life and definition. While assuming the dominant biological understanding, the Jewish Scriptures and then the rabbinic tradition make adjustments to it by also having God as an active third party in conception. The same holds for patristic views on these matters in relation to Jesus' conception. Many spell this out and in particular Tertullian (e.g. *Marc.* 4.21), who was an avid reader of medical texts, goes into graphic detail about what went on with the fluids in Mary's womb and how what she supplies is the matter or flesh, Jesus' human substance, or as the Athanasian Creed put it more succinctly, "He is God from the Father's substance, begotten

before time; and He is man from His mother's substance, born in time." This ancient understanding continues through Aquinas who states, "the female supplies the matter, while the male is the active principle of generation" (*Summa Theologiae* 3.31.5). So, Jesus was held to be both divine and human; the divine Spirit was the active principle of generation, while Mary supplied all that was necessary of Jesus' human fleshly matter, including his male embodiment, and thus served as a guarantee of his solidarity with the rest of the material world

But, as we know, from the late eighteenth century a huge shift in thinking about sexuality has taken place. The biology of sex gradually became foundational for thinking about procreation, eventually producing its narrative of the more complementary roles of sperm and egg, and we are, of course, heirs of its later stages in molecular biology. We take it for granted that it needs a female ovum to combine with a male sperm in order to produce a child and that the sex of the resulting child results from the female supplying an X chromosome and the male either an X or a Y chromosome. Whereas the ancient view allowed a certain Christological coherence in which Jesus could be seen as fully divine and yet fully human, the shift in biological understanding has produced a major problem of coherence. According to our present knowledge, to be a fully human male Jesus would have needed an X chromosome from Mary and a Y chromosome from a human father.<sup>2</sup> Some recent defenders of a literal virginal conception would accept this but reply, "Well, God must have supplied *de novo* either the genes that had come from a male or both sets of genes." But both options fail to meet the problem. In the latter case – both sets – Mary would have been simply the surrogate mother of this embryo, which would have no real continuity with the human race to this point, although it could have been a copy of a human being with its genetic endowments. In the former case, if God miraculously supplied a human Y chromosome without sexual contact, what was the point of the miracle and what is the message it conveys about sexuality? Why not use that of Joseph or some other male through the normal means? If the further response is that this was a Y chromosome untainted by previous genetic traits so that Jesus could be the beginning of a new creation, then two further objections remain. Does Jesus then really and fully share the human condition he was to redeem and why could a normal X chromosome be employed, which would have been tainted by previous genetic traits? A traditional answer to the latter question would be to appeal to the immaculate conception of Mary herself, but that logically involves an infinite regress of immaculate conceptions.

The point should be clear. Given what we now understand about reproduction, a literal virginal conception means that Jesus would not "have become like his brothers and sisters in every respect" (Heb. 2:17). The traditional view now produces a major irony. The earliest interpreters of the virgin birth and those who formulated the later creeds were able to see in it a defence against docetism. For them Jesus was fully human because he shared in common human matter through the flesh of Mary. But we can simply no longer think that a mother's input alone is sufficient to constitute a fully human person. Understood in the light of present biological knowledge, instead of guaranteeing Jesus' real participation in humanity, the virgin birth has just the opposite effect and becomes positively damaging to the doctrine of incarnation because it is docetic. Without complete human DNA Jesus would be a semi-divine or wholly divine special creation that appeared to be human.

