

THE PROBLEM OF THE VIRGINAL CONCEPTION OF JESUS*

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IN A CERTAIN SENSE this is not one of the most relevant problems of theology or exegesis. The solution to it will not help the wretched in the inner city or even the wretched in the suburbs; should it be resolved, there will remain questions of war and peace and even of priestly celibacy. To some the problem will seem a parade example of the purely (or impurely) inquisitive in theology, in short, the "nosey."¹ Yet, in another sense, is it ever irrelevant to be nosy about Jesus, especially when our inquisitiveness touches on his uniqueness? Unless there is something unique about the way "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor 5:19), even the most "relevant" Christian theology becomes irrelevant.

In Protestantism the question of the virginal conception has been debated for a long time. In some quarters it has been settled with a negative response about historicity, a response occasionally accompanied with a perceptive hesitancy that the negation threatens a symbolism touching on the mystery of Christ. In other quarters an affirmative answer remains one of the essential criteria of orthodoxy, so that English Bibles that do not carry the word "virgin" in Is 7:14 are suspect. In still other quarters the subject is discreetly avoided, except perhaps by a nervous examination board testing a candidate's doctrinal suitability for the ministry. Since the denial of the virginal conception was initiated by the rationalists, there remains a certain suspicion about

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¹ Some would equate the theologically relevant with what is essential for being identified as a Christian; and our question fares poorly if one asks: Do you mean that a man who believes in Jesus is not able to be called a Christian because he does not think that Jesus was born of a virgin? No matter how one may answer that question (and most would not be inclined to answer it with a yes), it is disastrous to reduce Christian theology or belief to the minimum. A more pertinent question is: Is a thinking Christian loyal to his heritage when he denies that Jesus was born of a virgin?

those who hesitate to evaluate it as a historical fact. And so it may well be that a reconsideration of the evidence will be of utility in the broad span of Protestantism.

In Roman Catholicism (and Eastern Orthodoxy) there has been a unanimity in regarding the historicity of the virginal conception as unquestionable. But after Vatican II the solid front is cracking in many places. As with so many other issues, the questioning has been more public in the Netherlands than elsewhere.² In 1965–66 J. van Kilsdonk, a Jesuit who served as chaplain for the students at the University of Amsterdam, attracted attention when he voiced his opinion that a biological understanding of the virginal conception is a barrier to genuine Christology, is prejudicial to belief in the Incarnation, and does not correspond to the scriptural affirmation.³ Almost at the same time the famous “Dutch Catechism” raised eyebrows by its ambiguity on the factuality of the virginal conception.⁴ It told Catholic believers that by proclaiming that “Jesus’ birth was not due to the will of a man,” Matthew and Luke were expressing the theological truth that Jesus was born wholly of grace and was *the* gift of God. “They proclaim that this birth does not depend on what men can do of themselves—ininitely less so than in other human births. That is the deepest meaning of the article of faith, ‘born of the virgin Mary.’” No one could fault what the Catechism said, but many noticed what it did not say explicitly, namely, that Jesus was born of a woman who was biologically a virgin. And so, despite the imprimatur of Cardinal Alfrink, the orthodoxy of the Catechism came under attack. The Dutch bishops, who had composed a foreword for it, subsequently made an effort, as it were, to make one thing perfectly clear: they did not intend any ambiguity about Mary’s corporeal virginity.⁵ They cited as a truth “which the Church has always believed and proclaimed on the basis of the Gospel” the virginal conception of Jesus in the sense that he “was born of the Virgin Mary through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, without a man’s co-operation.” Rome showed enough concern about the Catechism to appoint

² Almost simultaneously there was difficulty in Germany over the case of Peter Lengsfeld, a priest Dozent at Münster, who taught that in the light of the biblical evidence it could no longer be denied with certainty that Joseph was the physical father of Jesus. The displeasure this aroused in the German Catholic hierarchy delayed Lengsfeld’s promotion to a professorship.

³ Initially, van Kilsdonk expressed himself in a student newspaper of Dec. 3, 1965; this led to an interrogation in Rome on July 4, 1966. Not deterred by this nor by the statement of the Dutch bishops (note 5 below), van Kilsdonk reiterated his views in a radio interview on Oct. 11, 1966.

⁴ See pp. 74–75 of the English edition: *A New Catechism: Catholic Faith for Adults* (New York, 1967).

⁵ A statement from the bishops’ meeting in Utrecht was published in the Amsterdam newspaper *De Tijd*, Aug. 19, 1966.

a commission of cardinals to investigate complaints. The result⁶ was a corrected text of the Catechism which insists that Jesus "was not procreated by the intervention of man."

This did not stop the controversy, which has now spread to other countries. Rosemary Ruether caused considerable disturbance in her column in the American Catholic press when she questioned the virginity of Mary, arguing that in the infancy narratives the theme of virginal conception was a secondary development in relation to an earlier and probably more historical tradition of Joseph's physical paternity.⁷ As final examples of how this trend is making headway among Catholics, I would cite the latest scholarly treatment of the question in Germany, which seems to classify the virginal conception of Jesus as a theologoumenon,⁸ and the facile remarks of Louis Evely, who dismisses it as a "maladroit fable."⁹

⁶ *Acta apostolicae sedis* 60 (1968) 688 reports a directive that the Catechism "must teach equally clearly [with the perpetual virginity of Mary] the doctrine of the virginal birth of Jesus, which is so supremely in accord with the mystery of the incarnation. No further occasion shall be given for denying this truth. . . retaining only a symbolic meaning [of virginal birth], for instance, that it merely expresses the gift inspired by pure grace that God bestowed upon us in His Son." The resulting corrected text of the Catechism is now printed as a supplement.

⁷ Her argument is stated in fuller form in "The Collision of History and Doctrine: The Brothers of Jesus and the Virginity of Mary," *Continuum* 7 (1969) 93-105. Much of the article concerns Mary's continuing virginity after Jesus' birth, and that problem is the focus of the response by A. J. Novak, "The Virgin Birth: Ad Ruether," *Continuum* 7 (1969) 443-52.

⁸ In the collection *Zum Thema Jungfrauengeburt* (Stuttgart, 1970) by K. S. Frank, R. Kilian, et al., the article on Matthew's infancy narrative by O. Knoch, p. 58, raises this possibility. For him, a theologoumenon would mean that the belief that Jesus was God's Son in a unique sense has been historicized (made *geschichtlich*) in the infancy narratives, where he has no human father. Evidently Knoch agrees with J. Michl, "Die Jungfrauengeburt im Neuen Testament," *Mariologische Studien* 4 (1969) 145-84, who maintains (p. 183) that historico-critical exegesis cannot resolve the problem of whether the virginal conception of Jesus is a historical fact or a theologoumenon. In the article on Luke's infancy narrative, G. Lattke, p. 88, treats the virginal conception as the development of theological reflection rather than the reminiscence of a historical happening.—We should note that authors who use the term "theologoumenon" in relation to the virginal conception are not necessarily agreed about the degree of nonhistoricity to be attributed to the picture in which the theological truth finds expression. It seems to me that three questions would have to be asked of those who claim that the virginal conception is the historicizing of the truth that Jesus is God's Son. (a) Is it this truth that the virginal conception actually conveys in the NT, especially in Matthew, which seems to put primary emphasis on answering calumny, on affirming Davidic descent, and on fulfillment of prophecy? (b) Do we have reason to think that it would occur to early Christians to express divine sonship in terms of virginal conception? Is this an imagery that would suggest itself to Jewish believers in Jesus, whether Greek-speaking or Semitic-speaking? (c) Even if the answers to both a and b are affirmative, does this prove that, in fact, a virginal conception did not occur?

⁹ L. Evely, *The Gospels without Myth* (Garden City, 1971) pp. 80-82. "The belief in

Thus, there is a growing need for a careful discussion of the problem by Catholic theologians, historians, and exegetes, hopefully in cooperation with their Protestant confreres. Some Catholics will resent such a discussion, charging that the participants are denying the virginal conception; but then no one has yet discovered a protection against the calumny of oversimplification. Indubitably, the accusation of pastoral irresponsibility will be leveled on the grounds that any discussion of the virginal conception, no matter how carefully conducted, will disturb the faithful. The above history of Catholic denials of the virginal conception, however, indicates a trend that is bound to have disturbing effects on the faithful. For competent Catholic scholars to avoid the discussion is not prudence but cowardice; for they will turn the field over to irresponsible popularizers like Evely, who resurrects the rationalistic positions of the last century, thinking he is biblically *au courant*.

Before proceeding further, it would be wise for me to specify carefully the question under consideration. I am concerned with the belief that Jesus was conceived in the womb of a virgin without the intervention of a human father, i.e., without male seed; and every time I use the expression "virginal conception," I use it in that sense.¹⁰ I have chosen "virginal conception" rather than "virgin birth" in order not to confuse this matter with another, somewhat recondite belief concerning the miraculous *birth* of Jesus or the way he emerged from the womb.¹¹ Nor do I enter here into the question of still another aspect of Mary's virginity, namely, her lifetime virginity or the view held by many Christians that she had neither marital relations nor children after the birth of Jesus.¹² (Obviously, however, a negative answer

Mary's physical virginity is based on the need to translate the mystery of the Incarnation into terms intelligible to unsophisticated people."

¹⁰ It is a question, then, of the "bodily" or "biological" virginity of Mary in conceiving Jesus (the former term having the advantage of being less clinical). Of course, even if this aspect is in direct focus, the question still has a converse side: Was the conception of Jesus by a unique action of God, an action differing from His general providence in the conception of other men? If later God uniquely freed Jesus from the bonds of death, a privilege not yet accorded to other men, was such an eschatological power effective already in the conception of Jesus?

¹¹ In classical Mariology a threefold virginity has been attributed to Mary: *ante partum*, *in partu*, *et post partum*. (Triadic patterns can be traced back to about A.D. 370 and Zeno of Verona: *Tractatus* 1, 5, 3, and 2, 8, 2; *PL* 11, 303 and 414-15.) By virginal conception I mean *virginitas ante partum*. Usually the miracle of *virginitas in partu* has been specified in terms of birth without rupture of the hymen and/or birth without pain. See Karl Rahner, *Theological Reflections* 4 (Baltimore, 1966) 134-62.

