

# THE VIRGINAL CONCEPTION OF JESUS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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THE VIRGINAL conception of Jesus by Mary has recently become the topic of discussion in American Roman Catholic circles. There have been comments in diocesan newspapers and reports of the "dismay" of the Mariological Society in the U.S.A.,<sup>1</sup> and there have been references to the discussion of this topic in many and varied Roman Catholic circles in Europe, in technical theological periodicals, and in not a few specifically devoted to Mariology. The discussion ranges far at times, involving systematic theologians as well as exegetes, and in at least one instance a national conference of bishops.

The issue involves the virginal conception of Jesus, i.e., whether He was historically conceived by Mary who was and remained bodily a virgin in the process, or, in other words, whether He was conceived without the intervention of human seed. It is necessary to be precise about this, because in popular writing and sometimes in Protestant theological treatment or in Roman Catholic discussions in other modern languages the question has been referred to as the "Virgin Birth." This mode of reference may be defensible, for it is based on early credal formulas, such as *natus ex Maria virgine*. But it should be avoided in technical discussions, because it is often ambiguous. The ambiguity comes from a different notion in Catholic tradition which asserts that Mary remained a virgin even at the time of Jesus' birth (i.e., that His birth was miraculous, or caused no rupture of the hymen or other bodily lesions). The notion of the virginal parturition has no basis in Scripture and comes from post-NT and patristic writings; it even acquired status in Mariology.<sup>2</sup> But because of this development it is better to avoid the term

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<sup>1</sup>"Virgin Birth Controversy Stirs Convention: Mariological Society Dismayed," *Tablet* (Brooklyn) 65/51 (Jan. 11, 1973) 4; "Mariologists Discuss Virgin Birth Controversy," *Catholic News* (New York) 87/2 (Jan. 11, 1973) 7; "Shadow over Mary," *Catholic Review* (Baltimore) 37/44 (Jan. 12, 1973) 1; "Defend Dogma of Virgin Birth," *New World* (Chicago) (Jan. 12, 1973) 2.

<sup>2</sup>See, among others, K. Rahner, "Virginitas in partu," *Theological Investigations* 4 (Baltimore, 1966) 134-62.—Even though it is affirmed in various Church documents (see, e.g., Pius IV, *Cum quorundam* [DS 1880]: "B. V. Mariam . . . perstitisse semper in virginitatis integritate, ante partum scilicet, in partu et perpetuo post partum"), M. Schmaus can

“Virgin Birth” and to insist that the topic under discussion is the virginal conception of Jesus by Mary, or what has often been called her *virginitas ante partum*.

To broach the question, one has to realize that it is multifaceted and has all sorts of ramifications. Since the problem in the modern discussion begins with the biblical data, though it is not restricted to that, I should like to reconsider the NT material that bears on the topic. Though I shall be primarily interested in the modern interpretation of that material, other aspects of the problem will have to be touched on. Consequently, I should like to do four things: (1) explain the varied background of the recent discussion among Roman Catholics, (2) survey the discussion briefly in order to highlight the problem, (3) consider the NT data on the virginal conception of Jesus, and (4) suggest a mode of interpretation that may prove palatable.

#### THE VARIED BACKGROUND OF THE RECENT DISCUSSION

Various factors have given rise to the discussion of this topic in recent times. First of all, there is the shift in emphasis in Roman Catholic Mariology that has taken place since the Second Vatican Council. It was decided not to issue a separate schema on Mary, after one had actually been prepared by the preparatory theological commission, but rather incorporate the conciliar treatment of Mary into the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, as its last chapter—in effect, as an appendix to *Lumen gentium*.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, within the chapter the Council

still state: “From the 3rd century on, the general doctrine of the Fathers of the Church and the theologians was that the birth took place without pangs and without bodily lesions in Mary. But this cannot be regarded as dogma” (“Mariology,” *Sacramentum mundi: An Encyclopaedia of Theology* 3 [New York, 1969] 379).

<sup>3</sup> *Acta apostolicae sedis* 57 (1965) 58–67. See W. M. Abbott and J. Gallagher (eds.), *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York, 1966) pp. 85–96 (chap. 8: The Role of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church). See especially the introduction and notes by A. Dulles, pp. 13, 85, 91, 94 (nn. 256, 279, 285). Cf. F. Lakner, “Hat die Mariologie nach dem Vatikanum II wesentliche Fortschritte gezeitigt? Ein Literaturbericht,” *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 90 (1968) 462–75; R. Laurentin et al., *La Vierge Marie dans la constitution sur l'église (Etudes mariales* 22; Paris, 1965); G. Philips, “Le Saint-Esprit et Marie dans l'église: Vatican II et prospective du problème,” *Le Saint-Esprit et Marie (Etudes mariales* 25; Paris, 1968) pp. 7–37; *Mariologia conciliar* (L. G. cap. 8) (*Estudios marianos* 30–31; Madrid, 1968); R. Laurentin, *Court traité sur la Vierge Marie: Edition postconciliaire* (Paris, 1968) pp. 90–100; C. W. Neumann, “The Decline of Interest in Mariology as a Theological Problem,” *Marian Studies* 23 (1972) 12–38. For a preconconciliar harbinger of this shift in emphasis, see A. Müller, “Contemporary Mariology,” in *Theology Today* 1: *Renewal in Dogma* (Milwaukee, 1965 [tr. of *Fragen der Theologie heute*, 1957]) 109–28.

fathers did not hesitate to profess the "subordinate role of Mary,"<sup>4</sup> acknowledging that her maternal duty toward men in no way obscured or diminished the "unique mediation of Christ."<sup>5</sup> In thus setting forth the role of Mary with reference to her Son and to all Christians, the Council stressed it precisely in relation to the Church.<sup>6</sup> This conciliar stance has created a shift in emphasis in Roman Catholic Mariological thinking.

True, in chap. 8 of *Lumen gentium* Mary is referred to as the "Blessed Virgin," and one finds there the repetition of traditional titles: "in the mystery of the Church, herself rightly called mother and virgin, the Blessed Virgin stands out in eminent and singular fashion as exemplar of both virginity and motherhood."<sup>7</sup> But the passing references to her as virgin are there couched in stock formulas, and this is readily intelligible, because the Council was more interested in affirming her maternal role with reference to Jesus and the Church.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, this shift in emphasis in Mariological thinking must also be understood in terms of another affirmation of the Council. In the Decree on Ecumenism it is admitted that "in Catholic teaching there exists an order or 'hierarchy' of truths, since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith."<sup>9</sup> This admission, though not without some background in the theological past, constituted an official recognition of the centrality or noncentrality of certain ideas

<sup>4</sup> *Lumen gentium*, no. 64. This was explicitly stated to safeguard the unique mediation of her Son, but the implications of the statement are obvious.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 60.

<sup>6</sup> This notion received further stress in the address of Pope Paul VI as he closed the third session of Vatican II, declaring Mary to be the "most holy Mother of the Church" (see *Acta apostolicae sedis* 56 [1964] 1015).

<sup>7</sup> *Lumen gentium*, no. 63.

<sup>8</sup> Aside from titles like "the Virgin Mary" (nos. 52, 53, 65), the "most Holy Virgin" (no. 65), the "Blessed Virgin" (nos. 54, 58, 60, 61, 62, 63, 66, 67), the "Virgin of Nazareth" (no. 56), the "Immaculate Virgin" (no. 59), reference to the virginal conception are found in no. 55 (identifying Mary as "the Virgin who is to conceive and bear a son, whose name will be called Emmanuel [cf. Is. 7:14]") and no. 57 (referring to "Christ's virginal conception" and His not diminishing "His mother's virginal integrity" at birth [with a note referring to the Lateran Synod of A.D. 649, can. 3]). That these references were made only in passing is readily seen from the intent of the Council Fathers: "The Synod does not . . . have it in mind to give a complete doctrine on Mary, nor does it wish to decide those questions which have not yet been fully illuminated by the work of theologians. Those opinions therefore may be lawfully retained which are freely propounded by schools of Catholic thought concerning her who occupies a place in the Church which is the highest after Christ yet very close to us" (*Lumen gentium*, no. 54).

<sup>9</sup> *Unitatis redintegratio*, no. 11 (*Acta apostolicae sedis* 57 [1965] 90-112, esp. p. 99; *The Documents of Vatican II*, p. 354).

in Catholic teaching.<sup>10</sup> Though the Council fathers gave no instance in the Decree itself of what truths they had in mind or of their relative position in the hierarchy, it escaped no one's attention that in rejecting the idea of a separate schema on Mary, in making their Mariological affirmations in the concluding chapter on the Church, and in not hesitating to "profess the subordinate role of Mary," they were supplying a concrete example of truths that have to be judged in terms of this hierarchy.

Against such a background since the Council the modern Roman Catholic discussion of the virginal conception of Jesus has taken place. But there is another factor that has to be considered. Since it is usually thought that this is a matter of Catholic faith, one may wonder how there could be a discussion of it in recent times. No little reason, however, for the discussion comes precisely from the theological status of this notion within Roman Catholic teaching. Standard manuals on Mariology have normally assigned a theological note of at least *de fide* to the thesis of Mary's virginity *ante partum*.<sup>11</sup> But systematic theologians have recently been stating that theological status with more

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of this notion since the Council, see H. Mühlen, "Die Bedeutung der Differenz zwischen Zentraldogmen und Randdogmen für den ökumenischen Dialog: Zur Lehre des zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils von der 'hierarchya veritatum,'" in *Freiheit in der Begegnung: Zwischenbilanz des ökumenischen Dialogs* (eds. J.-L. Leuba und H. Stirnimann; Stuttgart, 1969) pp. 191-227; "Die Lehre des Vaticanum II über die 'hierarchya veritatum' und ihre Bedeutung für den ökumenischen Dialog," *Theologie und Glaube* 56 (1966) 303-35; L. Jaeger, *A Stand on Ecumenism: The Council's Decree* (New York, 1965) pp. 112-18; G. Thils, *Le décret sur l'œcuménisme du deuxième Concile du Vatican* (Bruges, 1966); J. Feiner, "Decree on Ecumenism: Commentary on the Decree," in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II 2* (New York, 1968) 57-164, esp. pp. 118-21; U. Valeske, *Hierarchya veritatum: Theologiegeschichtliche Hintergründe und mögliche Konsequenzen eines Hinweises in Ökumenismusdekret des II. Vatikanischen Konzils zum zwischenkirchlichen Gespräch* (Munich, 1968) p. 66; G. H. Tavard, "'Hierarchya veritatum': A Preliminary Investigation," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 32 (1971) 278-89; "Report of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Study Commission on 'The Gospel and the Church,'" *Worship* 46 (1972) 326-51, esp. p. 333 (nos. 24-25).

<sup>11</sup> For example, J. M. Hervé, *Manuale theologiae dogmaticae* 2 (Paris, 1935) 648; "de fide divina et catholica" (J. A. de Aldama, "Mariologia," *Sacrae theologiae summa* 3 [BAC; Madrid, 1953] p. 394); "Es ist Glaubenssatz . . ." (M. Schmaus, *Katholische Dogmatik* 5: *Mariologie* [Munich, 1955] p. 107); "catholicae fidei dogma" ("commissio cardinalitia de 'Novo Catechismo' ('De nieuwe Katechismus')," *Acta apostolicae sedis* 60 [1968] 685-91, esp. p. 687. Few, however, would agree today with P. J. Donnelly, ("The Perpetual Virginity of the Mother of God," *Mariology* 2 [ed. J. Carol; Milwaukee, 1957] 228-96) that "it is a solemnly defined dogma," appealing to the Lateran Synod of A.D. 649 under Pope Martin I (p. 228); or with L. Lercher, *Institutiones theologiae dogmaticae* 3 (3rd ed.; Innsbruck, 1942) 288 ("de fide definita").—See K. Rahner, "Dogmatische Bemerkungen zur Jungfrauengeburt," in *Zum Thema Jungfrauengeburt* (eds. K. S. Frank et al.; Stuttgart, 1970) pp. 121-58.

precision and greater caution. Michael Schmaus, who can scarcely be branded for liberal views, recently summed it up thus:

... Mary conceived Jesus of the Holy Spirit without a male principle of generation. It is the constant teaching of the Church *from the beginning*<sup>12</sup> that she gave birth to Jesus without violation of her integrity and that she remained ever virgin. Though there has been no formal definition on the subject, but only non-infallible declarations of the Church in the course of Christological assertions<sup>13</sup> . . . , the perpetual virginity of Mary is certainly part of the faith and preaching of the Church."<sup>14</sup>

Though Schmaus recognizes the virginal conception as "part of the faith and preaching of the Church," he puts his finger on the problem: there have been only noninfallible declarations of the Church, and these in the course of Christological assertions. We are thus confronted with a teaching that is said to be of faith because of a long-standing affirmation in the ordinary magisterium. And this immediately involves it in the modern theological question about the binding character of the ordinary magisterium.<sup>15</sup> This is a thorny question, which has itself

<sup>12</sup> My italics; see further below, pp. 552, 560, 572-73.