### **5. Incarnational Christology**

Here we come back to focus explicitly on the doctrine of the Incarnation, which, of course, remains a profound mystery. Despite its title, *The Chalcedonian Definition* of 451 didn't so much define or explain the relation between the fully human and fully divine in Christ as set out some boundaries, in terms of the debates and cultural and philosophical categories of its own time, within which it was appropriate to speak of this identity of Christ. Within our context, some might still want to ask, "Can we appeal to what I have claimed is the majority NT report that Jesus was fully human with two biological parents and still retain a credible and orthodox account of his divinity?" A quick answer would be to point out that within the NT itself Paul, John and Hebrews have an incarnational, and therefore divine, Christology while holding that Jesus had a natural conception and that there are various models of incarnational Christology, both classical and contemporary, that do not require a virginal conception. So there is no reason to think that a non-historical perspective on the virgin birth will lead to a non-incarnational Christology in which Jesus is simply a supremely Spirit-filled man or the highest example of the openness of the human consciousness to God. We don't have time to explore this and so I can only note two major problems in some discussions of the topic. The first arises from another major irony about the contemporary defence of the virginal conception that holds that God supplied the male Y chromosome. Those who propose this don't appear to realise that *they are in fact changing the traditional doctrine*. Whereas previously God provided the animating spark through the Spirit and Mary supplied the human substance, now God has to supply part of the human substance, part of Jesus' humanity. One of the rules of Chalcedon was that Christ was at the same time divine and human "without separation and without confusion." But if God has to supply part of what makes Jesus human, then this does

---

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller statement of this biological argument and its consequences, see A. Peacocke, "DNA of our DNA", in G. J. Brooke (ed.), *The Birth of Jesus*, 62-65.



introduce confusion, replacing a normal human element of existence with genetic material provided by special divine intervention. The view that Jesus had two human parents helps us avoid thinking of Christ as some mixture of divine and human. The two qualities are not in competition. What constitutes Jesus' uniqueness and his status as divine is not some exceptional quality in his human life but simply that, unlike other humans, his entire earthly existence subsists in the Word, the second person of the Trinity. In other words, the human Jesus' relationship to the divine Word is one that leaves his human life intact. Jesus and the Word are one, but there is also no confusion of the two – Jesus does not have a humanity that is made exceptional because divinity takes over at specific points in his life, such as in his conception or in his miracles. To speak of Jesus' divinity is to claim that in and through Jesus' entire human life God has chosen to identify Godself.

A second area of confusion is related to this. You sometimes hear people say, "Well, as the Son of God, Jesus had to be born of a virgin; he could only have God as his Father, not some human male." But this is a faulty understanding of the relation between the triune God, who assumes the human life of Jesus of Nazareth, and Jesus in his humanity. You can see why it happens because the term "Son" is used in connection with both, but the term has two distinct senses. I have already quoted Benedict XVI's warning against making this mistake, so I'll cite this time a Catholic lay theologian, Nicholas Lash, who asserts, "confessing Jesus to be Son of *God* most certainly does not entail denying that he was any other father's son."<sup>3</sup> Put briefly, the unity of the one subject of the incarnation does not obliterate the distinction between his humanity and divinity. The Son as an hypostasis within the trinity is a person only in a very loose extended sense. Persons or hypostases within God stand not for individual centres of consciousness but for relationships, where each has its being only in relationship to the other two. This generative relationship between Father and Son in the Trinity cannot therefore be directly transferred to talk of the relationship between God and the human Jesus and the relationship between God and the human Jesus as Son cannot be directly transferred to the relationship between the Father and the Son in the Trinity. The personal life of Jesus of Nazareth as the Son in faithful obedience to God was fully part of creaturely reality. And, as we have argued, in contemporary understanding that means this Son had a human father.

## 6. Saying the Creed

Finally, someone might say, "The niceties of trinitarian orthodoxy may bother some, but I'm more concerned whether I can say the creed next Sunday if I accept that there are problems with the virginal conception tradition?" It's what came to be known as *The Apostles' Creed* that asserts Christ was "conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary," and it's the later revision of the Nicene creed, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, in 381 that has the formulation – "who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man."