¹² The doctrine of *virginitas post partum* depends on how one understands the family relationship implied in the references to Jesus' brothers (and sisters) in Mk 6:3, Mt

given to the question of the virginal conception of Jesus would render meaningless any discussion of Mary's subsequent virginity, whether in giving miraculous birth or in refraining from marital relations.) In confining myself to the virginal conception I am treating the only aspect of Mary's virginity that is directly scriptural.

I am aware, however, that in raising the question of Mary's *bodily* virginity I am not corresponding to the primary emphasis of the Evangelists. Matthew and Luke are interested in virginal conception as a sign of divine choice and grace, and as the idiom of a Christological insight that Jesus was God's Son or the Davidic Messiah from birth, etc.—in other words, they are interested in it as a phenomenon with theological import.¹³ Nevertheless, when one recognizes the primacy of the theological implications (perhaps by using terminology like "theological" or "spiritual" virginity), the question of historicity is still a legitimate one. Some theologians can continue to speak of "virgin birth" even though they think that the conception of Jesus was through marital intercourse. For other theologians that term refers to a conception that really was virginal and not natural. Still others use the term "virgin birth" but consider the question of bodily virginity of no import, and they are willing to take an agnostic stance toward it.¹⁴ The purpose of my inquiry is to determine which is the most responsible of these various attitudes, all of which rightly accent the theological import but disagree on the underlying historical fact (the manner of the conception).

Inevitably, no matter how hard one may try to be objective in such an inquiry, there are certain predispositions toward a particular solution. In times past the predispositions would have been favorable toward the historicity of the virginal conception. It was expected that the marvelous should accompany God's actions among men, and the miraculous supported faith. Today, however, the miraculous creates suspicion among many Christians. This is more than mere rationalism or the

13:55, and Jn 2:12 and 7:5. Were they siblings (Tertullian, Helvidius, modern Protestants), or were they stepbrothers (Epiphanius) or cousins (Hegesippus, Jerome, principal Reformers)? See J. Blinzler, *Die Brüder und Schwestern Jesu* (Stuttgart, 1967).

¹³ See P. Minear, "The Interpreter and the Birth Narratives," *Symbolae biblicae Upsalienses* 13 (1950) 1-22.

¹⁴ As an example of flexibility let me cite Floyd W. Filson, *A New Testament History* (Philadelphia, 1964) p. 86: "Here God was at work to bring into human life the one who was to carry out God's unique saving purpose for men. Whatever may be thought of the physical origin of Jesus, whether he had a human father or not, his coming and career cannot be explained by reference to human parentage and heritage. . . . If he had a human father, that does not exclude the unique action of God to bring this life into the world."

association of the miraculous with the credulous. Rather it stems from an appreciation of what is truly unique in the Judeo-Christian religion, namely, a conviction that God has been operative in human history, a history like our own. A history studded with the miraculous is not the history we live in. And so today the predispositions run against the thesis that Jesus, who was like us in all but sin, should have been conceived differently from other men.¹⁵

Yet we cannot let predispositions govern the discussion. And, indeed, there are signs of a changing attitude toward the miraculous in biblical research. As an illustration, we may reflect upon Rudolf Bultmann's treatment of the Gospel miracles; for him they were for the most part a later and nonhistorical addendum to the Jesus-tradition supplied by Christian miracle-story tellers who were trying to make the picture of Jesus competitive in a world that expected the miraculous. Naturally, he had exegetical arguments for his position, but the decisive factor in his outlook was his contention that modern man does not believe in miracles. But today Ernst Käsemann, one of Bultmann's most renowned pupils, has shifted from the stance of his master. He maintains that, since exorcisms (those miracles that seem so totally foreign to modern man) are found in the earliest strata of our information about Jesus, then if one wishes to remain a historian, one must accept the historicity of the tradition that Jesus was an exorcist.¹⁶ And so, analogously, if we are to enter this discussion as historians and theologians and exegetes, it cannot be an answer for us that modern man does not believe in virginal conceptions, any more than it can be an answer that, since Christians of the past accepted the virginal conception, we must follow in their footsteps blindly. Both the rationalist and the traditionalist must be open to an honest attempt to survey the evidence—and it may well be that the former will find this more threatening than the latter. Let us turn, then, to the evidence, which we shall

¹⁵ Even in antiquity there was an instinctive reluctance to make the virginal conception appear too marvelous, too unique. Already in Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1, 37 (*GCS* 2, 88-89), there is a search for analogies in the instances of animal parthenogenesis. And today there are the latest developments in experimental embryology, e.g., cloning, which open the possibility of reproduction without sexual intercourse. Others appeal to the analogy of evolution, wherein the first man or men would not have had human parents. However, the quest for natural parallels runs contrary to what the Evangelists are emphasizing; for they stress the role of the Holy Spirit and regard the virginal conception as an act of divine power. For them, it is important that God was acting *out of the ordinary way* in bringing about the birth of His Son.

¹⁶ Quoted in Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York, 1967) p. 65. Perrin himself observes: "Today this would be a widely accepted consensus of critical opinion."

discuss under four headings: (1) the evidence from authority; (2) the evidence from interlocking doctrines; (3) the evidence from early history; (4) the evidence from the Scriptures.

THE EVIDENCE FROM AUTHORITY

For some Christians, supreme authority in matters of belief resides in the Bible as the word of God; for other Christians, such authority is vested in the teachings of a living Church, teachings of which the Bible is a part. The wide acceptance of the virginal conception stems from its being presented as part of the Christian heritage both in the Bible and in Church pronouncements. Yet this unanimity does not foreclose the question; for modern theological insights make it necessary to qualify the authority both of the Bible and of Church teaching, or at least to qualify the way in which that authority is understood to function.

Later I shall return at length to the biblical evidence. Let me note here only that, while Matthew and Luke accepted the virginal conception as historical,¹⁷ we cannot be certain where they got their information on this point.¹⁸ The older thesis that all the information in Luke's infancy narrative came straight from Mary's side of the family, while Matthew's information came from Joseph's side, is no longer tenable in modern exegesis, even though family origins for some information cannot be a priori excluded. Consequently, we must face the possibility that in good faith the Evangelists have taken over an earlier belief in virginal conception that does not have an authentic historical basis. In short, the presence of the virginal conception in the infancy narratives of two Gospels carries no guarantee of historicity.¹⁹

¹⁷ Even if their interest in the virginal conception was primarily theological, as I have stressed, the Evangelists were not sophisticated beyond their times. It is lucidly clear that Matthew believed in Mary's bodily virginity before the birth of Jesus (1:25). It is harder to *prove* the case for Luke; but 3:23 indicates that Luke did not think that Joseph begot Jesus after the angel's annunciation to Mary.

¹⁸ The infancy narratives cannot be compared to the Gospel accounts of Jesus' public ministry. For the latter, the community relied upon a *basis* of eyewitness testimony by the disciples of Jesus, no matter how much the tradition developed in the course of time. But we do not know if eyewitness or close-to-eyewitness testimony stands behind any of the stories pertinent to Jesus' infancy. How many would have been in a position to know the intimate details of Jesus' conception?

¹⁹ The Roman Catholic Church has been slower than some of the Protestant denominations to qualify its understanding of biblical historicity and inerrancy. But when it finally did so at Vatican II, it spoke more publicly and clearly than most churches. In the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei verbum*) 3, 11, we find a very circumscribed, and hence liberating, understanding of inerrancy: "The books of Scripture must

The evidence from Church authority reaches back into very old creedal tradition. An early elaboration of the Old Roman Baptismal Creed confesses "Christ Jesus, His only Son, our Lord" as "born from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary." The creed of Nicaea-Constantinople confesses Jesus Christ "who came down and became incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary." The Apostles' Creed confesses "Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born from the Virgin Mary." There can be no doubt that those who formulated these creedal affirmations believed in the bodily virginity of Mary. Yet many scholars are convinced that the real thrust of creedally reciting *birth from the Virgin Mary* involved the reality of Jesus' birth and his humanity, not the exact how of his conception.²⁰ (Thus, "born of the Virgin Mary" would be descended in spirit from the Pauline formula in Gal 4:4, "God sent forth His Son, *born of a woman*, born under the law"—a formula that gives expression to the radical historicity of Jesus and his mission by stressing the fact that he came from a woman's womb, but without emphasizing the manner in which he was conceived in that womb.) More specifically, just before A.D. 200, in the Old Roman Creed the affirmation of belief in Christ Jesus was expanded by a reference to his birth from the Virgin Mary in order to counteract a docetism and gnosticism that questioned the reality of Jesus' humanity.²¹ Toward the end of the fourth century the Nicene creedal affirmation about the Incarnation was specified in the Constantinopolitan version in terms of incarnation from the Virgin Mary, an insertion seemingly aimed at the Apol-

be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation." The human nature and the divine sonship of Jesus are truths gleaned from the infancy narratives which would meet the qualification for inerrant teaching. Is the bodily virginity of Mary such a truth?

²⁰ Note that the creeds speak of the virgin *birth*. I have indicated that in this paper I prefer the term "virginal conception" to avoid confusion between *virginitas ante partum* and *virginitas in partu*. But there is a second reason for my preference. By speaking of virginal conception I can be precise about the problem of Mary's bodily virginity in a way that is not possible if I fall back on the creedal formulas pertaining to the virgin birth (which also refer to *ante partum*, not to *in partu*), precisely because the latter are almost exclusively Christological. An exception would be the long form of the creed of Epiphanius (*DS* 44; ca. A.D. 374), which is more specific: "He was not born of male seed, nor was he within a man."

²¹ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (2nd ed.; London, 1960) pp. 144-45. Kelly calls attention to "the insistence in this section of the creed on the reality of Christ's human experiences—His birth, His physical sufferings, His death and burial." Of course, the creeds confess birth not only from the Virgin Mary but also from the Holy Spirit, and indeed put the Holy Spirit first to emphasize the divine element in Jesus' incarnation. But my focus of interest here is the why of the mention of the Virgin Mary.

linarians, who did not admit the completeness of Jesus' humanity.²² And so, if we judge the credal affirmations from what they were meant to refute, it may be asked whether, in speaking of the virgin birth, they ever defined *precisely as a matter of faith* the virginal conception as I have been using that term, even though they certainly presupposed it. If I may resort to technical Roman Catholic theological terms, it may be asked whether the *bodily* virginity of Mary in conceiving Jesus has ever been infallibly defined by the extraordinary magisterium of the Church functioning through its creeds and ecumenical councils.²³

But we have not seen the whole picture, for the extent of Christian faith cannot be confined to the rare statements of the extraordinary magisterium. There is a wider area of matters of divine revelation, not defined by creed or ecumenical council, but proposed consistently and universally with such force that they have been accepted in faith by Christians as a whole—the *ubique, semper, ab omnibus* of Vincent of Lerins, or what in Roman Catholicism would be called an exercise of the ordinary magisterium of the Church. And even if the how of Jesus' conception was not the center of the credal affirmations, the development of Mariology did eventually focus the attention of the Christian believer on the bodily virginity of Mary the ever-virgin.²⁴ It would seem to me that for some 1600 years of Christian existence (A.D. 200–1800) the virginal conception of Jesus in a biological sense was universally believed by Christians. And, while I would welcome expert theological correction on this, I would think that according to the usual criteria applied in Roman Catholic theology the virginal conception would be classified as a doctrine infallibly taught by the ordinary magisterium.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 332–38.