<sup>13</sup> He refers to the Lateran Synod of A.D. 649 (DS 503) and Pius IV's Constitution *Cum quorundam* (DS 1880). Appeal is likewise often made to the *Symbolum apostolicum* in its different forms (DS 11, 30); *Tomus Damasi* (DS 158); First Council of Toledo (DS 189); *Tomus Leonis* (DS 294); Second Council of Constantinople, can. 2 (DS 422); Eleventh Council of Toledo (DS 533); Third Council of Constantinople (DS 555); Fourth Lateran Council (DS 801); Second Council of Lyons, Profession of Faith of Michael Palaeologus (DS 852); Council of Florence (DS 1337). But it has long since been recognized that in most of these texts the major affirmation is Christological, not Mariological, and that the passing affirmations about Mary bear on the *birth* of Jesus from her as "ever virgin," a stock phrase (*semper virgo, aeiparthenos*).

<sup>14</sup> "Mariology," *Sacramentum mundi* 3, 379.

<sup>15</sup> See Pius XII, *Humani generis* (*Acta apostolicae sedis* 42 [1950] 568; DS 3885). What was said there produced considerable immediate discussion; some of the more recent treatments of the topic reveal the real problems involved. See B. Schüller, "Bemerkungen zur authentischen Verkündigung des kirchlichen Lehramtes," *Theologie und Philosophie* 42 (1967) 534-51 (see *Theology Digest* 16 [1968] 328-32); G. Baum, "The Magisterium in a Changing Church," *Concilium* 21 (1967) 67-83; A. B. Vaughan, "The Role of the Ordinary Magisterium of the Universal Episcopate," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 22 (1967) 1-19; J. J. Heaney, "Catholic Hermeneutics, the Magisterium and Infallibility," *Continuum* 7 (1969-70) 106-19; P. Franssen, "The Authority of the Councils," in *Problems of Authority* (ed. J. M. Todd; Baltimore, 1962) pp. 43-78, esp. pp. 61-62 ("the ordinary magisterium, which, even in a Council, remains fallible" [p. 61]). What is really at issue here is the role of dogma and of the magisterium in an era of change within the Roman Catholic Church. See A. Dulles, *The Survival of Dogma* (Garden City, 1971) pp. 108-24, 146, 158-62; P. Schoonenberg, *Die Interpretation des Dogmas* (Düsseldorf, 1969; = *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 8 [1968] 243-347); R. A. McCormick, "The Teaching Role of the Magisterium and of Theologians," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 24 (1970) 239-54; K. Rahner, "Theology and the Church's

been debated ever since *Humani generis* in 1950, and to try to discuss its pros and cons here would distract from the purpose of this paper. But it has to be mentioned, since it too forms part of the background of the recent discussion of Mary's virginal conception.

THE RECENT ROMAN CATHOLIC BIBLICAL AND  
THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS

In the Protestant traditions of Christianity the virginal conception of Jesus has not been universally affirmed. One discerns, in fact, a three-fold position: (1) an affirmative position, often expressed as the "Virgin Birth," and clung to as a historical fact as tenaciously as is the virginal conception in most Roman Catholic circles;<sup>16</sup> (2) a negative position, which questions it;<sup>17</sup> and (3) an agnostic position, which sees little relevance in it for Christian faith.<sup>18</sup> While some Roman Catholic Mariological tenets have constituted genuine problems in recent ecumenical

Teaching Authority after the Council," *Theological Investigations* 9 (New York, 1972) 83-100. The question is further complicated by the recent discussions about the relationship of "dogma" to the "gospel" or the "word of God." See W. Kasper, *Dogma unter dem Wort Gottes* (Mainz, 1965); "Evangelium und Dogma," *Catholica* 19 (1965) 199-209. Moreover, it should be recalled that Vatican II clearly stated, in a historic "first," that "the living teaching office [magisterium] of the Church . . . is not above the word of God, but serves it" (*Dei verbum*, no. 10). The expression "word of God" has to be understood in the full sense in which it is used earlier in the Dogmatic Constitution, which, while it is not restricted to or identified with the *written* word of God, does not exclude that form of it. Hence for the first time the Council fathers admitted that the Scriptures stand over the magisterium in some sense (*eidem ministrat; Acta apostolicae sedis* 58 [1966] 822). Its privileged character as the inspired word of God is also something that the magisterium serves, "listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously, and explaining it faithfully by divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit" (*ibid.*).

<sup>16</sup> E.g., H. A. Hanke, *The Validity of the Virgin Birth: The Theological Debate and the Evidence* (Grand Rapids, 1963); J. G. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York, 1930; reprinted 1967); D. Edwards, *The Virgin Birth in History and Faith* (London, 1943). In such Protestant circles it is often feared that the denial of the virginal conception implies the denial of the divinity of Jesus Christ; or it is stoutly asserted as the touchstone of orthodoxy against rationalist criticism. J. Ratzinger (*Introduction to Christianity* [New York, 1970] p. 208) notes apropos of such a position that "according to the faith of the Church the Sonship of Jesus does not rest on the fact that Jesus had no human father; the doctrine of Jesus' divinity would not be affected if Jesus had been the product of a normal human marriage. For the Sonship of which faith speaks is not a biological but an ontological fact, an event not in time but in God's eternity; the conception of Jesus does not mean that a new God-the-Son comes into being, but that God as Son in the man Jesus draws the creature man to himself, so that he himself 'is' man."

<sup>17</sup> With varying nuances, T. Boslooper, *The Virgin Birth* (London, 1962); R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Oxford, 1968) pp. 295-96; W. Marxsen, "Jungfrauengeburt (exegetisch)," *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* 3 (3rd ed.; Tübingen, 1959) 1068-69.

<sup>18</sup> See F. V. Filson, *A New Testament History* (London, 1965) p. 86.

dialogues (e.g., the Immaculate Conception, the Assumption), Mary's virginal conception has normally not been such an issue. Moreover, it is hard to say to what extent the understanding of this matter among Protestants has really been operative or influential in the recent Roman Catholic discussion of it. For this reason I shall not try to include Protestant views on the matter in this brief survey.<sup>19</sup>

Though one can trace the beginnings of the discussion back to about 1960,<sup>20</sup> it gained notoriety in Holland about the time of the publication of the Dutch Catechism in 1966,<sup>21</sup> for which the bishops of the Netherlands had written a foreword, and in which it was stated that Jesus

was born wholly of grace, wholly of promise—"conceived of the Holy Spirit." He was *the* gift of God to mankind.

This the evangelists Matthew and Luke express when they proclaim that Jesus' birth was not due to the will of a man. 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". . . . Mankind has ultimately no one to thank but the Holy Spirit for the coming of this promised one. His origin is not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but from God: from the Most High.<sup>22</sup>

What is said here seems to be beyond cavil.<sup>23</sup> But what is *not* said

<sup>19</sup> A. Vögtle ("Offene Fragen zur lukanischen Geburts- und Kindheitsgeschichte," in *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien: Beiträge zur Evangelienforschung* [Düsseldorf, 1971] pp. 43-56, esp. p. 43) does make some reference to this aspect of the problem. See further J. M. Alonso, "Cuestiones actuales: La concepción virginal de Jesús: I. En autores protestantes," *Ephemerides Mariologicae* 21 (1971) 63-109.

<sup>20</sup> See F. J. Schierse, "Weihnachtliche Christusverkündigung: Zum Verständnis der Kindheitsgeschichten," *Bibel und Leben* 1 (1960) 217-22.

<sup>21</sup> *A New Catechism: Catholic Faith for Adults* (New York, 1967) pp. 74-75. This is a translation of *De Nieuwe Katechismus: Geloofsverklondiging voor volwassenen* (Hilversum, 1966), published with the imprimatur of Card. B. Alfrink. The 1970 edition of *A New Catechism* contains "the Supplement to a New Catechism," written by E. Dhanis and J. Visser on behalf of the Commission of Cardinals appointed to examine the Dutch Catechism (pp. 511-74); see pp. 538-40 especially.

<sup>22</sup> The Dutch bishops subsequently made it clear that they intended no ambiguity on Mary's bodily virginity; see *De Tijd* (Amsterdam), Aug. 19, 1966; *De nieuwe Gids*, Aug. 20-21, 1966. Cf. "The Dutch Catechism Controversy," *Herder Correspondence* 4 (1967) 156-59; J. M. Alonso, "El catecismo holandés: El tema mariano," *Ephemerides Mariologicae* 19 (1969) 119-43, 457-66. See further W. Bless, *Witboek over de Nieuwe Katechismus* (Utrecht, 1969).

<sup>23</sup> It is worth noting that the usual criticism of the Dutch Catechism in this matter passes over a facile position that it assumed; for it blithely ascribes to "the evangelists Matthew and Luke" phrases that sound biblical but were never penned by either of them: "Jesus' birth was not due to the will of a man," or "His origin is not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but from God." Such phrases, biblical indeed, are derived from the Johannine prologue (Jn 1:13), from a passage that has its own problems (see further below, pp. 558-59).

caused a notable reaction, for nothing had been included about Jesus' conception by Mary who was a virgin. A clarifying statement was subsequently issued by the Dutch bishops, and a Roman commission of cardinals suggested various corrections for the Catechism, among which was a note reaffirming the virginal conception.<sup>24</sup>

But the matter has not rested there. Roman Catholic writers in Germany and elsewhere in Europe have continued to debate the issue. In Germany, in particular, they have referred to the virginal conception of Jesus in the Matthean and Lucan infancy narratives as a theologoumenon,<sup>25</sup> i.e., a theological assertion that does not directly express a matter of faith or an official teaching of the Church, and hence is in itself not normative, but that expresses in language that may prescind from factuality a notion which supports, enhances, or is related to a matter of faith.<sup>26</sup> The German writers who have been using this term to

<sup>24</sup> "Commissio cardinalitia de 'Novo Catechismo' ('De nieuwe Katechismus')," *Acta apostolicae sedis* 60 (1968) 685-91: "3. De profitenda Iesu conceptione ex Maria Virgine. Petium est a Commissione Cardinalium ut Catechismus aperte profiteretur Beatam Verbi Incarnati Matrem virginali semper floruisse honore et ut clare doceret factum ipsum virginalis conceptionis Iesu, quod cum mysterio Incarnationis maxime congruit; proindeque ut nullam ansam deinceps daret ad hoc factum—contra Ecclesiae Traditionem in Sacris Litteris fundatam—derelinquendum, servata tantum aliqua eius significatione symbolica, verbi gratia de summa gratuitate doni quod Deus nobis in Filio suo largitus est" (p. 688).

<sup>25</sup> See R. Pesch, "Der Gottessohn im matthäischen Evangelienprolog (Mt 1-2): Beobachtungen zu den Zitationsformeln der Reflexionszitate," *Biblica* 48 (1967) 395-420, esp. p. 410; J. Michl, "Die Jungfrauengeburt im Neuen Testament," *Mariologische Studien* 4 (Essen, 1969) pp. 145-84, esp. p. 183 ("The question raised was: Is the conception of Jesus by a virgin to be considered a historical fact or a theologoumenon? A critical investigation can bring forth reasons that suggest the position of a historical fact; but it must also grant that there are circumstantial details that favor the opposite thesis of a mere theologoumenon. The limitations of historico-critical exegesis are manifest here, which stand in the way of a decisive view"); O. Knoch, "Die Botschaft des Matthäusevangeliums über Empfängnis und Geburt Jesu vor dem Hintergrund der Christusverkündigung des Neuen Testaments," *Zum Thema Jungfrauengeburt*, pp. 37-59, esp. pp. 57-58 ("The reticence of the fourth Gospel [in this matter] suggests the conclusion that the tradition about the virginal conception and birth of Jesus was either not generally known and admitted in the Church of the first century or was not regarded as decisive for belief in Christ and for a Christian profession of faith. . . . If this observation is correct, then it lends support to what is today generally admitted in Catholic teaching, that belief in Jesus Christ as true man and true God does not necessarily entail the virginal conception and birth of Jesus"); Vögtle, "Offene Fragen," p. 43; also his "Die matthäische Kindheitsgeschichte," *L'Evangile selon Matthieu* (ed. M. Didier; Gembloux, 1972) pp. 153-83.