When we repeat those words as part of the Church's worship, they are not so much contemporary statements of an individual's personal faith as a pledge of allegiance to the triune God within the tradition of the church through the ages. As with Scripture, the creeds' historical conditionedness and particular cultural formulations can be acknowledged without that detracting from their authority or significance. When we repeat their words, in translation of course, we are already interpreting them in our own terms, making adjustments, for example, for the ancient cosmology they presuppose. If the creed's statement that Jesus "descended into hell" can be reinterpreted, in the light of the shift away from an ancient cosmology, as a way of depicting his full experience of death and its consequences, there should be no impediment to reinterpreting the virginal conception in the light of the shift away from an ancient biology. Whether the credal statement is "conceived by the holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary" or "And was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary," the important point of such an affirmation is that, through the divine Spirit, Jesus is the incarnation of God's Son. There is no need to stumble over the specific term "virgin." All that is necessary is to take the whole phrase "born of/ incarnate by the virgin Mary" and, if and when we pause to ask ourselves what we mean by that, to realize that this was the way, on ancient biological assumptions, of depicting the fully human conception and birth of the incarnate son of God. So we say to ourselves something like, "this part of the creed points to the mystery of the divine being experiencing a complete creaturely life from its start," which after all is what the framers of the creed, in the conceptuality of their own time, were intending to convey. I'm glad to have Rowan Williams on board at this stage. In one of his earlier incarnations, before being encumbered by the burdens of the See of Canterbury, he wrote, "If we can have some freedom in interpreting the vividly mythological language of 'he came down from heaven,' we can claim equal flexibility in our understanding of 'incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary'."<sup>4</sup> Lest anyone think that this is one of those places where Rowan went out on a limb, let me hasten to remind you of a fact that is sometimes not as well known as it should be – this is the official stance of the Church of England. Three times in the last century it made this

---

<sup>3</sup> N. Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God* (London: SCM, 1992), 58.

<sup>4</sup> *Open to Judgement* (London: DLT, 1994) 27.

flexibility of interpretation of “incarnate by the virgin Mary” clear – the Report of the Doctrine Commission in 1933, the Doctrine Commission’s publication, *Christian Believing*, in 1976, and the statement of the House of Bishops, *The Nature of Christian Belief*, in 1986. So, if you have questions about whether this lecture leaves me as a good Christian, you should have no doubts about it qualifying me as a good Anglican who can say the creed next Sunday!

### **Conclusion**

But I don’t want to be accused of ending on a particular and partisan Anglican point. Returning to my first section, the major purpose of these reflections has been a clearing of the ground so that difficulties and debates about the mode of Jesus’ conception do not get in the way of or obscure the far more essential and fundamental Christian claim that in the fully human life of Jesus of Nazareth God was incarnate. It is in that claim that the real mystery lies – one with which the church continues to grapple in its understanding and proclamation – that in that particular life, death and resurrection God and humanity met so decisively as provide the sign that interprets all of life.

### **Possible Further Reading**

Borg, M. J. and Wright, N. T. *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1999), 171-86.

Brown, R. E. *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 2nd edn, 1993).

Lincoln, A. T. “Contested Paternity and Contested Readings. The Conception of Jesus in Matthew 1.18-25” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 34 (2012) 211-31.

Lincoln, A. T. “Luke and Jesus’ Conception: A Case of Double Paternity?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 132 (2013) 639-58.