²³ There are official Church statements pertaining to the bodily virginity of Mary, but none of them seems to meet the very strict requirements for a *de fide* exercise of the extraordinary magisterium. For instance: (a) In A.D. 449 the letter of Pope Leo I to Bishop Flavian (*DS* 291) speaks of Mary's having conceived with her virginity intact (*salva virginitate concepit*) and without carnal pleasure. (b) In 649 the Lateran Council (*DS* 503) condemned anyone who would not confess that the holy, immaculate, and ever-virgin Mary conceived of the Holy Spirit without seed (*absque semine; asporōs*) and gave birth without detriment to her virginity. (c) In 675 the Eleventh Council of Toledo (*DS* 533) spoke of the intact virginity of Mary, who did not have intercourse with a man (*intacta virginitas et virilem coitum nescivit*). (d) In 1555 a bull issued by Pope Paul IV against the anti-Trinitarians and Socinians (*DS* 1880) condemned those who thought that our Lord was not conceived in the womb of the blessed ever-virgin Mary from the Holy Spirit but rather from the seed of Joseph in the way other men are conceived (*sicut ceteros homines ex semine Joseph*). (e) See note 6 above.

²⁴ The citations in the previous note would be an eloquent proof of this. The shift of Christian focus is well documented by H. von Campenhausen, *The Virgin Birth in the Theology of the Ancient Church* (London, 1964).

But here Catholics come to the type of anguish that faced and faces conservative Protestants when biblical criticism has called into doubt their belief that the Bible is infallible (whether or not that term is used). Does the Roman Catholic notion of infallibility need to be qualified in the light of modern historical study? This question has been answered affirmatively by two Catholic books in the last year: *Infallible? An Inquiry* by Hans Küng (with its heated and counter-productive polemic against the Roman Curia) and *The Survival of Dogma* by Avery Dulles (an unimpassioned and profound study). Like Dulles and unlike Küng, I do not think the concept of infallibility can be discarded or reduced to indefectibility; but it may need rethinking precisely because theologians realize more clearly just how historically conditioned the judgments of the magisterium are—Dulles (p. 173) speaks of “the historical relativity of all doctrinal statements.” Küng used the Roman Church’s teaching on artificial contraception as his chief example of an “infallible” statement that has been subsequently called into doubt or denied. Karl Rahner responded, and probably rightly, that it was not clear that this teaching met all the requirements for a doctrine *de fide ex ordinario magisterio*. The virginal conception more clearly meets the usual criteria, and indeed might become a better test case of the limits of infallibility, at least in reference to applicability and criteria.

The virginal conception is interesting in this regard because it is an example of a doctrine that had not been seriously challenged within Christianity. From *ca.* A.D. 200 to *ca.* 1800 it was attacked almost exclusively by those who denied Christianity in general or the divinity of Christ in particular. For the mass of Christians it was an unexamined doctrine taken for granted. As Jerome explained, “We believe that God was born of a virgin because we read it.”²⁵ But now the virginal conception is being questioned by Christians who do not deny the divinity of Jesus—men who can no longer say they believe because they read it, since they know the complexities of the scriptural accounts in which they read it. Are they to be bound by the unreflective teaching of a past which was in no position to know the problems that must be faced now? Of course, it is almost axiomatic in Catholic theology that what the Church teaches does not draw its validity from the arguments used to reach that teaching; but it is not clear how to apply that principle to a question of *fact* such as is involved in the virginal conception. There is not much evidence that the Church had another chain of tradition back to the facts about Jesus’ conception besides the affirmation common to Matthew and Luke. If that affirmation is called into

²⁵ *Adv. Helvidium* 19 (PL 23, 213A).

question, can we avoid seeing difficult implications for the Church's teaching?

Perhaps an analogy might be of help. The Church has infallibly taught the theological doctrine that God was specially involved in creating man in His image and likeness. For almost 1900 years that theological doctrine was interpreted to include the how of man's creation, namely, by direct divine action forming man's body from the earth, and woman's body from man's. Today no serious theologian accepts this understanding of the how, because of the evidence favoring evolution; yet the changed understanding of the how of man's creation has not negated the infallibility of the Church's teaching, for we have learned to distinguish between the theological insight and the physical imagery in which it was clothed. Could the same be said *if* Catholic theologians were forced to distinguish between the valid insight of faith that God intervened in the conception of His Son and a past notion of the biological how of that intervention, namely, virginal conception? Our notion of the how of man's creation changed without theological catastrophe; could our notion of the how of Jesus' conception change without theological catastrophe?

Please understand: I am not saying that there is no longer impressive evidence for the virginal conception. Nor am I saying that the Holy Spirit cannot give to the Church a deeper perception than would be warranted by scientific evidence alone. I am simply asking whether the fact that the virginal conception meets the usual criteria for a doctrine infallibly taught by the ordinary magisterium forecloses further investigation. I am asking systematic theologians to study this question,²⁸ especially as regards the criteria of infallibility, and the interplay between authority and evidence. As a help in this study, I shall now survey doctrinal, historical, and biblical evidence pertinent to the virginal conception.

THE EVIDENCE FROM INTERLOCKING DOCTRINES

We cannot consider the virginal conception of Jesus in isolation; it is related to other Christological and Mariological tenets that are dear to

²⁸ In my personal opinion, for Roman Catholic Church authorities to seek to close this question by fiat and without discussion of the complexities of the evidence would be disastrous. Those of us who are loyal would obey, and the discussion will be left to those Catholics who ignore authority. A more likely reaction will be to dismiss the request for a serious re-examination as unthinkable. Pedagogically, such a response will scarcely satisfy a generation that constantly thinks the unthinkable. A serious re-examination, involving refined criteria for infallibility and a more critical approach to the biblical evidence, may well result in reaffirming that the virginal conception is truly of Christian faith; but then the very fact that we were willing to make an honest study will enhance the credibility of the result.

Christianity. Some of those tenets seem to favor the historicity of the virginal conception, while for other tenets the virginal conception is an obstacle. Let us consider both.

Doctrines That Seemingly Suppose a Virginal Conception

1) The sanctity of Mary.²⁷ All would recognize that, if there was a virginal conception, this involved an extraordinary intervention of God, so that Mary was truly the *kecharitōmenē* of Lk 1:28, the "favored one" of God. But the question raised here concerns more than the consequences of the use of God's miraculous power. There has existed in Christian thought the attitude, explicit or implicit, that virginal conception is a more noble way of conceiving a child than is marital intercourse; and this attitude is tied in to the thesis that virginity is the nobler form of Christian life. Most often in Christian literature this attitude was voiced not in immediate reference to Mary's virginal conception of Jesus but in reference to her remaining a virgin after Jesus' birth. Origen is the first major theologian to bring this ascetical motif to the fore: Mary, once overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, could not conceivably have submitted to marital intercourse with a man. She thus becomes the model of all those who would choose virginity or celibacy as a way of life for the sake of the kingdom of God.²⁸

Most modern theologians, including many Roman Catholics,²⁹ would not support an evaluation whereby the witness of Christian virginity is esteemed as "better" than the witness of Christian married love. The antisexual bias that occasionally colored the theologizing of the past is not a dominant direction today. But there is an even

²⁷ I list the doctrines in an order of ascending importance. The Mariological tenet is lowest in the scale because originally the virginal conception was a Christological concept, not a Mariological one.

²⁸ Origen, *Comm. in Matt.* 10, 17 (*GCS* 40, 21). In *De institutione virginis* 5, 36 (*PL* 16, 328) Ambrose of Milan states: "By Mary's example all are summoned to the service [*cultus*] of virginity." Mary's virginity becomes one of the prominent reasons why God has so favored her. Pope Siricius, *Epistle* 9, 3 (*PL* 13, 1177), in the late fourth century, argues that if one denies the perpetual virginity, one plays into the hands of scoffers who say that Jesus could not have been born of a virgin.

²⁹ The Council of Trent (*DS* 1810) stated: "If anyone says . . . that it is not better to remain in virginity or celibacy than to be joined in marriage, let him be anathema." However, in the context of the sixteenth century, the real point of this was to defend the value of virginity against the attacks of some of the Reformers. The tendency among Roman Catholics today is not to compare virginity and marriage in terms of better or worse but to recognize that each has its uniqueness as a Christian witness. Because the choice of lifetime virginity for religious reasons is much less frequent than the choice of marriage, and because it is a choice that visibly renounces family continuity, the uniqueness of virginity is often thought to be centered in the eschatological challenge it presents to the world.

more fundamental difficulty in linking the "greater" sanctity of virginity to the virginal conception, namely, that the infancy narratives do not make the slightest connection between the virginal conception and the special value of the state of virginity (a theme that does appear elsewhere in the NT). Mary is depicted as having chosen the married state,³⁰ and the virginal conception is presented as God's intervention, not as Mary's personal choice. On the basis of the Gospel evidence it would be next to impossible to maintain that Mary would have been less holy if she had entered into normal marital relations with her husband and had borne Jesus through such relations.