<sup>26</sup> The term "theologoumenon" is not always used in the same sense; what is given here as the sense is a slightly modified form of that given by K. Rahner ("Theologoumenon," *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* 10 [2d ed.; Freiburg, 1965] 80-82): "a statement which makes a theological assertion that cannot be immediately considered as an official teaching of the Church, or as a dogmatic proposition that is binding in faith, but rather that is first of all the result and expression of a striving for an understanding of faith through the



designate the Matthean and/or Lucan affirmation of the virginal conception do not mean by it a mere mythologoumenon. It is not just a way of expressing in mythical language what transcends our limited human notions or judgments. They refer to the virginal conception as theologoumenon because they find it a convenient way of labeling an assertion in the infancy narratives, which they are convinced says nothing about the historical or biological aspects of what they affirm. The German exegetes, in particular, have made use of this term,<sup>27</sup> because they are concerned to stress what is the real message in the Matthean and Lucan annunciation scenes and because they are aware of the diversity of the NT data in this area.

Discussions of this matter, however, have not been limited to Holland and Germany. The Spanish Mariological magazine *Ephemerides Mariologicae* has carried extended surveys of the debate and even recorded a dialogue between its editor, J. M. Alonso, and the Dutch theologian Piet Schoonenberg entitled "The Virginal Conception of Jesus: History or Legend?"<sup>28</sup> No one misses the import of such a dialogue between a Dutchman and a Spaniard, and the entire survey reveals the problems that the topic has raised for Roman Catholic theologians today. The editor's introductory note speaks of "libertas theologica" in a context fraught with meaning. Issues involved in the problem have been discussed in France and Belgium as well.<sup>29</sup> The first noteworthy discussion of the problem in the English-speaking world was begun by R. E. Brown, S.S., in his article "The Problem of the Virginal Con-

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establishment of connections between binding faith-statements and the confronting of (them with) the dogmatic thinking of a person (or a given period)" (col. 80). Further on, Rahner continues: "revelation that takes place in human awareness must necessarily make use (at least 'between the lines') of theologoumena. But these are not the process of understanding that is affirmed along with the statement itself, in which what is meant is correctly understood but with perspective" (col. 81, with a cross reference to his article on "Perspektivismus").

<sup>27</sup> See n. 25 above; cf. R. E. Brown, *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 33 (1972) 5, n. 8; M. Dibelius, *Jungfrauensohn und Krippenkind: Untersuchungen zur Geburtsgeschichte Jesu im Lukas-Evangelium* (Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-hist. Kl., Abh. 4, 1932; reprinted in *Botschaft und Geschichte: Gesammelte Aufsätze* 1 [Tübingen, 1953] 1-78, esp. p. 35 (n. 46).

<sup>28</sup> "La concepción virginal de Jesús: ¿Historia o leyenda? Un dialogo teológico," *Ephemerides Mariologicae* 21 (1971) 161-206; P. Schoonenberg, "Eine Antwort," *ibid.*, pp. 207-16. See further P. Schoonenberg, "God concurreert niet," *Theologie en Zielzorg* 61 (1965) 1-10; "Gods oorzakelijkheid en Christus' voortkomst," *Theologie en Pastoraat* 63 (1967) 35-45, esp. p. 42.

<sup>29</sup> See L. Evelyn, *L'Évangile sans mythes* (Paris, 1970); *The Gospels without Myth* (Garden City, 1971) pp. 80-82. From a different standpoint, P. Grelot, "La naissance d'Isaac et celle de Jésus," *Nouvelle revue théologique* 94 (1972) 462-87, 561-85.

ception of Jesus."<sup>30</sup> Careful never to deny it and even to admit 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,"<sup>31</sup> he surveyed the problem from many theological angles, both biblical and systematic, and from his discussion there emerge two areas in which further study is needed: the extent to which the virginal conception has actually been taught in the Church's tradition and the nature of the NT affirmations themselves.

This brief survey of the issues that have been raised in the modern Roman Catholic discussion has highlighted the main problems. I should now like to turn to the biblical data, which constitute the starting point of the discussion.

#### THE BIBLICAL DATA CONCERNING THE VIRGINAL CONCEPTION

Mary is not mentioned in the OT. The one text that may seem to bear on this question, because it is used in the Matthean annunciation scene (Mt 1:18–25), is Is 7:14, "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a young woman (is) pregnant and bearing a son, and you will call his name Immanuel."<sup>32</sup> Though OT commentators debate about whose son is concerned, there is no longer any hesitation among them that the original sense of the text had nothing to do with a virginal con-

<sup>30</sup>THEOLOGICAL STUDIES 33 (1972) 3–34. This article surveys some of the same material from a different viewpoint. It has now appeared in an expanded form in his book *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York, 1973). I am indebted to him for a number of leads that he has given to me beyond his original article and for certain sources that he kindly put at my disposal.—For other discussions of this matter in the English-speaking world, see Brown's n. 7. For lightweight reactions to Brown's article, see J. S. Brusher, "Waffling Theologians: A Problem for the People of God," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 73 (1972) 22–28; T. C. Lawler, "Some Observations on the Brown Article on the Virginal Conception of Jesus," *ibid.*, pp. 61–66. In the same category of reactions belong the remarks of J. B. Carol, *Marian Studies* 24 (1973) 9 and 96.

<sup>31</sup>THEOLOGICAL STUDIES 33 (1972) 11.

<sup>32</sup>This is my literal translation of the Hebrew text, *lākēn yittēn 'ōdōnāy hū' lākem 'ōt hinnēh hā'almāh hārāh w' yōledet ben w'qārū't š'mō 'immānū-Ēl*. It preserves the participial/adjectival form of *hārāh* and *yōledet*. For recent Roman Catholic discussions of this text in the context of the virginal conception, see R. Kilian, "Die Geburt des Immanuel aus der Jungfrau, Jes 7, 14," *Zum Thema Jungfrauengeburt*, pp. 9–35; H. Haag, "Is 7, 14 als alttestamentliche Grundstelle der Lehre von der Virginitas Mariae," *Jungfrauengeburt gestern und heute* (eds. H. J. Brosch and J. Hasenfuss; *Mariologische Studien* 4; Essen, 1969) pp. 137–44; M. Rehm, "Das Wort 'almāh in Is 7, 14," *Biblische Zeitschrift* ns 8 (1964) 89–101.—The Jerusalem Bible translates: "The maiden is with child." The RSV: "A young woman shall conceive and bear a son." The NEB: "A young woman is with child and she will bear a son." The NAB, however, has: "The Virgin shall be with child, and bear a son." But cf. the note on this verse in the NAB.

ception. Neither in Diaspora Judaism prior to Christianity<sup>33</sup> nor in Palestinian Judaism prior to or contemporary with the rise of Christianity was this text understood either of the Messiah or of a virginal *conception*.<sup>34</sup> We find it first so used in the Matthean infancy narrative, and the Evangelist's intention is clear. However, the question that has arisen so often today is which came first, a biological fact that was seen as the fulfilment of an OT passage, or a reflection on an OT passage that served as an explanation of the character of the special child to be born

<sup>33</sup> It is, of course, well known that the so-called Septuagint rendered the Hebrew *hā-almāh*, "a young (marriageable) girl," by *hē parthenos*, which is usually taken to mean "a virgin" or "the virgin." And in this form Mt 1:23 quoted Isaiah in Greek. But part of the problem here is that the existing mss. of the so-called Septuagint date from Christian times, and no one is sure that the *parthenos* of Is 7:14 actually belonged to the pre-Christian Greek translation of Isaiah or whether the reading has been influenced by Matthew's text. One Septuagint ms. does use *neanis* instead of *parthenos*; this would mean "young girl" and would be the exact equivalent of Hebrew *almāh*. Moreover, *neanis* is used in other Greek translations of the OT (Aquila, Symmachus, Theodotion), as well as in one or other patristic citation of Is 7:14. See J. Ziegler, *Isaias (Septuaginta Vetus Testamentum graecum 14; Göttingen, 1939)* p. 147.—Another aspect of the problem is the meaning of *parthenos* in the so-called Septuagint. In 45 out of 52 instances it translates *b'tūlāh*, the proper Hebrew word for "virgin," and in these instances its own natural Greek meaning covers precisely the nuance of the Hebrew. But Greek *parthenos* was apparently not as precise as the Hebrew *b'tūlāh*, for sometimes in the Septuagint it renders *almāh* (Gn 24:43) or *na<sup>a</sup>rāh*, "young girl" (Gn 24:14; 34:3). See further P. Benoit, "La Septante est-elle inspirée?" in *Vom Wort des Lebens: Festschrift für Max Meinertz (Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen 1, Ergänzungsband; Münster, 1961)* p. 45. Even granting that the Septuagintal reading of *parthenos* does genuinely mean "virgin" and does really go back to Diaspora Jewish circles, it still does not affirm "virginal conception" in the sense in which this is usually understood of Jesus (i.e., excluding a male, human progenitor). One has to reckon with the possibility that the Greek text of Isaiah is not loaded with all the connotations that it has in Matthew.—For an attempt to explain the shift from *almāh* to *parthenos* as the result of influence from Egyptian myths about the god Amon and a virgin, see E. Brunner-Traut, "Die Geburtsgeschichte der Evangelien im Lichte ägyptologischer Forschung," *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 12 (1960) 97–111. This has been too facilely adopted as plausible by Kilian, "Die Geburt des Immanuel," pp. 32–34. The Egyptian myth does not refer to parthenogenesis, but rather to a *hieros gamos*, involving intercourse of the god with the woman who was a virgin. See further T. Boslooper, "Jesus' Virgin Birth and Non-Christian 'Parallels,'" *Religion in Life* 26 (1956–57) 87–97; J. Hasenfuss, "Die Jungfrauengeburt in der Religionsgeschichte," in *Jungfrauengeburt gestern und heute*, pp. 11–23.

<sup>34</sup> To date at least there is no indication in Palestinian Jewish literature of Is 7:14 being so understood. See H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch 1* (4th ed.; Munich, 1926; reprinted 1965) 75. The Targum of Jonathan on the Prophets does not introduce a messianic nuance here. A Davidic (and hence indirectly messianic) sense of the passage is admitted by some commentators, who relate chap. 7 to Is 9:1–6 and 11:1–9; but to admit this is still a far cry from the "virginal conception" of the Messiah.

and of the gratuitous and divine origin of the messianic era now dawning.<sup>35</sup> It is thus that the modern debate about the use of Is 7:14 in the Matthean infancy narrative takes shape.

In treating the NT data, one notes at the outset that only two passages bear on the topic, the two annunciation scenes in the Matthean and Lucan Gospels: the annunciation to Joseph (Mt 1:18-25) and the annunciation to Mary (Lk 1:26-38). The matter scarcely finds an echo elsewhere in the Matthean and Lucan Gospels, and it is surrounded with silence in the rest of the NT. When one further considers the nature of the infancy narratives in which these annunciation scenes occur, one realizes the complicated nature of the question. Moreover, what is generally admitted today as the early Christian kerygma, preserved in various NT passages, never includes a formulation such as we find in the later creeds, "conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary."<sup>36</sup> Given this general situation, one can understand how Roman Catholic theologians and exegetes have queried whether this notion was really part of the "constant teaching of the Church from the beginning."<sup>37</sup> In treating the NT data that bear on the topic, one has to consider four bodies of material: (1) Pauline passages, (2) the Marcan Gospel, (3) the Johannine data, and (4) the annunciation scenes in Matthew and Luke. I have listed the material here more or less in the accepted chronological order and shall treat it in this way.

### *Paul*

The first theologian of the Christian Church never mentions Mary in any of his writings.<sup>38</sup> This is only part of the general puzzle why Paul manifested so little concern about the origins, life, and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>39</sup> Only two texts in his letters bear directly on the topic,

<sup>35</sup> See Vögtle, "Offene Fragen," pp. 46-47.

<sup>36</sup> Not even the maximal approach to the early Christian kerygma that is taken by C. H. Dodd (*The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* [London, 1950] pp. 7-35) would include this. See further M. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (New York, n.d.) p. 17; R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* 1 (London, 1956) 33-52; B. van Iersel, "Saint Paul et la prédication de l'église primitive," *Studiorum Paulinorum congressus internationalis catholicus, 1961 (Analecta biblica 17; Rome, 1963)* pp. 433-41; C. F. Evans, "The Kerygma," *Journal of Theological Studies* 7 (1956) 25-41; W. Baird, "What Is the Kerygma? A Study of I Cor 15<sup>3-8</sup> and Gal 1<sup>11-17</sup>," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 76 (1957) 181-91.