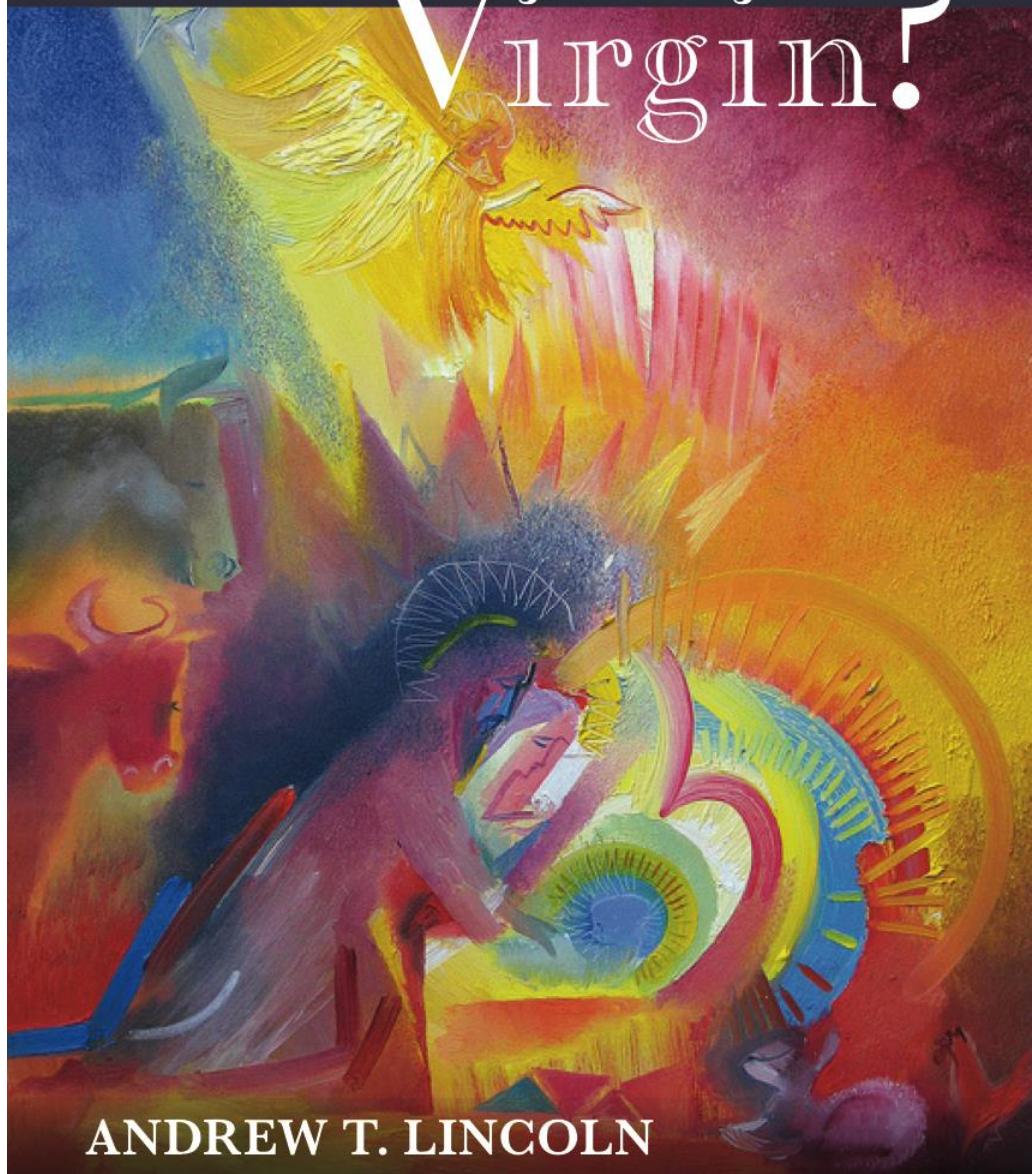
Lincoln, A. T. *Born of a Virgin? Reconceiving Jesus in the Bible, Tradition and Theology* (London: SPCK, 2013).

Miller, R. J., *Born Divine: The Births of Jesus and Other Sons of God* (Santa Rosa, CA.: Polebridge, 2003).

Peacocke, A. “DNA of our DNA” in G. J. Brooke (ed.), *The Birth of Jesus* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), 59-67.

Schaberg, J. *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (Sheffield: S.A.P., 1995)

# Born of a Virgin?



**ANDREW T. LINCOLN**

**Reconceiving Jesus**

in the Bible, tradition and theology

Andrew Lincoln (09/03/15) – [alincoln@glos.ac.uk](mailto:alincoln@glos.ac.uk)