2) The sinlessness of Jesus. In Heb 4:15 Jesus is described as "one who has been tempted as we are in every respect, *yet without sinning*," a description that Chalcedon (*DS* 301) rephrased: "similar to us in all things *except sin*." Ambrose and Augustine, the Fathers of the Western Church who figured prominently in developing the theology of original sin, explained that Jesus was free from sin because he was conceived of a virgin.³¹ Behind this explanation lies the thesis that the transmission of original sin is bound up with the sexual nature of human propagation and the sensual appetites aroused by procreation. Many modern theologians feel an urgency to reformulate the truth contained in the doctrine of original sin, but even the defenders of the traditional understanding of the concept have for the most part abandoned the "concupiscence theory" of the propagation of sin. Thus, while the virginal conception may enter into the mystery of Jesus'

³⁰ Few today interpret the "I do not know man" of Lk 1:34 as a vow of virginity, *pace* G. Graystone, *Virgin of All Virgins* (Rome, 1968). In the long run, as Graystone admits on pp. 147-51, the interpretation depends on whether Mary is to be considered a pious Jewish girl of her times (a situation that militates against a vow of virginity) or whether, by a special impulse of grace and in view of her future vocation, she broke out of the limitations of her surroundings (to make a vow of virginity). Nevertheless, if most take the former alternative and think that Mary entered matrimony with the same intentions as any other girl, one cannot agree with Thomas Boslooper, *The Virgin Birth* (Philadelphia, 1962), who uses Mary's choice to polemicize against what he deems a perverse Roman Catholic emphasis on virginity. On p. 235 he contends: "In the narrative of Jesus' birth a preview glimpse is given of the Savior's own teaching on sex and marriage. . . . Those who receive this story with faith accept premarital chastity, heterosexuality, and monogamous marriage as a divinely ordained way of life." This is an example of eisegesis (in an otherwise perceptive book). The infancy narratives are not meant to praise either marriage or virginity but the greatness of God's action.

³¹ See the texts in von Campenhausen, pp. 79-84. Thus the virginal conception becomes almost a theologoumenon of sinlessness. While the Greek Fathers did not deal with this matter in terms of original sin, they too related the moral perfection and sinlessness of Jesus to his virginal conception. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 1, 30, 12 (*PG* 7, 702), seems to think of this as a Gnostic view; but see Hippolytus, *In Ps. 22* (*GCS* 1², 146-47).

sinlessness, it is difficult to argue that in order to be free from original sin Jesus had to be conceived of a virgin.³²

3) The divine sonship of Jesus. The vehemence of conservative Christian feeling with regard to the virginal conception may best be explained by the fact that in the past the denial of virginal conception has often been accompanied by a denial that Jesus is the Son of God. Nevertheless, historical Christianity has resisted attempts to identify incarnation with divine filiation in any sense that would have the deity as the male element unite with Mary as the female element to produce the human Son of God—in other words, a form of *hieros gamos*.³³ In A.D. 675, for instance, the Eleventh Council of Toledo (*DS* 533) rejected the contention that, since Mary conceived by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit was the father of Jesus. And so, while the doctrine of the virginal conception draws attention to the fact that Jesus was not simply a man like all others and is God's Son in a unique way, it would be impossible to prove theologically that the Son of God could not have become incarnate as the product of a marital union between Joseph and Mary. Both Protestant and Catholic theologians have stated clearly that the bodily fatherhood of Joseph would not have excluded the fatherhood of God.³⁴ Indeed, it is doubtful that if there had been no infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke (and thus there were no mention in the NT of the virginal conception), Christian faith in Jesus as God's Son would have been really different. The idea of divine sonship is substantiated in the Synoptic accounts of the baptism and the transfiguration, and in Pauline and Johannine Christology; it is not dependent upon the infancy narratives.

Doctrines Unfavorable to a Virginal Conception

If theorizing about a natural conception does not seem to raise insuperable difficulties in relation to the doctrines discussed above, we may now ask the converse question: Does retention of the virginal

³² K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1² (Edinburgh, 1956), 188–92, makes a sophisticated connection between the lack of original sin and virginal conception. W. Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (Philadelphia, 1968) p. 149, disagrees with Barth.

³³ Of note is the Mormon belief that God the Father is human and corporeal (and masculine) in form—since we were created in His image and likeness—and that He begot His Son of Mary.

³⁴ A conflict between the two fatherhoods was suggested by Tertullian, *Adv. Marcion* 4, 10 (*CSEL* 47, 446). It is rejected by P. Althaus, quoted with approval by Pannenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 148, and by J. Ratzinger, *Einführung in das Christentum* (2nd ed.; Munich, 1968) p. 225, who insists that the divine sonship of which faith speaks is not a biological fact (as is the virginal conception) but an ontological one. We may add that in the relationship between virginal conception and incarnation, it is not the first that is essential for the second; it is the second that makes the first credible.

conception raise insuperable difficulties for other Christian doctrines as they are understood in our times?

1) Can the virginal conception be reconciled with the pre-existence of the Son of God? Wolfhart Pannenberg has answered with a firm no: "In its content, the legend of Jesus' virgin birth stands in an irreconcilable contradiction to the Christology of the incarnation of the pre-existent Son of God found in Paul and John."³⁵ His contention is based on the modern analysis of how NT Christology developed. To simplify, we may say that NT Christology developed backwards, from end to beginning.³⁶ The earliest Christians placed their "highest" Christological emphasis on the return of Jesus at the end of time, which was to come shortly; it was then that he would be the Messiah and the Son of Man (Acts 3:20-21). The next step was to realize that Jesus had been exalted to a high Christological status already at his resurrection (Acts 2:36; 5:30-31), which (eventually) was contrasted with a ministry of service and lowliness (Rom 1:3-4). As we see in the Gospel accounts of the public ministry, the high Christology was gradually moved back into the lifetime of Jesus, so that he was the Messiah (Mt 16:16-17), the Son of Man (Mk 8:31), and the Son of God (Mk 1:11; 9:7) during the ministry.

Still a further step in Christian reflection was to push the question back beyond the ministry and to ask at what earlier stage he was all these things. In Matthew and Luke we have the Christology moved back to Jesus' infancy in Mary's womb, for an angel proclaims that from the moment of his conception he was already the Messiah and the Son of God. On the other hand, in hymns quoted in the Pauline epistles (Phil 2:6-7; Col 1:15-17), in Hebrews (1:2), and in John (1:1; 17:5) the Christology is moved toward pre-existence. The NT authors did not have the difficult task of reconciling these two "pre-ministry" Christologies, one centered on conception, the other on pre-existence; for we have no evidence that the proponents of one were aware of the other. But the later Church did reconcile them by establishing a sequence whereby the pre-existent Word or Son of God took flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary and became man.³⁷ Pannenberg rejects

³⁵ Pannenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 143. To discuss this question fully, one would have to deal with sophisticated modern attempts to reinterpret pre-existence. See a Catholic attempt by P. Schoonenberg, *The Christ* (New York, 1971) pp. 80-91.

³⁶ A full exposition may be found in R. H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York, 1965), and F. Hahn, *The Titles of Jesus in Christology* (Cleveland, 1969).

³⁷ The process is probably already at work in Ignatius of Antioch, who posits pre-existence for the divine element in Jesus who is conceived in the womb of Mary (see A. Hoben, *The Virgin Birth*, in *Historic and Linguistic Studies* [2nd series] 1 [Chicago, 1903]

this reconciliation as false because the original idea of the Matthean and Lucan infancy narratives was that Jesus first became God's Son through Mary's conception. He may well be right in his exegesis, but we have to ask why Matthew's and Luke's understanding of the Christology of the virginal conception should be any more final than were the earlier NT understandings of the Christology of the second coming or of that of the resurrection. Why is not the Church's reconciliation of pre-existence and virginal conception a genuine step in a developing Christology? Because they are not reconciled in the NT does not mean, *pace* Pannenberg, that they are irreconcilable.³⁸

2) On the other side of the coin, can the virginal conception be reconciled with the true humanity of Jesus? Does Jesus become docetic if he was not conceived in a truly human manner? Is he a Jesus "similar to us in all things except sin"?³⁹ This question may well be unanswerable in the abstract, since we are dealing with something unique. We have said that Jesus would still have been God's Son if he had two human parents; how can we say that he would not be man's son if he had only one?⁴⁰ And, as we have seen, the *natus de virgine* of the creeds was precisely antidocetic.

Yet there is a very serious problem in reconciling the virginal conception with the modern understanding of how Jesus functioned as a human being who was limited in the way he could *express or formulate* his own identity⁴¹—a Jesus who did not speak of himself as "Messiah,"

20–21). Pre-existence and virginal conception are combined in Aristides, *Apology* 15, 1, and especially in Justin's writings, which speak of the virginal birth of the pre-existent Word (*Apology* 1, 21 and 33). In Melito's *Discourse on Faith*, 4 (*Corpus Apologetarum* 9, 420), there is an attempted harmony between the Johannine Prologue and the infancy narratives.

³⁸ O. Piper, "The Virgin Birth: The Meaning of the Gospel Accounts," *Interpretation* 18 (1964) 132, states that if the virginal conception was once a rival to the Pauline and Johannine thesis of pre-existence, for the Church Fathers the virginal conception confirms pre-existence.

³⁹ Some have wondered if such a conception would not have made Jesus asexual, and they have related it to his remaining unmarried. This is another form of the connection made between virginal conception and lifetime virginity, a thesis rejected above when it was applied to Mary. Its application to Jesus goes back to Tertullian, *De carne Christi* 20 (*CSEL* 70, 241).

⁴⁰ Since the same Evangelists who tell us about the virginal conception also give us genealogies of Jesus, they did not think that the conception ruptured the chain of human descent.

⁴¹ In my book *Jesus God and Man* (Milwaukee, 1967) pp. 92–93, I acknowledged that the limitations of Jesus' knowledge of himself, traceable in the Synoptic picture of the ministry, were not reconcilable with the pictures of Jesus offered by the fourth Gospel and the infancy narratives. The fourth Evangelist has rewritten the story of the ministry in light of late first-century Christology, so that Jesus speaks as the pre-existent Son who

as "Son of God," and perhaps not even as "Son of Man." The history of Christology given above assumes that "high" explicit Christology was the contribution and insight of the Christian community, while the Christology of Jesus' lifetime was implicit, i.e., implied in his words and actions but not expressed in titles. However, if Joseph and Mary knew that their son had no human father but was begotten of God's holy spirit, if it had been revealed to them from the start that the child was to be the Messiah, and if they had not kept this secret from Jesus, how can he *not* have affirmed that he was the Messiah or that he was the unique Son of God? Obviously this conflict between the infancy narratives and the (reconstructed) Jesus of the ministry is based on many "ifs," all of which can be questioned.⁴²

One may even argue forcefully in the opposite direction. The historical Jesus came to his ministry with an assurance that he could tell men what God wanted of them (as implied in his very proclamation of the kingdom and in his use of the initial, authoritative "Amen") and that he could act with God's power (the exorcisms). What was the source of this assurance, which involved some kind of awareness of his own identity? Was the source his knowledge that he had no human father and thus was uniquely God's Son? The latter might explain his strange custom of addressing God intimately as "Abba." Yet there remains the difficulty that such a specific knowledge of his origins did not result in an ability to formulate his role in Christological titles (e.g., the titles given to him in the annunciation of his birth) or in clearer descriptions.