<sup>37</sup> Schmaus, quoted above, p. 545.

<sup>38</sup> Not even in Rom 16:6.

<sup>39</sup> As is well known, his concern was with the interpretation of the Christ-event, the explanation of the significance for mankind in the complex of the final events of Jesus' existence: His passion, death, burial, resurrection, exaltation to glory, and heavenly in-

and two others are related to it indirectly.<sup>40</sup>

a) In a passage that is often regarded as pre-Pauline and kerygmatic, Rom 1:3,<sup>41</sup> the Apostle refers to Jesus as "born of the seed of David according to the flesh." This assertion is part of a parallelism in which the major theological affirmation bears on Jesus as the "Son of God set up in power according to a spirit of holiness as of the resurrection." But in it Paul does assert Jesus' Davidic descent. The phrase "of the seed of David" (*ek spermatos David*) is obviously meant in the figurative sense of "descent from David"; only a fundamentalist interpretation of it would insist on *sperma* being used to suggest male seed. Actually, it means no more than what Paul means by "the seed of Abraham," used of Jesus in Gal 3:16.<sup>42</sup> At face value, it implies that Jesus had Davidic blood in His veins, and nothing suggests that this was to be taken in a fictive, putative, legal sense alone. On the other hand, it clearly says nothing about His virginal conception.<sup>43</sup>

b) The second Pauline text that bears on the matter is the Apostle's

tercession. See further my *Pauline Theology: A Brief Sketch* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1967) pp. 12-14. Even Paul's rare references to "words" or "commands" (1 Th 4:15; 1 Cor 7:10, 11:23, 14:37) are ascribed not to the historical Jesus but to the risen "Lord," thus indicating his concern with the present influence of the risen Jesus rather than with the historical Jesus. Cf. D. L. Dungan, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Churches of Paul: The Use of the Synoptic Tradition in the Regulation of Early Church Life* (Philadelphia, 1971) pp. xvii-xxix.

<sup>40</sup> Paul's reference to James as "the brother of the Lord" (Gal 1:19) raises another problem, but we cannot treat it here. See J. Blinzler, *Die Brüder und Schwestern Jesu* (Stuttgart, 1967) pp. 17, 23, 92, 96, 107, 119, 121, 132-33, 137-38.

<sup>41</sup> On Rom 1:3-4 as "kerygmatic," see my commentary in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968) 2. 294 (§ 53:15-16); O. Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer (Meyerkommentar 4; 13th ed.; Göttingen, 1966)* pp. 38-39; O. Kuss, *Der Römerbrief übersetzt und erklärt: Erste Lieferung (Röm 1,1 bis 6,11)* (2d ed.; Regensburg, 1963) pp. 4-9, 12-15; M.-E. Boismard, "Constitué fils de Dieu (Rom., I, 4)," *Revue biblique* 60 (1953) 5-17; H. Schlier, "Zu Röm 1,3f.," in *Neues Testament und Geschichte* (Festschrift O. Cullmann; Tübingen, 1972) pp. 207-18.

<sup>42</sup> The phrase is, of course, derived from the OT in this sense; see Ps 89:3-4; cf. 2 S 7:12; Jn 7:42; 2 Tim 2:8.

<sup>43</sup> Even such a commentator as H. Schürmann, who traces the idea of the virginal conception back to a "historisches Faktum," has to admit that "Paul would have formulated things differently here, had he known of the Virgin Birth" (*Das Lukasevangelium: Erster Teil [Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 3; Freiburg, 1969]* p. 61).—The further question is sometimes raised whether Paul may have derived the parallel kerygmatic affirmation from early Christian traditions which already knew of the genealogies of Mt 1:1-16 and Lk 3:23-28. However, the real question is whether the genealogies were part of the early tradition or not. The more frequent understanding of this matter is to regard the genealogies as attempts to spell out the Davidic and divine relationships attested in the early Pauline passages, and not the other way round. See Vögtle, "Offene Fragen," p. 49.

assertion that Jesus was sent forth by God as His Son, "born of woman, born under the law" (Gal 4:4). It is part of Paul's affirmation about the fulness of time and the beginning of a new phase of salvation history, in which the role of the unnamed woman is clearly motherhood, without the slightest hint of virginity. While it may be idle to insist that Paul did not actually say "born of a virgin," as did Ignatius of Antioch some decades later,<sup>44</sup> the issue for him was really something else: to affirm the redemption and the adoptive sonship of all Christians in v. 5. To do so, he asserts the abasement and the common humanity shared by Jesus and those redeemed, even though He was the Son sent by the Father.<sup>45</sup> Here Paul at least alludes to Jesus' divine pre-existence, as he mentions this mission. But once again there is no awareness of the virginal conception.<sup>46</sup>

c) Indirectly related to these two texts is Phil 2:6-7, part of a pre-Pauline hymn derived from some early Christian liturgy and used by Paul to assert again Jesus' pre-existence, His kenosis and abasement, and finally His exaltation to glory.<sup>47</sup> What is important here is to note

"*Ad Smyrn.* 1, 1 (*alēthōs onta ek\*genous Daidid kata sarka, huion theou kata thelēma kai dynamin theou, gegennēmenon alēthōs ek parthenou*). The dependence of Ignatius' wording here on Rom 1:13 is unmistakable; his addition of "truly born of a virgin" is significant, but it still has not clearly enunciated virginal conception.—Did Paul actually write Gal 4:4-5? J. C. O'Neill (*The Recovery of Paul's Letter to the Galatians* [London, 1972] p. 58) regards these verses as "not originally written by Paul," but introduced later as a gloss from "Jewish Christian liturgy." But if they were introduced later, they would almost surely have been formulated otherwise.

<sup>44</sup> Years ago J. B. Lightfoot (*The Epistle of St Paul to the Galatians* [reprinted, Grand Rapids, 1967] p. 168) perceived the force of these verses expressed in Paul's chiasmus: "The Son of God was born a man, that in Him all men might become sons of God; He was born subject to law, that those subject to Law might be rescued from bondage."—The attempt of T. Zahn (*Der Brief des Paulus an die Galater* [2d ed.; *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* 9; Leipzig, 1923] pp. 201-2) to interpret this text as evidence for the virginal conception, because no father is named in it, has convinced no one. More recently, W. C. Robinson ("A Re-Study of the Virgin Birth of Christ: God's Son Was Born of a Woman: Mary's Son Prayed 'Abba Father,'" *Evangelical Quarterly* 37 [1965] 1-15) has tried to draw an argument from Paul's use of *genomenon* for Jesus, "born" of a woman in contrast to Ishmael or Isaac, who were "begotten" (*gegennētai*) according to the flesh or the Spirit. The trouble with his view is that *genesthai* can mean either to "be born" or to "be begotten" (see Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* [Cambridge, Eng., 1957], p. 157) and *gennan* can mean either to "beget," i.e., become the father of, or to "bear," i.e., become the mother of (*ibid.*, p. 154). So this distinction proposed by Robinson breaks down.

<sup>45</sup> M. Dibelius (*Jungfrauensohn*, p. 29, n. 47) remarks appositely: "If the text read *genomenon ek parthenou* [born of a virgin], the words would be stripped of their meaning" in the Pauline context.

<sup>46</sup> The literature on this Pauline passage is vast; for a recent treatment of it, see J. T. Sanders, *The New Testament Christological Hymns: Their Historical Religious Background* (Cambridge, Eng., 1971) pp. 58-74; or R. P. Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians*

that Paul saw no contradiction in his affirmation of the divine pre-existence of Jesus and His descent from the line of David according to the flesh (Rom 1:3).<sup>48</sup> No reference is made to the virginal conception, and it is not seen as a necessary or indispensable prop for the Incarnation. Fully human, with Davidic blood in His veins, He could still be the Son of God, the exalted Kyrios.<sup>49</sup>

d) The last Pauline text that bears on the question indirectly has nothing to do with Jesus or Mary but contains a formula that may shed some light on our subsequent discussion. To emphasize the freedom of Christians from the law, Paul introduced into Galatians 4 an allegory of the OT story of Sarah and Hagar.<sup>50</sup> Because of her barrenness, Sarah gave her Egyptian slave-girl, Hagar, to her husband, Abraham, so that he might have a son by her; but God intervened and promised Abraham a son from Sarah, his real wife (Gn 16:1-15; 21:1-14). Paul insists that Christians "like Isaac are children of promise" (Gal 4:28), born to be free, not to be slaves. He continues: "But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh [Ishmael] persecuted him [Isaac] who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now" (Gal 4:29). Here one encounters again Paul's contrast, "according to the flesh . . . according to the Spirit." He considers Ishmael born to Abraham from Hagar as "born according to the flesh," and Isaac born to him from the barren Sarah as a result of God's promise as "born according to the Spirit." This is, indeed, Paul's *interpretation* of the Genesis story, where there is a promise, but no mention of the Spirit. Thus, Paul invokes the in-

ii. 5-11 in *Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Cambridge, Eng., 1967).

<sup>48</sup> Some authors have even asked whether, if one were to take Paul at his word about kenosis and humiliation, the idea of virginal conception would not introduce a Docetic notion and thus really weaken his argument. See H. Räisänen, *Die Mutter Jesu im Neuen Testament (Suomalaisen Tiedeakatemia Toimituksia, Annales academiae scientiarum fennicae, ser. B, nide-Tom 158; Helsinki, 1969)* p. 24; Vögtle, "Offene Fragen," p. 49. Whether the query is all that important, the more significant thing is that Paul inherits here an early Christian (Hellenistic? Jewish?) hymn that affirms Jesus' pre-existence and incarnation and feels no concern to correct it in terms of virginal conception.

<sup>49</sup> See further Rom 8:32. The ideas of pre-existence or incarnation that are implied in these texts are notions that Paul seems to have derived from the early Christian community which he joined as a convert. Yet these notions scarcely reflect the earliest levels of that community's Christological beliefs. Remnants of still earlier Christologies, in which notions and titles were applied to Jesus in terms of His parousiac coming, are found in the NT. These were then first retrojected back to His earthly ministry; in Paul's writings we see some of them being pushed back to the stage of pre-existence. See further R. E. Brown, *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 33 (1972) 17-19.

<sup>50</sup> See my commentary on Galatians in the *Jerome Biblical Commentary* 2, 244 (§ 49:28).

fluence of the Spirit in Isaac's birth to explain how Sarah's sterility was overcome; but it is not an influence of the Spirit that substitutes for human intercourse.<sup>51</sup> Though the allegory has nothing to do with the virginal conception of Jesus, it does attest a biblical sense in which the Spirit intervened in the birth of a child without implying virginal conception. It is noteworthy, then, that Paul makes no similar affirmation about the generation of Jesus "according to the Spirit," either in Rom 1:3-4<sup>52</sup> or in Gal 4:4.

In these Pauline passages we note his silence about the virginal conception of Jesus. It raises the question whether he believed in it, cared about it, or just did not know about it. His silence obviously does not exclude it, and by itself or in isolation it would mean perhaps nothing at all. But when it is considered against a larger pattern, it makes its own significant contribution.<sup>53</sup>

### *Mark*<sup>54</sup>

In the earliest NT writing in which an attempt was made to record who Jesus was and what He did and said, we find the same silence about His origins.<sup>55</sup> In Mk 1:1 "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ" is related to a starting point in salvation history and commences with the ministry of John the Baptist. The Marcan gospel slightly post-dates the composition of the major Pauline letters; it is known to contain all sorts of details about Jesus that later Evangelists, who worked with it as a base, tended to excise or to censor in order to bring their

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Dibelius, *Jungfrauensohn*, pp. 42-52. See E. Schweizer, "Pneuma," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 6 (Grand Rapids, 1968) 429.

<sup>52</sup> In Rom 1:3-4 Paul does use the phrase "according to the spirit of holiness," but this cannot be facilely equated with the "holy Spirit," even in the OT sense, and it is strikingly related by Paul to Jesus' resurrection, not His birth.