In summary of the evidence from interlocking doctrines, we note that the balance seems to be shifting from an almost perfect harmony of the virginal conception with other Mariological and Christological tenets to disturbing difficulties about its reconcilability with some thrusts of modern Christological insights.

THE EVIDENCE FROM EARLY HISTORY

By the year A.D. 200 the virginal conception of Jesus was "in possession" as a Christian doctrine. Formerly the claim might have been made that this was already true by A.D. 100, since Ignatius of Antioch mentions the virginal conception in his letters.⁴³ Yet Walter

was with the Father before creation. Matthew and Luke have not so totally rewritten the story of the ministry, but they have created a tension between the implications of the ministry and what is explicit in the infancy narratives.

⁴² Perhaps, for instance, the direct divine intervention in the conception of the child would still have been interpreted in the OT light of God's adoptive fatherhood toward the Davidic kings.

⁴³ In *Ephesians* 7:2; 18:2; 19:1; *Smyrnaeans* 1:1.

Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christianity* (German ed., 1934) has forcefully reminded us that the second century was not a uniform or homogeneous period in Christian thought; for what was accepted in one area was rejected or unknown in another, and what triumphed as orthodoxy at the end of the century was often but one competing idea earlier. On the one hand, then, we may ask if large groups of Christians betrayed ignorance of the virginal conception during the second century. And were there Christians who did not accept the virginal conception and whose rejection of it is indicative of a historical tradition that knew of a natural conception of Jesus? On the other hand, we may search for evidence of Christian belief that came from noncanonical sources and which might supplement the testimony of the infancy narratives.⁴⁴

First, the rejection of the virginal conception. Two groups are involved: Gnostics and Jewish Christians. In the Gnostic or sectarian camp the names of Cerdo, Cerinthus, Saturnilus, the Carpocratians, Marcion, and the Manicheans may be mentioned. Of them von Campenhausen says: "We must not regard these views as entirely secondary and directed against the doctrine of the virgin birth; they are, on the contrary, further evidence of how little the virgin birth was taken as a matter of course, even at the beginning and up to the middle of the second century."⁴⁵ That may be true and of importance for evaluating whether the virginal conception was believed *ubique, semper, et ab omnibus*; but the variant views of most of these groups tell us little about the possible historical validity of a contrary tradition. Often their opposition to the virginal conception stems from doctrinal or philosophical presuppositions (Docetism, disdain for the worldly, etc.) rather than from historical reasons. One can scarcely take seriously their alternative explanations of Jesus' origins, e.g., Marcion's seeming contention that a supernatural being came down directly from heaven in the fifteenth year of Tiberius, at the time of Jesus' baptism by John.⁴⁶

Much more important is the rejection of the virginal conception by Jewish Christians. In mid-second century Justin, who himself believed

⁴⁴ Of particular help here are the excellent surveys of historical evidence by Hoben (n. 37 above) and von Campenhausen (n. 24 above). I would judge the latter a bit minimalistic (e.g., n. 53 below), in part because he does not give sufficient attention to the apocrypha (pseudepigrapha) as evidence of early Christian belief.

⁴⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 22; see also Hoben, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-35.

⁴⁶ Some of the other views listed by von Campenhausen, *op. cit.*, p. 22, n. 1, are that the Holy Spirit was Jesus' mother, that Mary was an angel, that Jesus was the angel Gabriel or Michael who entered into Mary to take on human form. On the other hand, Cerinthus, the Carpocratians, and the *Acts of Thomas* agree with the Jewish Christian evidence in asserting that Jesus was the natural son of Joseph.

that Jesus was conceived of a virgin, acknowledged the existence of Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah but declared that he was of merely human origin.⁴⁷ Somewhat later Origen knew of the Ebionites or Jews who had accepted Jesus as the Messiah; and he reported: "There are two sects of Ebionites: the one confessing as we do that Jesus was born of a virgin, the other holding that he was not born in this way but like other men."⁴⁸ Considering the relationship of both Justin and Origen to Palestine, we may wonder if these Jewish Christians preserved a tradition that had come down in that country from some of the original followers of Jesus who knew nothing of his having been conceived of a virgin and thought that he was Joseph's natural son. Some recent evidence, but of very dubious value, may be cited in favor of that view.⁴⁹ On the other hand, as we shall see below, there are Christian works of Jewish background that show early acceptance of the virginal conception.

Second, how widely was the virginal conception known? It has often been noted that of "the Apostolic Fathers" only Ignatius of Antioch makes reference to the virginal conception, and many think that this silence is not a matter of chance. Von Campenhausen,⁵⁰ for instance, thinks the silence is especially significant on the part of the *Letter of Barnabas* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, since both of these works have speculation about the Lord's origins. While that may be,⁵¹ there

⁴⁷ *Trypho* 48, 4 (reading "your race" rather than "our race" as in *PG* 6, 581). Justin's tone seems to indicate that these Jewish Christians were not considered out-and-out heretics (von Campenhausen, *op. cit.*, p. 22), but by the end of the century and the time of Irenaeus (*Adv. haer.* 3, 19, 1; *Sources chrétiennes* 34, 330) there was much less fluidity about the obligation to accept the virginal conception.

⁴⁸ *Contra Celsum* 2, 1 and 5, 61 (*GCS* 2, 126-27 and 3, 65).

⁴⁹ I refer to the material published by Shlomo Pines, *The Jewish Christians of the Early Centuries of Christianity according to a New Source* (Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities 2, no. 13; Jerusalem, 1966). Behind an Arabic, tenth-century Moslem polemic against Christians, Pines detects a fifth-century Syriac account of Nazarene or Jewish-Christian beliefs. The document claims that this sect was driven out of Palestine into Syria around A.D. 62. These Jewish Christians believed that Jesus was "the son of Joseph the Carpenter," as opposed to being one "born without [fecundation by] a male" (66b; Pines, p. 45). However, the lateness and nature of the evidence create serious doubts about its reliability, especially in regard to first-century Palestinian Christianity. The author seems to know both the Matthean and Lucan infancy traditions; e.g., he reports that Joseph took the child and his mother to Egypt and that Joseph and Mary searched for the lost child in Jerusalem (94b; Pines, p. 51). The tradition that Jesus was the son of Joseph may reflect the Sinaiticus Syriac variant of Mt 1:16 (rather than Mt 1:1, to which Pines, p. 8, refers) in combination with Mt 13:55.

⁵⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 19.

⁵¹ The virginal conception would not be harmonious with the theology of the author of *Barnabas*, who understood Jesus to be Son of God in a way that was irreconcilable with his being son of David (12, 10).

is a surprising amount of evidence that the virginal conception was known and accepted during the second century by Christians of various origins and many places.

Let us begin with Ignatius of Antioch, who associates the virginity of Mary with the birth and resurrection of Jesus as "three resounding mysteries wrought in the silence of God" (*Ephesians* 19, 1). The association with other doctrines that he makes and the assurance with which he makes it would indicate that Ignatius could take for granted the acceptance of Mary's virginity. Since it is scarcely by exclusive choice that he mentions it only in *Ephesians* and *Smyrnaeans*, we may assume that the virginity of Mary would have been known by all or most of the (largely Gentile) congregations whom he addresses in Asia Minor and Rome, and also at Antioch (a church with deep Jewish roots) where he was bishop. We are not certain whether Ignatius draws upon the canonical Matthean infancy narrative or upon independent tradition⁵²—if the latter, his witness would be even more important. A few years later (*ca.* 125) Aristides of Athens refers to the Son of God taking flesh of a virgin.⁵³ Knowledge of the virginal conception among the Apologists is also attested in the writings of Justin (mid-second century), whose witness is important because he came from Palestine and may have preserved some Palestinian noncanonical material about Jesus' birth.⁵⁴ Elsewhere in the Gentile Christian world of the second century the virginal conception is supported by Tatian, Abercius of Hierapolis, Melito of Sardes, the Old Roman Creed, and the *Protevangelium of James*.⁵⁵ Among Christians of peculiarly Semitic interests or background we have the witness of the *Testaments of the Patriarchs*⁵⁶ and the *Ascension of Isaiah*.⁵⁷ Of

⁵² Boslooper, *op. cit.* (n. 30 above) p. 28, argues for this.

⁵³ Von Campenhausen, *op. cit.*, p. 19, n. 4, rightly points out glosses in the text of Aristides' *Apology* 15, 1, which can be determined by comparing the Greek and the Syriac; but I wonder does the reader come away from von Campenhausen's note with the *fact* clearly in mind that there is a reference to incarnation "of a virgin" in all three forms of Aristides' work (Armenian, Greek, Syriac).

⁵⁴ See E. F. Bishop, *Evangelical Quarterly* 39 (1967) 30-39. Nevertheless, while Justin knew Jewish views and made considerable use of OT prophecies in defending the virginal conception (*Apology* 1, 33; *Trypho* 77-78 and 84), his personal outlook and exegesis was that of a Gentile Christian.

⁵⁵ Although this apocryphal gospel pretends to come from Jesus' family circle (his stepbrother James), the author was not a Palestinian Jew, for he betrays real ignorance of the Temple and its customs. Writing in mid-second century, he combines the Matthean and Lucan information with imaginative details of another origin.

⁵⁶ *Testament of Joseph* 19, 8 mentions the spotless lamb born of a virgin. While scholars are not agreed whether this is a pre-Christian Jewish document with Christian interpolations (R. H. Charles) or an original Jewish-Christian compilation (M. de Jonge), most would see here a testimony to the virginal conception coming from the second century

particular importance is the witness to a virginal conception in the *Odes of Solomon*, because of the efforts of James Charlesworth to establish that this is a first-century Jewish-Christian work, not dependent on the canonical infancy narratives.⁵⁸

In summary, then, the over-all picture from the early historical evidence is one of reasonably wide affirmation for the virginal conception. Yet there are some puzzling instances of silence that may indicate ignorance or rejection, along with explicit rejection in certain Jewish Christian circles, raising the possibility (but no more than that) of a contrary historical tradition in favor of human fatherhood. Certainly, therefore, the problem cannot be settled on the basis of the early historical evidence.

THE EVIDENCE FROM THE SCRIPTURES

Since our other forms of evidence ultimately refer back to the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, the value of the scriptural evidence for the virginal conception will have a great effect on any ultimate decision about historicity. The scope of this paper requires that I treat the NT with the same brevity with which I scanned the other areas. And so I shall leave to a future book a full treatment of the infancy narratives⁵⁹ and attempt here only to list factors on both sides of the question of historicity, with a warning that I cannot do justice to all the subtleties. But first let me summarize in a few sentences the place of the virginal conception within the infancy narratives. It seems clear that the two Evangelists traditionally known as Matthew and Luke, writing in the era A.D. 80–100, believed that, in conceiving Jesus, Mary remained bodily a virgin and did not have intercourse with Joseph (see note 17

at the latest. On the *Testaments* see A.-M. Denis, *Introduction aux pseudépigraphes grecs d'Ancien Testament* (Leiden, 1970) pp. 49–59.

⁵⁸ The apocalyptic "Vision of Isaiah," which constitutes the second half of the *Ascension*, is generally attributed to Jewish-Christian circles of the late first or early second centuries. The author of the "Vision" knows Matthew's Gospel. See E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha* 2 (Philadelphia, 1965) 642–44; also J. Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* (Chicago, 1964) pp. 12–14.

⁵⁹ *Ode* 19, 6–9. For Charlesworth's articles see *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 31 (1969) 357–69; *Semitics* 1 (1970) 12–26; *Revue biblique* 77 (1970) 522–49. By courtesy he permitted me to use his translation in the forthcoming *The Odes of Solomon* (Oxford, 1972). However, we should note that in the *Odes* the virginal conception is associated with the thesis of a feminine Holy Spirit and a painless birth—ideas known to us in Christian circles of the second century, the date more commonly assigned to the *Odes*. The thesis that *Ode* 19 is a later insertion has been generally abandoned.

⁶⁰ Although modern Protestant and Catholic scholars are in surprising agreement on the generally figurative and nonhistorical character of the infancy narratives, there really is no adequate commentary on these Gospel chapters in English. Much of the excellent foreign Catholic work has had little impact in America.

above); they were not consciously presenting us with a theologoumenon. Neither Evangelist knew the other's infancy narrative, and the fact that a virginal conception through the power of the Holy Spirit is one of the few points on which they agree means that this tradition antedates both accounts. Indeed, it had been in circulation long enough to have developed into (or to have been employed in) narratives of a quite diverse character and to have circulated in different Christian communities. Now we must ask whether this common tradition was historical in its origins.

Scriptural Arguments against Historicity

1) The "high" Christology of a virginal conception. What is the most serious objection to historicity has already been mentioned at the end of the section on interlocking doctrines. The explicit and high Christology of the infancy narratives centering on the virginal conception is hard to reconcile with the widely accepted critical theory of a gradual development of explicit NT Christology, unless the virginal conception is considered to be a late Christological theologoumenon. If the Christology associated with virginal conception was known from the first moments of Jesus' earthly career, the whole critical theory falls apart. This difficulty is not insuperable if scholars can work out a distinction between the *fact* of virginal conception and the *Christology* that surrounds it in the infancy narratives, but that has not yet been done in a satisfactory way.

2) The dubious historicity of the infancy material in general. I have already pointed out, at the beginning of the section on authority, that we know little of the sources from which the various infancy traditions were drawn and thus the infancy narratives differ from the rest of the Gospels. But our problems deepen when we compare the two infancy narratives one to the other; for, despite ingenious attempts at harmonization, the basic stories are virtually irreconcilable (cf. Mt 2:14 and Lk 2:39). They agree in so few details that we may say with certainty that they cannot both be historical *in toto*. Even the lists of Jesus' ancestors that they give are very different, and neither one is plausible.⁶⁰

If we consider them separately, Matthew's account is redolent of the folkloric and imaginative: e.g., angelic appearances in dreams,

⁶⁰The Matthean genealogy with its three groupings of fourteen generations is obviously artificial; it contains well-known confusions in the first two groupings and is impossibly short for the third or postexilic period; moreover, it records a priestly name like Zadok, which is not expected in a Davidic list. The Lucan genealogy also follows a numerical pattern (probably 77 names) and may have duplications (compare 3:23-24 to 3:29-30); it attributes names of a definite postexilic type to the pre-exilic period.

guiding birth star, treasures from the East, the machinations of a wicked king, the slaughter of innocent children.⁶¹ Luke's account has less of the folkloric, even though it reports several angelic appearances and a miraculous punishment of Zechariah. Yet Luke shows signs of considerable literary artistry and organization: e.g., a delicate balance between two annunciations and two births, joined by the visitation—obviously this is not the atmosphere of purely historical reporting. Moreover, some of the Lucan details are of dubious historicity, namely, a family relationship between the Baptist and Jesus,⁶² or a census of the Roman world that affected Galilee and occurred before the death of Herod the Great.

Once again the difficulty is not insuperable. Most scholars today would agree that each infancy narrative is composite: information or stories from different sources have been combined and edited by the two Evangelists. Thus it is possible that some of the sources were folkloric or nonhistorical, while other sources or items of tradition came down from genuine family memories. Virginal conception through the power of the Holy Spirit could have been in the latter category, precisely because it is common to the two Evangelists. Nevertheless, one must admit that the general context of the infancy narratives, in which the virginal conception is preserved, does nothing to increase our confidence in historicity.

A particular difficulty should be mentioned. The virginal conception is intimately (but perhaps not inextricably) associated with the Davidic descent of Jesus and his birth at Bethlehem, two affirmations that are also often considered as theologoumena by modern biblical criticism. It is suggested that because the early Christians confessed Jesus as Messiah, for which "Son of David" was an alternative title, they historicized their faith by creating for him Davidic genealogies and by claiming that Joseph was a Davidide.⁶³ Similarly, the theory continues, they localized his birth in the Davidic birthplace of Bethle-

⁶¹ While the raw material is folkloric, the accounts are remarkably brief; they have been pruned down to the bare storyline and to suit the Evangelist's pedagogical interests in OT fulfilment. See the analysis by A. Vögtle, *Bibel und Leben* 6 (1965) 246-79, especially 263-65.

⁶² Such a relationship could not even be suspected from any other NT evidence and certainly was not known by the fourth Evangelist (Jn 1:31).

⁶³ The latest discussion is that by C. Burger, *Jesus als Davidsson* (FRLANT 98; Göttingen, 1970), who doubts that the thesis of Davidic descent can be traced back to the Semitic-speaking Christian circles of Palestine; it is a product of Hellenistic Jewish Christianity. But Burger does not really solve the objection to his thesis raised by the fact that James, the brother of the Lord, was known to Christians at large and active into the 60's. The widespread thesis of Davidic descent must have circulated in his lifetime and could scarcely not have reached his ears. Can we posit his acquiescence in this fictional

hem.⁶⁴ The probative value of the arguments for this theory is debatable, as I have indicated in the notes; but once again the virginal conception is surrounded by the dubious.

3) The silence of the rest of the NT. The questionable historical character of the infancy narratives makes the silence of the rest of the NT about the virginal conception all the more significant. The NT material that rests in some way on apostolic witness (Pauline letters; Gospel traditions of the ministry) offers no support for the virginal conception; indeed, not even all the infancy traditions support it. Let us try to evaluate the silence in each instance as to whether it implies ignorance or rejection of the virginal conception.

Paul. The Pauline letters are the earliest Christian writings; yet their problem-oriented character makes it very difficult to judge if Paul's silence on this question is accidental or significant.⁶⁵ That Paul described Jesus as "born of a woman" (Gal 4:4) rather than as "born of a virgin" is scarcely probative; and his reference to Jesus as the "seed of David" (Rom 1:3) and the "seed of Abraham" (Gal 3:16) is no more specific in its information about the how of Jesus' conception than is Matthew's description (1:1) of Jesus as "son of David, son of Abraham," a description that Matthew found reconcilable with virginal

affirmation about his family descent? Would not others who knew the family and, especially, the Jewish opponents have raised some objection? Paul makes his own a creedal statement about Jesus' Davidic descent (Rom 1:3); he knew James and he was scarcely indifferent about questions of family origin (Rom 11:1; Phil 3:5). As for the oft-cited Mk 12:35-37a (which Bultmann does not consider historical), it need not be interpreted as a rhetorical question implying a negation of Davidic sonship. Rather it may be a rabbinic *haggada*-type question requiring that two seemingly contradictory scriptural positions be reconciled: the Messiah is both David's Son and David's Lord, but in different ways. See D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London, 1956) pp. 158-69.

⁶⁴ Unlike Davidic descent, birth at Bethlehem is attested only in the infancy narratives; but since it appears in both, it is an antecedent datum. Again Burger, p. 104, is too negative: "The overwhelming evidence to the contrary has made the thesis that Bethlehem was *not* the historical birthplace of Jesus the *communis opinio* of NT scholarship." While there was an expectation of the Messiah's birth at Bethlehem (Mt 2:4-6; Jn 7:42), there were other Jewish views of the Messiah's origin to which Christians might have appealed if Jesus were not born at Bethlehem (see Jn 7:27); and certainly Jesus was hailed as Messiah when he was known only as Jesus of Nazareth. As for the rest of the NT evidence, it is not certain that Jn 7:41-42 represents the Evangelist's ignorance or denial of birth at Bethlehem, for it may be an instance of irony—cf. Jn 4:12, where the Evangelist and the reader, but not the speaker, know the true situation. (Yet John does portray Jesus' contemporaries as ignorant of his birth at Bethlehem.) A greater problem is Mk 6:1-3, where family acquaintances at Nazareth (called Jesus' "native region") betray no knowledge of Jesus' having been born elsewhere and, in particular, of his having been born in the town of David, which might have been auspicious of his present fame.

⁶⁵ To argue that, if Paul knew of the virginal conception, he would have mentioned it in the course of his observations on virginity is to make an unwarranted connection between virginal conception and virginity as a life-style, a connection never made in the NT.

conception. More important is the tension already mentioned between the pre-existence motif in hymns cited by Paul and the Christology of virginal conception. On the other hand, scholars have detected close vocabulary parallels between Rom 1:3-4 and Lk 1:31-35, indicating a possible relation between a Pauline creedal formula and the Lucan tradition of virginal conception.⁶⁶ Ultimately, however, there seems to be no way to establish persuasively whether or not Paul knew of the virginal conception.