<sup>53</sup> Commenting on the *argumentum ex silentio*, H. von Campenhausen (*The Virgin Birth in the Theology of the Ancient Church* [Naperville, Ill., 1964] pp. 17-18) admits that it "must not be pressed in relation to an isolated text or document; it may be that in one case or another the silence is a matter of pure chance. But as regards Paul such qualifications are not relevant; his legacy is too big for that, and too rich in Christological assertions and formulae. . . . In any case, generation 'according to the Spirit' is not thought of in his writings, even remotely, as a physiological miracle. In this he was certainly no exception. There is nothing to indicate that, for example, the letters composed later under his name, or the other writings of the New Testament, knew and put forward anything more than he did in this matter." Campenhausen does not include the infancy narratives in these "other writings of the New Testament"; see the context of his discussion.

<sup>54</sup> Mary appears in the Marcan Gospel only in 6:3. It is highly unlikely that the "Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses" (15:40; cf. 15:47; 16:1) refers to her. It is inconceivable that the Evangelist would have used such a circumlocution to indicate the presence of Jesus' own mother near the cross.

<sup>55</sup> If one were to prefer the postulated Q-source as earlier than Mark, the situation would still be the same, nothing in it about the virginal conception.



picture of Jesus more into harmony with the developing Christology of their day.<sup>56</sup> And in this sort of comparison Mark's Gospel has again and again revealed traces of its more primitive character.

Only in Mk 6:3 do we find a phrase that might seem pertinent to the topic at hand: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not His sisters here with us?" We are not concerned with the latter part of the verse, which speaks of Jesus' "brothers" and "sisters," for that is involved in the discussion of Mary's virginity *post partum*.<sup>57</sup> What is of interest is the identification of Jesus as "the carpenter, the son of Mary." Such an identification of a Palestinian Jew by a matronymic instead of a patronymic is unusual. It might seem to suggest that Mark did have some idea of the virginal conception. But this is to read into a cryptic, and possibly innocuous, Marcan phrase a meaning that is really derived from the Matthean infancy narrative. If we did not have the latter composition, of definitely later vintage, would the idea of virginal conception suggest itself to the reader of Mk 6:3?<sup>58</sup> What is significant in this regard is the way in which the Matthean Gospel changes what it borrows from Mark. Despite its infancy narrative, it rephrases the query of Jesus' townspeople thus: "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary? And are not His brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?" (Mt 13:55). Though one can explain the phrase "the carpenter's son" in the putative or legal sense, and thus harmonize the data in Matthew, the more significant aspect is that the assertion of the virginal conception in the Matthean annunciation scene finds no echo here in the later chapter.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> See, among other discussions, R. E. Brown, *Jesus God and Man* (Milwaukee, 1967) pp. 45-46; A. Robert and A. Feuillet, *Introduction to the New Testament* (New York, 1965) pp. 179, 212-13.

<sup>57</sup> On this issue see Blinzler, *Die Brüder und Schwestern Jesu* (n. 40 above); J. J. Collins, "The Brethren of the Lord and Two Recently Published Papyri," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 5 (1944) 484-94.

<sup>58</sup> The text of Mark, as we have given it above, is found in all the chief Greek manuscripts; see B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York, 1971 [appeared 1972]) pp. 88-89. Some inferior mss., however, identified Jesus rather as "the carpenter's son," which seems to be a harmonization of the Marcan text with Mt 13:55. Yet such an astute commentator on the Marcan Gospel as Vincent Taylor preferred this reading as the original (*The Gospel according to St. Mark* [London, 1953] p. 300). But see Blinzler, *Die Brüder und Schwestern Jesu*, pp. 28-30; H. J. Vogels, "Die 'Eltern' Jesu," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 11 (1913) 33-43; E. Stauffer, "Jeschu ben Mirjam: Kontroversgeschichte Anmerkungen zu Mk 6:3," in *Neotestamentica et semitica: Studies in Honour of Matthew Black* (eds. E. E. Ellis and M. Wilcox; Edinburgh, 1969) pp. 119-28; *Jesus and His Story* (London, 1960) pp. 23-25, 165-66; and most recently H. K. McArthur, "'Son of Mary,'" *Novum Testamentum* 15 (1973) 38-58 ("the phrase had no special connotation," p. 58).

<sup>59</sup> A similar situation is found in the Lucan Gospel; see "Joseph's son" (4:22); cf. 2:41, 48, and see further below, p. 567. Luke completely omitted the Marcan episode (6:1-6a).

Even if one were to insist that Mark purposely used the phrase "son of Mary," one would still have the problem of specifying the purpose. Did it refer to Mary as a widow? (Joseph is never mentioned in the Marcan Gospel.) Did it echo an ancient accusation of illegitimacy? Such questions may strain the imagination; but they are answered only by speculation.

The upshot of the investigation of the earliest Gospel is that it too has no clear affirmation of a Christian belief in the virginal conception of Jesus.<sup>60</sup> In this, its data agree with those of Paul.

### *John*

If I introduce the Johannine data next, it is not because the Gospel of John was composed before the Matthean or Lucan Gospels, but because the data are more easily handled next and the Gospel, despite its late final redaction, has apparently preserved material that is often as primitive as the Synoptics, but from a parallel Christian setting.<sup>61</sup> And in this matter the Johannine tradition may well antedate the annunciations of the Matthean and Lucan infancy narratives.

Unlike the Marcan tradition, the Johannine Gospel identifies Jesus as "the son of Joseph" (1:45; cf. 6:42). It makes no attempt to suggest that this should be understood in a legal, putative, or foster sense. Aside from these passing references, the only passage that has been introduced into the discussion of Mary's virginal conception is a clause in the prologue, 1:13: "But to all who received Him, who believed in His name, He gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (RSV; the crucial Greek phrase is *hoi ouk egennēthēsan*). The plural reading, referring to Christian believers, is used in the most recent critical edition of the Greek NT, that of the United Bible Societies,

<sup>60</sup> It should not be overlooked that this Marcan passage and the phrase "son of Mary" have been taken by W. R. Farmer as a "classic example" of an inconclusive theological or Christological argument for the primitive character of the Marcan Gospel. He thinks that Mk 6:3, with its identification of Jesus as a "carpenter, the son of Mary," reflects a later formulation and one stemming from a community in which the idea of Mary's virginal conception was already accepted (*The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Analysis* [New York, 1964] p. 231). Aside from the problem that his opinion raises with regard to the Synoptic question in general, it is more readily intelligible that this cryptic phrase in Mark became the seedbed for the development of the assertion in the Matthean and Lucan infancy narratives. See further my essay "The Priority of Mark and the 'Q' Source in Luke," in *Jesus and Man's Hope* 1 (Pittsburgh, 1970) 131-70, esp. pp. 161-62, 170.

<sup>61</sup> See C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, Eng., 1963) pp. 1-18, 423-32; R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John (i-xii)* (Anchor Bible 29; Garden City, 1966) pp. xli-li; A. J. B. Higgins, *The Historicity of the Fourth Gospel* (London, 1960) pp. 63-82.

and also in older critical editions in general.<sup>62</sup> The Jerusalem Bible, however, has preferred to read the singular in 1:13, *hos ouk egennēthē*, which would mean "But to all who did accept Him He gave power to become children of God, to all who believe in the name of Him *who was born not* out of human stock or urge of the flesh or will of man, but of God Himself."<sup>63</sup> This singular reading would suggest that the Evangelist of the Johannine Gospel was aware of the virginal conception of Jesus. However, it is really based on wishful textual criticism, for it runs counter to "the overwhelming consensus of all Greek manuscripts"<sup>64</sup> and

<sup>62</sup> It is the reading adopted in *The Greek New Testament* (eds. K. Aland et al.; New York, 1966) p. 321; E. Nestle, *Novum Testamentum graece* (24th ed.; Stuttgart, 1960) p. 230; A. Merk, *Novum Testamentum graece et latine* (9th ed.; Rome, 1964) p. 306; [G. D. Kilpatrick], H KAINH ΔΙΑΘΗΚΗ (2d ed.; London, 1958) p. 276; R. V. G. Tasker, *The Greek New Testament* (London, 1960) p. 140 [the Greek text presupposed in the NEB New Testament]; H. J. Vogels, *Novum Testamentum graece et latine* 1 (3rd ed.; Freiburg, 1949) 287; J. M. Bover, *Novi Testamenti biblia graeca et latina* (3rd ed.; Madrid, 1953) p. 271; B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, *The New Testament in the Original Greek* 1 (London, 1890) 187; C. Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum graece* 1 (8th ed.; Leipzig, 1869) 743-44; H. von Soden, *Griechisches Neues Testament: Text mit kurzem Apparat* (Göttingen, 1913) p. 182. I have not been able to find a critical edition of the Greek NT that has preferred the singular reading to the plural.

<sup>63</sup> *The Jerusalem Bible* 2 (Garden City, 1966) 146. For the worth of this translation one should not fail to consult the pointed review of W. J. Harrington, an Irish confrere of the French Dominicans who produced the remarkable French original. His review is published in French, obviously to spare the sensibilities of English-speaking readers enamored of this English version (*Revue biblique* 75 [1968] 450-52). In this case the fault lies not with the English version, for it reflects the French original of John 1:13: "lui qui ni sang, ni vouloir de chair, ni vouloir d'homme, mais Dieu a engendré" (*La sainte Bible* [de Jérusalem]: *L'évangile... de saint Jean* [2nd ed.; Paris, 1960] p. 69). The note reads: "Allusion à la génération éternelle du Verbe, mais sans doute aussi, vu l'insistance sur l'exclusion du sang et de la chair, à la naissance virginale de Jésus. . . ."—It seems rather obvious that the Dutch Catechism derived its questionable formulation of what "the evangelists Matthew and Luke" said from this reading of the Johannine Gospel (see n. 23 above). A good instance of how a well-meaning, popular version of the Bible can lead the untutored astray!

<sup>64</sup> Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, p. 197. The patristic evidence stems mainly from Latin Fathers or versions (e.g., *Vetus Italica*, Irenaeus [Latin], Tertullian, Origen [Latin], Ambrose, Augustine, Pseudo-Athanasius). Metzger lists the following modern scholars who have argued for the originality of the singular: T. Zahn, A. Resch, F. Blass, A. Loisy, R. Seeburg, C. F. Burney, F. Büchsel, M.-E. Boismard, J. Dupont, F.-M. Braun. He could also have listed D. Mollat, the translator of John in *La sainte Bible* [de Jérusalem], and J. Galot (*Etre né de Dieu: Jean 1:13* [*Analecta biblica* 37; Rome, 1969]).—But see J. Schmid, "Joh 1, 13," *Biblische Zeitschrift* ns 1 (1957) 118-25; A. Hossiau, "Le milieu théologique de la leçon *egennēthē* (Jo. I. 13)," in *Sacra pagina* 2 (eds. J. Coppens et al.; Paris, 1959) 170-88; G. D. Fee, "The Text of John in the Jerusalem Bible: A Critique of the Use of Patristic Citations in New Testament Textual Criticism," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 90 (1971) 163-73, esp. pp. 166-67: "it is quite another [thing] to reconstruct this primitive reading on a purely eclectic basis, so that by a process of picking and choos-

finds support only in patristic citations and a few isolated Syriac translations (which have a conflate text). The scholarly world has come out strongly against the singular reading, judging it to "have arisen either from a desire to make the Fourth Gospel allude explicitly to the virgin birth or from the influence of the singular number of the immediately preceding *autou*."<sup>65</sup> Despite the backing of the Jerusalem Bible, this sole support for the virginal conception in the fourth Gospel is alleged and without foundation; it cannot be seriously entertained.

The Johannine Gospel obviously does not deny the virginal conception of Jesus, but it does not affirm it either. This is striking in view of the Christological stance that it assumes, presenting Jesus as almost always speaking from glory, even in statements uttered during His earthly ministry.<sup>66</sup> The Johannine Christology has pushed the titles and the understanding of Jesus back from the primitive stage already mentioned, where they referred to His future parousiac coming (see Acts 3:20), not only to the ministry itself, but to a stage of pre-existence that even surpasses that of Paul. It is, as it were, a *reflexive* pre-existence that makes the Jesus of the ministry sound as if He were speaking always from "the glory that I had with you before the world was made" (Jn 17:5). It represents but a logical development of the Christological tendencies of other NT writings, and it prepares for the Nicene declaration about Jesus as "true God from true God" (DS 125). But even so, the Johannine Gospel can still refer to Him as "the son of Joseph" and can remain silent about His virginal conception. In this the Johannine writings join the Pauline and the Marcan testimony, and witness to widespread areas in the early Church that did not affirm that which is found in the annunciation scenes of Matthew and Luke. This silence from three distinct local church traditions again raises the modern question about the "constant teaching of the Church *from the beginning*."<sup>67</sup>

### *The Annunciation Scenes in Matthew and Luke*

In contrast to the data in Paul, Mark, and John, there are two passages in the Matthean and Lucan Gospels which seem to deal with the

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ing one 'creates' an original reading that is supported *in toto* by *no* single piece of evidence. Yet this is precisely the nature of Boismard's resultant text for such passages as John 1:12-13" (Fee refers to Boismard's article, "Critique textuelle et citations patristiques," *Revue biblique* 57 [1950] 388-408, esp. pp. 401-8, an article that greatly influenced D. Mollat in his translation of John for *La sainte Bible* [de Jérusalem]).

<sup>65</sup> Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, p. 197.

<sup>66</sup> See R. E. Brown, *Jesus God and Man: Modern Biblical Reflections* (Milwaukee, 1967) p. 92.

<sup>67</sup> Schmaus, quoted above, p. 545.

virginal conception of Mary. These are the annunciation scenes: in Mt 1:18-25, in which the "angel of the Lord" announces to Joseph, in a dream, that Mary is already pregnant by the Holy Spirit; and in Lk 1:26-38, in which the "angel of the Lord" (1:11), now identified as Gabriel (1:19, 26), promises to Mary a conception through the intervention of the Holy Spirit. Since, however, these annunciation scenes occur in the infancy narratives, some preliminary comments about the nature of these Gospel parts are in order for a proper understanding of them.

First of all, it is generally agreed today that the infancy narratives represent the latest part of the Gospel tradition to develop.<sup>68</sup> The earliest Gospel, Mark, has no such introductory section; the Johannine Gospel substitutes a largely hymnic prologue for its introduction.<sup>69</sup> And the tendency manifested here, in this late stage of Gospel formation, became full-fledged when infancy gospels as such emerged in their own right, such as the apocryphal *Protevangelium Iacobi* or the *Infancy Story of Thomas the Israelite Philosopher* (actually an account of the childhood of Jesus ascribed to Thomas).<sup>70</sup>

Secondly, it is significant that none of the so-called kerygmatic passages of the NT ever allude to details of the infancy of Jesus, as we have already noted in part. The most that one finds is the reference to His Davidic descent in the kerygmatic fragment of Rom 1:3-4. Even the most expanded form of such kerygmatic preaching, as claimed by some commentators to be found in Acts 10:37-43, refers only to the "word which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John preached."<sup>71</sup> Whatever one wants to say about these so-called kerygmatic passages in Acts, it is noteworthy that Luke, who is said to have preserved several of them, never so formulates them as to include details from his own infancy narrative, let alone anything specifically connected with the virginal conception in them.

Thirdly, the historicity of details in the infancy narratives has always

<sup>68</sup> See, e.g., V. Taylor, *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition* (London, 1959) pp. 168-89; Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, p. 354; O. Cullmann, "Infancy Gospels," in *New Testament Apocrypha* 1 (eds. E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher; tr. R. McL. Wilson; London, 1963) 363-69; J. Riedl, *Die Vorgeschichte Jesu* (Stuttgart, 1968) pp. 11-13.

<sup>69</sup> See, e.g., Brown, *John* (i-xii), pp. 18-36; R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* (New York, 1968) pp. 221-81.

<sup>70</sup> See *New Testament Apocrypha* 1, 370-417.

<sup>71</sup> See above, p. 552. Cf. G. Friedrich, "Kēryssō," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 3, 710-12. Even if Acts 10:37-43 is basically kerygmatic and pre-Lucan, it also betrays Lucan reworking (e.g., in the formulation of the "beginning" from Galilee, *arxamēnos*, 10:37; cf. Lk 3:23; Acts 1:22). Cf. Lk 23:5.

been a problem, and it has been frankly discussed by Roman Catholic commentators in recent years. In this regard a certain consensus of opinion has arisen: (a) Matthew and Luke *do not depend on each other*, not only in the composition of their Gospels as a whole, but specifically in the writing of their infancy narratives.<sup>72</sup> (b) Both of them make use of *prior early Christian tradition in some details at least*.<sup>73</sup> (c) Despite their mutual independence, the radically different structure of their narratives, and their basically different stories about the infancy of Jesus, they have *certain details in common*—details which both may have inherited from the previous tradition and in which one is disposed to find a historical nucleus (Matthew would seem to be a control for Luke, and vice versa). We shall return to the common details; but for most of the scenes in the infancy narratives there simply is *no* control, biblical or extrabiblical, such as a historian would consider necessary for a judgment about the historical character of long-distant happenings.<sup>74</sup> (d) There is a liberal sprinkling in these narratives of folklore,

<sup>72</sup> See J. Schmid, *Matthäus und Lukas: Eine Untersuchung des Verhältnisses ihrer Evangelien* (Freiburg, 1930); Fitzmyer, "The Priority of Mark," pp. 148-50; P. Feine, J. Behm, and W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville, 1966) p. 50. With reference to the infancy narratives specifically, see Riedl, *Die Vorgeschichte Jesu*, pp. 11-13.

<sup>73</sup> R. Pesch, "Eine alttestamentliche Ausführungsformel im Matthäus-Evangelium," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 10 (1966) 220-45; 11 (1967) 79-95, esp. pp. 88-89. Also Vögtle, "Offene Fragen," p. 44; C. T. Davis, "Tradition and Redaction in Matthew 1:18-2:23," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 90 (1971) 404-21; A. Paul, *L'Évangile de l'enfance selon saint Matthieu* (Paris, 1968) pp. 45-94.—There is not time to discuss here the amount which the Matthean or Lucan accounts owe to tradition and to redaction, though this is an important aspect of one's judgment. See C. Burger, *Jesus als Davidsson: Eine traditions-geschichtliche Untersuchung* (Göttingen, 1970) pp. 91-106, 127-37.

<sup>74</sup> It might be well to interject here a consideration from a dogmatic theological point of view, to forestall an obvious difficulty. The events in the infancy narratives are recounted in the historic past tense and, like the rest of the Gospel stories, are inspired. From this one might be tempted to conclude to the guaranteed, inerrant character of the narratives and perhaps even to a guarantee of their *historical* character. But this is to ride roughshod over the literary forms or the types of accounts that one has to deal with in these narratives. To offset such a misunderstanding, one should recall what Pius XII had to say about literary forms in his Encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* (§ 314-16 [DS 3829-30]) and the precisions added by Vatican II in *Dei verbum* (chap. 3, nos. 11-12 [*The Documents of Vatican II*, pp. 118-20]). Moreover, neither official ecclesiastical documents treating of biblical inspiration and inerrancy nor the discussions of theologians have ever maintained that the necessary formal effect of inspiration was historicity. Inspiration does not make a historical statement out of what was not intended to be such. It would, however, obviously guarantee the historical character of an intended historical statement, just as it would guarantee the poetic truth of a poem, the rhetorical truth of a sermon or oration, the gospel truth of a Gospel. "Biblical inspiration" is thus an analogous notion; see P. Benoit, "The Analogies of Inspiration," in *Aspects of Biblical Inspiration* (Chicago, 1965) pp. 13-35; B. Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration* (Philadelphia, 1972) pp. 119-31; Vögtle, "Offene Fragen," pp. 44-45.

astrology, Christological titles, and interpretation of the OT, which makes the reader realize that he is confronted with a literarily embellished account. The extent to which either narrative can be regarded as "midrashic" is debated and need not detain us now.<sup>75</sup> If the narratives could ever be accorded the label of historiography, that label would have to be qualified with some adjective like "imitative"—i.e., imitative historiography.<sup>76</sup> For both Matthew and Luke recount their infancy stories in imitation of other traditions, biblical and extrabiblical. In Matthew, the story of Jesus' infancy is modeled in part on the haggadic development of the birth of Moses in contemporary Palestinian Judaism;<sup>77</sup> in Luke, the infancy story about Jesus not only parallels that about John the Baptist (which was probably derived from an independent earlier tradition), but has unmistakable similarities with the story of the childhood of Samuel in the OT (1 S: 1-2).<sup>78</sup>

Fourthly, the Christology of the Matthean and Lucan Gospels differs from that of Mark in that, like the Pauline and Johannine presentation, it represents a form of the three-stage Christology of the early Church. Mark's Christology was two-staged in that it reflects the retrojection of the titles and the understanding of the risen Jesus back to the Jesus of Nazareth in the account of the ministry. Both Paul and John pushed the titles and the understanding back to a third stage, viz., that of pre-existence (each in his own way). But Luke and Matthew, who never allude to Jesus' pre-existence, have a three-stage Christology of their own, in which the understanding of Jesus as Messiah, Savior, Lord, Son

<sup>75</sup> See Riedl, *Die Vorgeschichte Jesu*, pp. 8-10; A. G. Wright, "The Literary Genre Midrash," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 28 (1966) 105-38, 417-57, esp. pp. 454-56.

<sup>76</sup> This term has been used, in a slightly different way, by E. Burrows, *The Gospel of the Infancy and Other Biblical Essays* (London, 1940) pp. 1-58. As I am using it, the "imitation" involves the assimilation of details to other literary accounts.

<sup>77</sup> See M. Enslin, "The Christian Stories of the Nativity," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 59 (1940) 317-38; P. Winter, "Jewish Folklore in the Matthean Birth Story," *Hibbert Journal* 53 (1954) 34-42; H. W. Obbink, "On the Legends of Moses in the Haggadah," *Studia biblica et semitica T. C. Vriezen dedicata* (Wageningen, 1966) pp. 252-64; P. J. Thompson, "The Infancy Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke Compared," *Studia evangelica* 1 (*Texte und Untersuchungen* 73; Berlin, 1959) 217-22; M. M. Bourke, "The Literary Genus of Matthew 1-2," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 22 (1960) 160-75; S. Muñoz Iglesias, "El género literario del evangelio de la infancia en San Mateo," *Estudios bíblicos* 17 (1958) 243-73 (see *Theology Digest* 9 [1961] 15-20). But cf. C. H. Cave, "St Matthew's Infancy Narrative," *New Testament Studies* 9 (1962-63) 382-90.

<sup>78</sup> See, e.g., Burrows, *The Gospel of the Infancy*, pp. 1-58; S. Muñoz Iglesias, "El evangelio de la infancia en San Lucas y las infancias de los héroes bíblicos," *Estudios bíblicos* 16 (1957) 329-82; R. McL. Wilson, "Some Recent Studies in the Lucan Infancy Narratives," *Studia evangelica* 1 (*TU* 73) 235-53. This aspect of the Lucan infancy narrative is strangely neglected by R. Laurentin, *Structure et théologie de Luc I-II* (Paris, 1957).

of David, etc. is pushed back to the infancy period.<sup>79</sup> It represents in reality a stage in the developing understanding of Him who is the Christian Lord. These Evangelists thus seek in the overtures to their Gospels to strike the chords that will orchestrate their presentation; from the beginning of their Gospels they identify this person as if all that is to be said about Him were actually patent from the very beginning of His earthly existence. Their major affirmations in these Gospel introductions bear then on His Christological identification: He is born of God, son of Abraham, son of David, Messiah, Savior, Lord, and Son of God. To fail to perceive this is to miss the thrust of the infancy narratives.<sup>80</sup>

Against the background of these four generic observations about the infancy narratives we may look at some specific details, and above all at the elements in them that are common to Matthew and Luke despite their great diversity. These have been noted as the following nine points: (1) the principal characters, Jesus, Mary, Joseph; (2) the dating of the stories in the days of Herod the king (Mt 2:1; Lk 1:5); (3) the engagement of Mary a virgin to Joseph (Mt 1:18; Lk 1:27; 2:5); (4) the Davidic descent of Joseph (Mt 1:16, 20; Lk 1:27; 2:4); (5) the involvement of God's holy Spirit in the conception of Jesus (Mt 1:18, 20; Lk 1:34); (6) the birth of Jesus from Mary in Bethlehem (Mt 1:25; 2:1; Lk 2:7); (7) the heavenly imposition of the name of Jesus prior to the birth (Mt 1:21; Lk 1:31); (8) Jesus' Davidic descent (Mt 1:1; Lk 1:32); (9) the final settlement of the family in Nazareth (Mt 2:23; Lk 2:51).

Some commentators would add to this list two further elements: (a) Mary's virginal conception (appealing to Mt 1:18-20; Lk 1:34); (b) and this precisely at a time when she was still only engaged to Joseph (Mt 1:18; Lk 1:27; 2:5). These common details I have taken from a Roman Catholic commentator, Josef Schmid, who definitely included the last two elements in his list of 1960.<sup>81</sup> However, a more recent discussion by J. Riedl, who refers to Schmid's list, restricts what it calls

<sup>79</sup> See, e.g., R. H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York, 1965) pp. 195-97; R. E. Brown, *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 33 (1972) 24.