Mark. The virginal conception is not mentioned by the earliest Gospel, which paradoxically, however, is the only Gospel that does not refer to Jesus as the "son of Joseph" or the "son of the carpenter."⁶⁷ Some interpreters deem the omission of an infancy narrative sufficient proof that Mark knew nothing about Jesus' birth. Yet, in Mark's time would a birth tradition, even if well known, have already been considered part of the public proclamation of the Good News and hence something in the category of Gospel? Others point out that Marcan Christology is not so "high" as that of the infancy narratives. For instance, in Mk 8:29-30 Jesus reacts against a confession that he is the Messiah. But the same reaction is found in Lk 9:20-21, a Gospel that has an infancy narrative where we are told that Jesus is the Messiah.⁶⁸ If Mark's account of the baptism of Jesus (1:11) *can* be interpreted as an adoption of Jesus as God's Son at that moment (probably a wrong interpretation) and thus as a negation of the Christology of the infancy narratives, so can Luke's account of the baptism⁶⁹—and Luke did accept

⁶⁶ J. Orr, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York, 1907) pp. 120-21; G. A. Danell, *Studia theologica* 4 (1950) 94-101. This argument is independent of the unverifiable assumption that Luke, Paul's companion, was the Evangelist, an assumption that vitiates much of R. J. Cooke's *Did Paul Know of the Virgin Birth?* (New York, 1926).

⁶⁷ These designations are found in Matthew (13:55) and in Luke (five times), Evangelists who clearly believe in the virginal conception; and thus they need imply no more than Joseph's legal or "public" paternity. Of course, they may have been taken over by Matthew and Luke from an earlier usage where there was no knowledge of virginal conception; yet it remains true that the designations themselves tell us nothing about the user's attitude on this question. It is striking that Mk 6:3, if we accept the best textual witnesses, refers to Jesus as "the carpenter," while Mt 13:55 refers to him as "the carpenter's son." If the usage were the reverse, there would be exegetical unanimity that "the carpenter's son" in Mark (implying Joseph's natural fatherhood) was the original reading, changed by Matthew to "the carpenter" to favor virginal conception. Unfortunately, facts get in the way of theory.

⁶⁸ There is an unreconciled conflict in Luke between the two Christologies (of the ministry and of the infancy), as we have previously insisted; but the fact that they can coexist in Luke makes it difficult to be sure what Mark's attitude would have been.

⁶⁹ Indeed, more so if one accepts the Western reading of Lk 3:22: "You are my Son; today I have begotten you"—a reading, however, that may be just a later scribal "improvement," smoothing out a mixed citation (Ps 2:7 and Is 42:1), in favor of citing only Ps 2:7.

the Christology of the infancy narratives. Exegetes who join Mk 3:21 to 3:31-35 would have Jesus' "mother and brothers" (3:31) thinking that Jesus was "out of his mind" (3:21)—an attitude scarcely reconcilable with Mary's knowledge of the uniqueness of her son's conception—but the relation of the two texts is not lucidly clear in Mark. In general, then, Marcan silence may well mean Marcan ignorance of the virginal conception, but the evidence leaves much to be desired.

John. The last of the Gospels is also silent on the virginal conception. The third-person-singular reading in Jn 1:13, "*He who* was begotten, not by blood, nor by carnal desire, nor by man's desire, but of God," is considered by most⁷⁰ an early patristic change from the original plural in order to make the text Christologically useful. Jesus is called "son of Joseph" in Jn 1:45 and 6:42 (but see note 67). Some would find John's ignorance of the virginal conception made more likely by his seeming ignorance of Jesus' birth at Bethlehem (Jn 7:42; but see note 64). I have already explained above that a tension exists between John's thesis of Jesus' pre-existence and the Christological direction taken by the infancy narratives. Over-all, the scales tip in favor of Johannine ignorance of the virginal conception; and that means the ignorance of it in a late-first-century Christian community that had access to an early tradition about Jesus.⁷¹ On the other hand, some suggest that the fourth Gospel stems from the region of Antioch; and it is interesting that less than twenty years after the Gospel's composition, Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch who reflects certain Johannine ideas (whether or not he knew the Gospel), was firmly convinced of the virgin birth.

Sections of the infancy narratives. We have already stated that the infancy narratives are probably composite, an amalgamation of different traditions. It is very likely that certain of these traditions were composed in ignorance of a virginal conception. As for Luke, most scholars have given up the thesis that Lk 1:34-35, which contains the only clear reference in this infancy narrative to virginal conception, is a post-Lucan scribal addition.⁷² Yet there is considerable agreement that chapter 2 of Luke may have come from a tradition independent of

⁷⁰ Although not found in a single Greek Gospel ms., this reading is still accepted by a surprising number of French-speaking exegetes: M.-E. Boismard, F.-M. Braun, D. Mollat (in the "Bible of Jerusalem"), and exhaustively defended by J. Galot, *Etre né de Dieu: Jean 1:13 (Analecta biblica 37; Rome, 1969)*.

⁷¹ This is the least one can conclude from C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, 1963).

⁷² V. Taylor, *The Historical Evidence for the Virgin Birth* (Oxford, 1920) pp. 40-80, argues that the verses are Lucan but added as an afterthought. Yet their presence parallels 1:18 ff. in the annunciation of the Baptist's birth and seems integral to the chapter. See J. G. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York, 1930) pp. 120-53.

1:34–35 and ignorant of a virginal conception.⁷³ Certainly Mary's puzzlement in 2:48–49 is explained more easily on this supposition. Also, the modifying phrase in Lk 3:23 ("Jesus being the son, *as was supposed*, of Joseph, the son of Heli . . .") may be Luke's correction of a genealogy that originally listed Jesus as the natural son of Joseph. As for Matthew, there is reason to detect an underlying story involving a series of angelic visions to Joseph, in which the first vision may have originally announced only the birth of the child Saviour, and not his virginal conception.⁷⁴ Personally, I find Matthew's genealogy of less significance than Luke's, since I think that Matthew added the names of Joseph and Jesus to an already existing popular genealogy of the Messiah king, and therefore there was no previous attitude in the genealogy toward Jesus as the son of Joseph.⁷⁵

As a summary reflection on the silence of these various NT documents in relation to the virginal conception, I would have to insist that, even when this silence indicates ignorance, it does not disprove the historicity of the virginal conception. Such a conception would not have been part of the early proclamation, for it opened Jesus' origins to ridicule and calumny. One might theorize, then, that a family tradition about the virginal conception circulated among relatively few in the period A.D. 30–60 before it spread and became known by communities such as those for whom Matthew and Luke wrote. On the other hand, the silence of the rest of the NT enhances the *possibility* of the theologoumenon theory whereby sometime in the 60's one or more Christian thinkers solved the Christological problem by affirming symbolically that Jesus was God's Son from the moment of his conception. According to the theory, they used an imagery of virginal conception whose symbolic origins were forgotten as it was disseminated among various Christian communities and recorded by the Evangelists.

Scriptural Arguments Favoring Historicity

The evidence is not one-sided and the theologoumenon theory leaves at least two knotty problems unsolved.

⁷³ M. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (New York, 1935) pp. 123–27; R. Leaney, *New Testament Studies* 8 (1961–62) 158–63.

⁷⁴ C. T. Davis, "Tradition and Redaction in Matthew 1:18—2:23," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 90 (1971) 404–21. Independently, I reached almost the same conclusions about the story underlying Matthew on the basis of other evidence, namely, the Jewish midrash on the birth of Moses on which the pre-Matthean story was patterned and which does not involve a virginal conception. I disagree with Davis on whether the pregnancy-divorce motif was so prominent in the pre-Matthean story.

⁷⁵ Most scholars do not accept as original the Sinaiticus Syriac reading of Mt 1:16, which makes Joseph the (natural?) father of Jesus.

1) The origins of the idea of a *virginal* conception. It is well attested that tales of marvelous births are created posthumously for great men, especially religious leaders; this is a way of showing that Providence had selected these men from the beginning. Undoubtedly, such a tendency influenced the formation of the infancy stories concerning Jesus; but our immediate concern is whether such a process explains one precise point: the Christian contention that Jesus was conceived virginally. If the Christian narrative were like the Lucan story (1:5-20) of how the Baptist was conceived, namely, through divine assistance that made aged and barren parents fertile, there would be little difficulty in accepting the theologoumenon theory: the conception could be explained as a symbolic, theological construction imitating similar birth narratives in the OT, e.g., of Isaac and of Samuel. But the story of Jesus' conception has, in fact, taken a form for which, to the best of our knowledge, there is no exact parallel or antecedent in the material available to the Christians of the first century who told of this conception.

The wealth of comparative material almost defies summary.⁷⁶ Without sufficient concern as to whether they would have been known by or acceptable to early Christians, *non-Jewish parallels* have been found in the figures of world religions (the births of the Buddha, Krishna, and the son of Zoroaster), in Greco-Roman mythology, in the births of the Pharaohs (with the god Amun-Ra acting through the father)⁷⁷ and in the marvelous births of emperors and philosophers (Augustus, Plato, etc.). But these "parallels" consistently involve a type of *hieros gamos* where a divine male, in human or other form, impregnates a woman, either through normal sexual intercourse or through some substitute form of penetration. They are not really similar to the nonsexual virginal conception that is at the core of the infancy narratives, a conception where there is no male deity or element to impregnate Mary.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ A competent survey is provided by Boslooper, *op. cit.* (note 30 above) pp. 135-86.

⁷⁷ This is stressed as an antecedent for the Christian stories by E. Brunner-Traut, *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 12 (1960) 99-111. But the best parallels she offers are to the general (and often folkloric) details of the infancy narratives, and she does not resolve the main difficulty that the Pharaohs were thought to have been conceived by intercourse.