<sup>80</sup> See, e.g., H. H. Oliver, "The Lucan Birth Stories and the Purpose of Luke-Acts," *New Testament Studies* 10 (1963-64) 202-26; P. S. Minear, "Luke's Use of the Birth Stories," in *Studies in Luke-Acts: Essays Presented in Honor of Paul Schubert* (Nashville, 1966) pp. 111-30; A. Vögtle, *Messias und Gottessohn: Herkunft und Sinn der matthäischen Geburts- und Kindheitsgeschichte* (Düsseldorf, 1971); "Die Genealogie Mt 1, 2-16 und die matthäische Kindheitsgeschichte (I. Teil)," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 8 (1964) 45-58; "(II. Teil)," *ibid.*, pp. 239-62; "(Schlussteil)," *ibid.* 9 (1965) 31-49; "Das Schicksal des Messiaskindes: Zur Auslegung und Theologie von Mt 2," *Bibel und Leben* 6 (1965) 246-79.

<sup>81</sup> *Das Evangelium nach Lukas* (4th ed.; *Regensburger Neues Testament* 3; Regensburg, 1960) p. 90. See further X. Léon-Dufour, *Les évangiles et l'histoire de Jésus* (Paris, 1963) p. 90; Vögtle, "Offene Fragen," p. 44.



the "historical facts" in the two narratives to the following: Mary's engagement to Joseph, the Davidic descent of Jesus via Joseph, the imposition of the name of Jesus, the birth of Jesus from Mary, the birth in Bethlehem, and the final settlement in Nazareth. Though Riedl has telescoped some of the elements that are listed separately above, he has significantly omitted from his list of "historical facts" all mention of the intervention of the Spirit and of the virginal conception.<sup>82</sup> In itself, this may seem merely like a difference of opinion; but it points up the attitude of Roman Catholic commentators today, when they are confronted with the question of the historical character of the Matthean and Lucan infancy narratives.

What lies behind the mode of interpreting the annunciation scenes of the infancy narratives in such a way? Several things are involved. First, the difference in the treatment of the conception of Jesus in the Matthean and Lucan stories. Matthew leaves no doubt that the conception has already taken place, and without the intervention of Joseph. He was on the point of repudiating his fiancée because "she was found to be with child" (Mt 1:18).<sup>83</sup> But he is reassured: "That which is conceived in her is of the holy Spirit" (1:20). Matthew never indicates how the conception came about; there is no hint of intercourse of any sort, and he uses no language that would suggest a hierogamy or a theogamy after the manner of Greek and Egyptian myths about the births of heroes as the result of the intercourse of a god and a human.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>82</sup> *Die Vorgeschichte Jesu*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>83</sup> In other words, the conception had already taken place when the angelic announcement was made.—What should not be missed here is the loaded form of the statement of the Evangelist (1:18): "She was found to be with child of the holy Spirit," and this is given as the basis of Joseph's consideration of divorce (see Dt 22:21 for the OT background to his doubting). See A. Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple* (Lund, 1965) pp. 135-42. No explanation is given why Joseph, a "just man," wanted to divorce someone who had been found to be with child of the holy Spirit. The Evangelist's intention is clear, but his mode of formulation raises questions precisely about the thrust of the narrative and its redaction—issues that cannot be pursued here. See C. T. Davis, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 90 (1971) 413.—Contrast the treatment of this episode in J. Daniélou, *The Infancy Narratives* (New York, 1968) p. 40: "the announcement made to Joseph was not intended to inform him that Mary had conceived virginally—that he already knew. . . ." But this goes against the plain sense and basic thrust of the story, which states that Joseph was about to repudiate Mary and had to be informed by the angel to persuade him to the contrary. However, Daniélou is on the right track when he states that "the object of this account" is not "to defend the virgin birth"; it is rather "to establish how Jesus can be a descendant of David and the Davidic Messiah despite the virgin birth which seems so fundamental an objection to his being so" (p. 41). In effect, this is to affirm the virginal conception as a theologoumenon (see below).

<sup>84</sup> For a history-of-religions approach to this question, see Marxsen, "Jungfrauengeburt," col. 1068; G. Gutknecht, *Das Motiv der Jungfrauengeburt in religionsgeschichtlicher Beleuchtung* (Griefswald, 1952). But attempts to find extrabiblical parallels for the virginal conception in Greek and Egyptian literature have not really succeeded, since

Whatever Matthew inherited in this matter from prior Christian tradition he has unmistakably presented as virginal conception, even with defensive, apologetic nuances. Thus, there is no doubt about the Matthean assertion of virginal conception as something that has already taken place.

Does Luke do the same? If he does, it is less clear, and herein lies the difficulty.

The interpretation of the Lucan annunciation is complicated by several things. First of all, it is clearly a parallel to the annunciation made to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist (1:5-23) and the husband of Elizabeth who was barren, "and both were advanced in years." By contrast, Mary is said to be a "virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph" (1:27). Secondly, she was a *young* Galilean girl, who was still a virgin, and who was not only contemplating marriage but was already engaged. Mary's youth and virginal status stand in contrast to the old age and the barrenness of Elizabeth. Thirdly, the angel's greeting that startles Mary and the subsequent indication to her that she has been favored by God to become the mother of the Davidic Messiah refer to a *future* conception, but it is not immediately understood. Moreover, the question has to be asked whether it really rules out human intercourse. And there is the further question whether, in reading it as if it did rule it out, one is not importing a Matthean nuance into the story. This may seem surprising, but listen to the Lucan text itself (in the RSV rendering):

<sup>28</sup>And he [Gabriel] came to her and said, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" <sup>29</sup>But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup>And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. <sup>32</sup>He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup>and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup>And Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no husband?" <sup>35</sup>And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God."

Eventually Mary says: "I am the Lord's servant; let it happen to me as you say."

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in almost every instance that is cited the parallels imply at least sexual intercourse. See R. E. Brown, *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 33 (1972) 30-32 (and the literature that he cites); Vögtle, "Offene Fragen," pp. 45-47; E. Schweizer, "Pneuma," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 6, 397.

When this account is read in and for itself—without the overtones of the Matthean annunciation to Joseph—every detail in it could be understood of a child to be born of Mary in the usual human way, a child endowed with God's special favor, born at the intervention of the Spirit of God, and destined to be acknowledged as the heir to David's throne as God's Messiah and Son. Chap. 2 in the Lucan Gospel supports this understanding even further with its references to Mary and Joseph as Jesus' "parents" (2:41) or as "your father and I" (2:48). And in these references no attempt is made on the part of the Evangelist to qualify Joseph's fatherhood as foster or legal.

However, four points may seem to militate against such an understanding of the annunciation scene in Luke. The first is Mary's query, which I shall translate literally from the Greek: "How will this be, since I do not know a man?" (1:34). Or, to paraphrase it with the proper Semitic connotation, "since I have no relations with a man (*or* with a husband)."<sup>85</sup> This query has been subjected to many explanations over the centuries: it has been said to express a vow, a resolve, or an intention not to have marital intercourse;<sup>86</sup> or a protest because she *has* not known a man;<sup>87</sup> or surprise because she is not yet married (which implies that Mary understood the angel's words to mean a conception that was already under way, as in parallel angelic communications in the OT, and one which the further words of the angel clarify and refer to the future);<sup>88</sup> or even some contorted explanations.<sup>89</sup> The one thing

<sup>85</sup> Contrast the tendentious translation of this verse in the Jerusalem Bible, New Testament, p. 91: "since I am a virgin." This inexcusable eisegesis is not found in the French original, "puisque je ne connais point d'homme."

<sup>86</sup> This understanding of the verse has been traced back to Ambrose (*Expositio evang. Lucae* 2, 14-15 [CSEL 32, 49-50]) and Augustine (*De sacra virginitate* 4, 4 [CSEL 41, 237-38]). In one form or another it still has its defenders: Laurentin, *Structure et théologie du Luc I-II*, pp. 176-88; G. Graystone, *Virgin of All Virgins: The Interpretation of Luke 1:34* (Rome, 1968). Cf. J. F. Craghan, *Mary: The Virginal Wife and the Married Virgin: The Problematic of Mary's Vow of Virginité* (Rome, 1967) esp. pp. 42-48.

<sup>87</sup> This understanding is found in many ancient versions which rendered the verb *ginōskō* in the past tense and implied that Mary understood the angel to mean that she was already pregnant. See H. Quecke, "Lk 1,34 in den alten Übersetzungen und im Protevangelium des Jakobus," *Biblica* 44 (1962) 499-520; "Lk 1,34 im Diatessaron," *Biblica* 45 (1964) 85-88; "Zur Auslegungsgeschichte von Lk 1,34," *Biblica* 47 (1966) 113-14.

<sup>88</sup> See Gn 16:11; Jg 13:3. This interpretation is widely used today; see, e.g., A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Luke* (5th ed.; Edinburgh, 1964) p. 24 ("The words are the avowal of a maiden conscious of her own purity; and they have been drawn from her by the strange declaration that she is to have a son before she is married"). For *ou* in the sense of *oupō* that this interpretation involves, see Mk 8:17-18.

<sup>89</sup> E.g., that of J.-P. Audet, "L'Annonce à Marie," *Revue biblique* 63 (1956) 364-74. This interpretation has "not received great support" (J. F. Craghan, "The Gospel

that is clear is that there is no unanimous or "Catholic" interpretation of this question.<sup>90</sup> Of the three mentioned, the least forced explanation seems to be the third, surprise at the announcement that is understood in the OT sense that conception is already under way. But the real solution to this problematic verse lies in the realization, as J. M. Creed has expressed it, that "a narrative of this kind ought not to be subjected to the strain of such questions" (i.e., whether Mary's words imply a vow or a resolve of virginity).<sup>91</sup> The purpose of Mary's question to the angel is to give the Evangelist an opening for the further angelic communication about the real character of the child to be born: He will not only be the Davidic Messiah to rule over the house of Jacob, but He "will be called holy, the Son of God" (1:35).<sup>92</sup> The main affirmation in the angelic

Witness to Mary's 'Ante Partum' Virginity," *Marian Studies* 21 [1970] 28-68, esp. p. 56). It is vitiated by an idea that is often repeated, that Luke's annunciation scene is influenced by Is 7:14. Aside from superficial parallels in the Greek wording of Lk 1:26-38 and the LXX of Is 7:10-17, there is not a shred of evidence that Luke has fashioned his annunciation in dependence on Isaiah. It is necessary to insist on this, because otherwise critical commentators tend at times to gloss over it (see Vögtle, "Offene Fragen," p. 46; Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium*, pp. 62-63; G. Voss, *Die Christologie der lukanischen Schriften in Grundzügen* [Bruges, 1965] pp. 65-81). The possible parallel phrases are seven: *oikou David* (Lk 1:27)—*oikos David* (Is 7:12); *ho kyrios* (Lk 1:28)—*kyrios* (Is 7:10); *parthenon* (Lk 1:27)—*hē parthenos* (Is 7:14); *syllēmpsē en gastri* (Lk 1:31)—*en gastri hexei* (Is 7:14 [cf. apparatus criticus]); *texē huion* (Lk 1:31)—*texetai huion* (Is 7:14); *kai kaleseis to onoma autou* (Lk 1:31)—*kai kaleseis to onoma autou* (Is 7:14); *epi ton oikon* (Lk 1:33)—*epi ton oikon* (Is 7:17). But in those Lucan phrases that seem to be similar to Is 7:14 in this list one should not miss the parallels that are found elsewhere in the OT (e.g., Gn 16:11). The difficulty here is once again the harmonization of the Lucan and Matthean narratives. It is noteworthy that Laurentin, for all his discussion of the OT background of Luke 1-2 (*Structure et théologie de Luc I-II*), does not treat Is 7:14 as part of it.

<sup>90</sup> J. M. Creed (*The Gospel according to St. Luke: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indices* [London, 1953] p. 19) thinks that Mary's "vow" is the "usual interpretation of Roman Catholic exegetes."

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* This is also acknowledged by Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium*, p. 49; he traces the idea back to H. J. Holtzmann and others (n. 68). J. Gewiss ("Die Marienfrage, Lk 1, 34," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 5 [1961] 221-54, esp. pp. 242-43) calls attention to the literary device of the question that Luke often uses (Lk 13:23; 16:5, 7; 17:37; Acts 8:30-31; 10:14; 16:30).