⁷⁸ Let me call attention to a few seeming exceptions: (a) Plutarch, *Life of Numa*, 4: "The Egyptians believe, not implausibly, that it is not impossible for the spirit of a god to approach a woman and procure in her certain beginnings of parturition." Yet he argues that it ought to work the other way around and that a man ought to be able to *have intercourse* with a goddess. (b) Aeschylus, *Suppliants*, vv. 17-19, speaks of Zeus making Io a mother "with a mystic breath" (which could be interpreted as spirit). But a few lines on we hear that Io was "quickened with Zeus' veritable seed," and Hera becomes jealous. (c) Plutarch, *Table-Talk* 8, 1, 2-3 (Loeb, *Moralia* 9, 114-19), has Apollo engender Plato

More logically, others have turned to seek parallels in the Jewish background. In pre-Christian *Hebrew or Aramaic sources*, however, no expectation or description of virginal conception has yet been found, even in reference to the coming Messiah.⁷⁹ The allusion to a divine begetting of the Messiah or Anointed One that appears in the Qumran documents involves no more than the divine adoptive begetting (coronation) of the anointed king in the royal psalms (Ps 2:7).⁸⁰

Hellenistic Judaism has seemed a more fertile field for search because Matthew makes reference to the LXX text of Is 7:14, "The virgin shall conceive."⁸¹ But we have no evidence that in Alexandrian Judaism the LXX of Is 7:14 was understood to predict a virginal conception, since it need mean no more than that the girl who is now a virgin will ultimately conceive (in a natural way). Moreover, it is dubious that Is 7:14 was the *origin* of Matthew's tradition of a virginal conception; elsewhere, including chapter 2, it is Matthew's custom to add fulfilment or formula citations to existing traditions.⁸² And, indeed, there is no proof that Is 7:14 played any major role in shaping the Lucan account of the virginal conception.

A parallel is sometimes sought in Philo's description of how virtues are generated in the human soul.⁸³ He employs allegorically the stories of the births of the patriarchs who were begotten through the instrumentality of God: "Rebekah, who is perseverance, became preg-

not by seed but by power; but the sequence seems to imply a form of intercourse, for it leads into the motif mentioned above regarding Egyptian belief. (d) The cult of Dusesares at Petra and Hebron (and sometimes associated with Bethlehem), which is related to the mystery-cult acclamation of the virgin-mother goddess who has brought forth a son. See T. K. Cheyne, *Basic Problems and the New Material for Their Solution* (New York, 1904) pp. 74-75; W. K. L. Clarke, *New Testament Problems* (London, 1929) pp. 1-5. This is another form of the Oriental fertility cult (Tammuz/Ishtar; Osiris/Isis), and the real parallels are to the Christian liturgical development of the Magi story into an epiphany celebration. No truly virginal conception is involved.

⁷⁹ I assume the common scholarly agreement that the Hebrew of Is 7:14 has nothing to do with virginal conception.

⁸⁰ See O. Michel and O. Betz, "Vom Gott gezeugt," in *Judentum, Urchristentum und Kirche* (J. Jeremias Festschrift) ed. W. Eltester (Berlin, 1960) pp. 3-23. The banquet scene in 1QS^a 2:11, at which the Messiah might appear, is scarcely the occasion for a virgin to conceive and bring forth a messianic child.

⁸¹ See also the LXX rendering of Ps 110(109):3, "From the womb before the morning I have begotten you." Some think the LXX translators may have been influenced by the Egyptian ideas of royal birth (note 77 above).

⁸² K. Stendahl, *The School of St. Matthew* (rev. ed.; Philadelphia, 1968) pp. vii-viii; W. Rothfuchs, *Die Erfüllungszitate des Matthäus-Evangeliums* (BWANT 88; Stuttgart, 1969) pp. 99-100.

⁸³ Philo, *De cherubim* 12-15; but see also the other texts amassed by A. S. Carman, *American Journal of Theology* 9 (1905) 491-518. For the complexities of the symbolism, see R. A. Baer, *Philo's Use of the Categories Male and Female* (Leiden, 1970).

nant from God." Wary of seeking reliable parallelism in such an allegory, some have suggested that, underlying the Philonic exegesis, was a Hellenistic Jewish theory that the real patriarchs were conceived directly by God without male intervention. Paul has been thought to give witness to this in his distinction between Abraham's two sons, one born according to the flesh, one born according to the promise or spirit (Gal 4:23, 29).⁸⁴ Yet Rom 9:8-10 makes it clear that, for Paul, the patriarchal children of the promise were still conceived by intercourse between their parents. And even if there were such a Hellenistic Jewish theory (and this remains possible), one still has to explain how it became embedded in some of the most Semitic sections of the NT.⁸⁵ Many scholars have proposed that the Lucan infancy narrative, especially chapter 1, was translated from Hebrew into Greek.⁸⁶ And Matthew's story of virginal conception is set in a background of peculiarly Galilean marriage customs.⁸⁷ And so no search for parallels has given us a truly satisfactory explanation of how early Christians happened upon the idea of a virginal conception⁸⁸—unless, of course, that is what really took place.

2) The charge of illegitimacy. Matthew tells us of the rumor that Mary's pregnancy was adulterous. The explanation given by the angel may have set Joseph's mind at ease; but in the implicit logic of Matthew's account there would have been no way to disguise the fact that Jesus would be born indecently early after Mary was taken to Joseph's home. Obviously Matthew is facing a story that is in circulation and factual data that he cannot deny: he does not and seemingly cannot reply that Jesus was born at the proper interval after Joseph

⁸⁴ R. H. Fuller, *Journal of Religion* 43 (1963) 254.

⁸⁵ W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge, 1964) p. 64, recognizes the problem caused by the "extreme Jewishness" of the Matthean context; but when he seeks the parallel for the virginal conception in D. Daube's "trace of a Jewish legend of a conception without a human father, and the child in question may well be Moses," he has really moved into the realm of surmise (see pp. 81-82). The surmise may be correct, but the proof is inadequate.

⁸⁶ The debate raised by P. Winter is conveniently summarized by R. M. Wilson, *Studia evangelica* 1 (TU 73; Berlin, 1959) 235-53. The Semitic background of Lk 1:31-35 will be enhanced when J. T. Milik finally publishes an Aramaic fragment from Qumran (in possession since 1958) which contains this sentence: "He will be said to be son of God, and they will call him son of the Most High."

⁸⁷ The feeling against sexual relationship between betrothed (= married) who had not yet begun to live in the same house was stronger in Galilee than in Judea: Mishnah *Kethuboth* 1, 5; Babylonian Talmud *Kethuboth* 9b, 12a.

⁸⁸ Another field of exploration now opening is the Coptic Gnostic material from Nag Hammadi. Seemingly of Jewish origin, *The Apocalypse of Adam* (CG 5, 78, 18-20) refers, apparently in a hostile manner, to the third kingdom of him who came from a virgin womb.

and Mary came to live together. Traces of the rumor of irregularity of birth and illegitimacy appear elsewhere in the NT. The reference to Jesus as "son of Mary" (Mk 6:3) is strange, for generally sons were not called by their mother's name unless paternity was uncertain or unknown.⁸⁹ Illegitimacy may be implied in the retort of "the Jews" in John 8:41, "We were not born illegitimate," if the Greek *hēmeis* is emphatic by way of contrast. And certainly, from the time of Origen through the Talmud and the medieval legends of the *Toledoth Yeshu*, the constant Jewish refutation of Christian claims about Jesus' origins has not been that he was an ordinary child, the legitimate son of Joseph, but that his mother committed adultery with another and he was born illegitimate.⁹⁰ Since it is not easy to dismiss such a persistent charge, which may be as old as Christianity itself, those who deny the virginal conception cannot escape the task of explaining how the rumor of illegitimacy and irregularity of birth arose and how they would answer it without accepting a very unpleasant alternative.

My judgment, in conclusion, is that the totality of the scientifically controllable evidence leaves an unresolved problem⁹¹—a conclusion that should not disappoint, since I used the word "problem" in my title—and that is why I want to induce an honest, ecumenical discussion of it. Part of the difficulty is that past discussions have often been conducted by people who were interpreting ambiguous evidence to favor positions already taken.

I would urge, however, that this discussion be pursued in an atmosphere of pastoral responsibility. I have already warned that here we are touching on the ordinary Protestant and the ordinary Catholic principles of authority, namely, Bible and Church teaching, and so even an openness to discussion will confuse and frighten many. Moreover, there is the danger that the discussion might imperil a traditional

⁸⁹ E. Stauffer, "Jeschu ben Mirjam," *Neotestamentica et Semitica*, ed. E. E. Ellis and M. Wilcox, in honor of M. Black (Edinburgh, 1969) pp. 119–28.

⁹⁰ The Samaritan Chronicle of A.D. 1616, just published by J. Macdonald and A. J. B. Higgins, *New Testament Studies* 19 (1971–72) 54–80, constitutes an exception since it reports the Jewish adversaries as saying that Jesus was the son of Joseph—but still his *illegitimate* son because he lay with Mary before the proper time. The value of the evidence is dubious because there is clear dependence on Matthew's Gospel.

⁹¹ In particular, as a Roman Catholic whose biblical studies have led him to appreciate all the more the importance of a teaching Church, I cannot resolve the problem independently of the question of authority raised in my first section. I am not afraid that an honest discussion of the virginal conception will lead to a traumatic choice between fidelity to modern exegesis and fidelity to a teaching Church, provided that both the Bible and tradition are subjected to intelligent historical criticism to find out exactly what was meant and the degree to which it was affirmed. Inevitably, however, openness to discussion will be misrepresented as denial of tradition.

formulation of faith that has served Christianity well, and those who discuss the matter must show a sensitivity for the underlying beliefs that have been formulated in terms of virginal conception. For instance, the idea that through the power of the Holy Spirit Jesus was conceived of Mary a virgin has helped to emphasize both the reality of Jesus' humanity and his uniqueness as God's Son. The virginal conception also has given a *woman* a central role in Christianity, and today we should appreciate more than ever before what a service that was. Leaving aside Protestant minimalism and Catholic exaggeration in Mariology, can any of us fail to see that, in all those centuries when no woman could stand publicly in the sanctuaries of churches, it was symbolically significant that a statue of the Virgin stood there. If by Church law a woman could not preside at the ceremonies that brought about Jesus' Eucharistic presence, no one could deny that by God's law it was a woman and not a man who brought about Jesus' historical presence. It must be with an awareness of what the virginal conception has meant to Christianity that we theologians and church historians and exegetes begin our ecumenical discussion of it. Discuss it we must, for Christianity can never seek refuge in anything except the truth, painful as it may be. But as we discuss Mary's virginity, we must assure all those ordinary people in our churches, the "little people" who happen to be God's people, that in our quest we "experts" have not forgotten that we too must obey the biblical injunction (Lk 1:48) that all generations, even this "nosey" generation, shall call her blessed.