<sup>92</sup> Or possibly "the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." This verse (1:35) and v. 32 have recently been found to echo Aramaic phrases that have come to light in pseudo-Danielic apocalyptic fragments from Qumran Cave IV, which J. T. Milik is to publish shortly in the *Harvard Theological Review*: "He will be said to be the son of God, and they will call him the son of the Most High" (see THEOLOGICAL STUDIES 25 [1964] 429). The text is apocalyptic and has nothing to do with an infancy narrative; unfortunately, it is fragmentary and no hint is given about the person who is the subject of the titles used.

declaration to Mary is thus wholly Christological.<sup>93</sup> Mary's query is merely a Lucan stage-prop for the dramatization of the identification of the child; the trouble is that Luke's dramatization has made it sound like a historicization, and the conversation of Mary with the angel has borne the weight of centuries of re-presentation of the scene in Christian art, especially of the sort of Fra Angelico. Unfortunately, such re-presentation does not make history out of what was not intended to be such.

A second difficulty for this interpretation may seem to come from the angelic declaration that the "holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (1:34). The language used by the angel is highly figurative, but neither verb, *eperchesthai* ("come upon") or *episkiazein* ("overshadow"), has in itself any connotation of conception, let alone of sexual implication. They are otherwise unattested in a context that would suggest either of these nuances.<sup>94</sup> They are, at most, figurative expressions for the mysterious intervention of God's Spirit and power which will be responsible for the divine and messianic character of this child. The figurative use of these verbs here obviously does not exclude the idea of a miraculous conception; but they do not say it either, least of all in an exclusive sense implying no human intervention. In this regard, we must recall here that the birth of Isaac "according to the Spirit" (Gal 4:29), which we discussed earlier,<sup>95</sup> did not imply a virginal conception of him. It was simply Paul's way of accounting for the child so cared for in God's providence and for his role in salvation history. In the Lucan infancy narrative, then, the real question that has to be asked is whether the

<sup>93</sup> See Voss, *Die Christologie*, pp. 75-76: "The Virgin Birth is regarded in the Lucan presentation not under its biological point of view, but as a theological statement." Also K. H. Rengstorf, "Die Weihnachtserzählung des Evangelisten Lukas," in *Stat crux dum volvitur orbis* (Fest. H. Lilje; eds. G. Hoffmann and K. H. Rengstorf; Berlin, 1959) pp. 15-30.

<sup>94</sup> The very *eperchesthai* is used in Lk 11:22, 21:26; Acts 1:8, 8:24, 13:40, 14:19; Eph 2:7; Jas 5:1. But only in the programmatic verse of Acts 1:8 is it again used of the Spirit, as the risen Jesus promises the apostles "power" for the ministry of witnessing to Him. Luke's use of the verb in 1:35 is often thought to be influenced by the LXX of Is 32:15, *heōs an epelthē eph' hymas pneuma aph' hypselou*, "until the Spirit comes upon you from on high." Here it is used to explain the fertility of the land (in the LXX: of Carmel), but it does not transcend the figurative sense. For other combinations of the verb with *pneuma*, see Nm 5:14; Jb 1:19; 4:15 (but one must be careful of the sense of *pneuma*).—The verb *episkiazein* has a literal sense in Acts 5:15; the use of it in the transfiguration scene (Mk 9:7; Mt 17:5; Lk 9:34) may be literal, but a symbolic connotation cannot be completely ruled out. In the Lucan infancy narrative the use of the verb is wholly figurative, symbolical of God's presence (and power) to Mary and the child to be born of her. It may well reflect the symbolism of Ex 40:35 or Ps 91:4, although this is sometimes contested (see Voss, *Die Christologie*, pp. 73-76).

<sup>95</sup> See pp. 555-56 above.

Spirit's "coming upon" Mary and its "overshadowing" of her are intended to explain the child's special relation to God (as His Son) or her bodily, virginal integrity. If we had only the Lucan infancy narrative, would this passage be read as it often is—in terms of the virginal conception of Jesus? It has been so interpreted because of the harmonization of its detail with the Matthean account. But the modern query is raised about this as a "common" element. At most, it is only a possible understanding of the Lucan annunciation scene, not one that is unquestionably such.

The third point that may seem to cause a difficulty for this interpretation of the Lucan annunciation scene is Lk 2:5, where we are told that Joseph went to Bethlehem to be enrolled in the census "with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child" (*syn Mariam tē emnēsteumenē autō, ousē enkyō*). This verse has long been a problem and it still remains one, no matter how one interprets 1:26–38, whether of Mary's virginal conception or not. Its description of Mary is dependent on 1:27, "a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph" (*parthenon emnēsteumenēn andri hō onoma Iōsēph*). And the question is still, what is Mary doing in the company of Joseph on a journey if she is still only "engaged"? The participle *emnēsteumenē* would imply that she had not yet cohabited with him. Ancient versions (Vetus Itala, Sinaitic Syriac) easily solved the problem by changing the reading from "his betrothed" to "his wife." And the Koine tradition of Greek manuscripts (together with some Latin versions) introduced the word *gynaiki* (or *uxori*), which would mean "his engaged wife," but this is clearly a harmonizing gloss that solves nothing. Which was she? His wife or his fiancée? The *lectio difficilior preferenda* is that with which we began;<sup>96</sup> it might seem to be a formulation made in the light of the virginal conception, but it is not per se clear, and nothing else in chap. 2 favors it. No hint is given about the cause of Mary's pregnancy,<sup>97</sup> and the original independence of

<sup>96</sup>In the recently published critical edition of *The Greek New Testament* (UBS, p. 206) these ancient tamperings with the text are not even noted; and in his commentary on the text Metzger (*A Textual Commentary*, p. 132) passes over them in silence.

<sup>97</sup>Not only here, but also in connection with the earlier passages discussed above, a distinction has often been proposed between the fact of the virginal conception and its possible literary embellishment in a presentation stemming from a later period of Gospel formation—as if the latter could be admitted to have been freely introduced, whereas the former is really the firm datum. At the end of an excursus, "Jungfrauengeburt—ein Theologoumenon?" E. Nellesen (*Das Kind und seine Mutter* [Stuttgart, 1969] p. 109) sought to explain why the data about the conception arose only in the later period of the Gospel tradition: "It should be recalled, however, that an explicit investigation into the peculiar circumstances of the conception and birth of Jesus would only then have recommended itself when the beginnings of Jesus' human life would have become the object of a

chap. 2 from chap. 1 may suggest that this verse is not even to be thought of in terms of virginal conception. In any case, Luke 2:5 is hardly a strong argument in favor of Mary's bodily virginity in the Lucan infancy narrative.

The last point of difficulty for the interpretation being used here is derived from outside the infancy narrative itself, from Lk 3:23, where we read that "Jesus, when He began His ministry, was about thirty years of age, being the son (as was supposed) of Joseph, the son of Heli," etc., and the genealogy continues backward through some seventy names to "the son of Adam, the son of God." Aside from the details of ancestors in the Lucan genealogy that differ from the Matthean list, Luke significantly traces Jesus' pedigree back not only to Adam but to God Himself. Some commentators see in the termination of the genealogy (in God Himself) a subtle way in which Luke again affirms the divine sonship of Jesus.<sup>88</sup> Yet, as it begins, the genealogical list says "as was supposed" (*hōs enomizeto*), the son of Joseph. At first sight, it sounds as if the Evangelist is correcting the impression suggested by the (inherited?) genealogy that Jesus was actually the son of Joseph, and correcting it in the light of the infancy narrative's annunciation scene. Leaving aside the strained interpretations of the phrase that have often been proposed in attempts to harmonize the two genealogies of Jesus,<sup>89</sup> we may note that, whatever way the phrase is going to be understood, it will affect not only the paternity of Joseph (in a real sense? in a putative, legal sense?) but also the climax of the genealogy as well. If one opts for the interpretation that Luke suggests here

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narrative presentation. Outside of the Matthean and Lucan Gospels that is scarcely the case, and certainly not in Paul, who speaks of the beginnings of Jesus' life only in short confessional formulas (Rom 1:3; Gal 4:4)." To which Vögtle ("Offene Fragen," p. 48) aptly remarked: "But that is to put the cart before the horse! A claim is made for a probative argument out of something that cries out for an explanation. The problem is why the idea of a virginal conception appears only in narrative presentations which make use of Old Testament annunciation forms and in declarations that prepared for these (Mt 1:16) or reflect on them (Lk 3:23), but have no reference to the incarnation of Jesus such as the Pauline passages suggest." The real problem is expressed by Vögtle (*ibid.*, p. 47): "Without a basic declaration of the original witness, in this case above all of Mary herself, an authentic tradition could not have been established," and it strains the imagination to try to explain it, all pious suggestions about intimate family traditions etc. notwithstanding. See further his "Offene Fragen," p. 50; A. Weiser, "Überblick über den Verlauf der Diskussion [der Beuronener Tagung]," in *Jungfrauengeburt gestern und heute (Mariologische Studien 4)* pp. 205-14, esp. pp. 211-12.

<sup>88</sup> See, e.g., Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium*, p. 188; E. E. Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (London, 1966) p. 93.

<sup>89</sup> See Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium*, pp. 198-200.

Joseph's "legal" or "putative" paternity, what does that say about the divine filiation at the end? On the other hand, if one were to insist that it refers merely to the beginning of the genealogy, then there might be a significant corrective to it in the light of chap. 1. This would then shed some light on the infancy narrative and possibly indicate that the Evangelist did want 1:26-38 to be understood of virginal conception. This is a possibility that cannot be excluded. But in the long run, the Lucan Gospel does not assert the virginal conception of Jesus as clearly as does the Matthean annunciation scene.

These, then, are the problems that face one when one tries to read the Matthean and Lucan infancy narratives in terms of the virginal conception of Jesus.

#### A PALATABLE INTERPRETATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT DATA

Because of such problems in the Lucan annunciation scene in particular, and because of the isolated testimony to the virginal conception of Jesus in the Matthean and Lucan infancy narratives, Roman Catholic interpreters, both exegetes and theologians, have asked a further question about the virginal conception. Given the silence of the NT outside of the two annunciation scenes, is it possible that the real thrust of the infancy narratives is to affirm something other than the historical, biological virginity of Mary? Is the affirmation of these scenes to be found in something else? For instance, in the divine and gratuitous creativity of a new age of salvation history, which is inaugurated with the birth of this extraordinary child, who will in time be recognized as God's agent of salvation and as the fulfilment of OT promises, the heir to sit on David's throne, the Christian Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior and Lord proclaimed to all men? In other words, is the virginal conception of Jesus, which is clearly asserted in the Matthean infancy narrative, and possibly so in the Lucan annunciation scene, anything more than a theologoumenon? One has to recognize that the NT data are not unambiguous; they do not support the claim that this was a matter of faith "from the beginning." When one looks at the complicated assertion in the Lucan annunciation scene, there is a real reason to raise the question whether the Evangelist's assertion is anything more than a theological expression in language that may prescind from factuality about a notion which is related to a matter of faith, without being such itself. Roman Catholic exegetes and theologians who so phrase the question are concerned with three things. First, how explain the isolated assertion of the virginal conception in Matthew 1 over against the general thrust of the Matthean infancy narrative, which is more concerned



to tell us who Jesus is and whence He comes, "Quis et unde?"<sup>100</sup> Similarly, the possible Lucan assertion of it is embedded in a twofold angelic announcement, the thrust of which is clearly more concerned with Jesus' messianic or Davidic role and His divine filiation than with Mary's virginal status.

Secondly, they are concerned to reckon with the "open" character of the two isolated NT passages which deal with the question, when they are compared with the striking silence about it in the rest of the Synoptic Gospels and in the remainder of the NT itself. Even if one were to say that in this matter Matthew and Luke have inherited traditional material and did not fabricate it themselves out of whole cloth, one has still to ask whether they present it as *Glaubensgut*,<sup>101</sup> as an affirmation of faith, or merely as a theologoumenon. Because this hesitation arises—and not merely because of modern hesitations about the miraculous, but rather because of the difficulties which the texts themselves raise—the assertion, such as it is in the Matthean and Lucan annunciation scenes, is "open," i.e., open to further understanding and/or development.

Thirdly, as in the case of other matters in the NT, which are judged today from an exegetical point of view to be open-ended assertions—

<sup>100</sup> This is the title of a perceptive article on the Matthean infancy narrative by K. Stendahl, "Quis et Unde? An Analysis of Mt 1-2," in *Judentum—Urchristentum—Kirche* (Festschrift für J. Jeremias; Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 26; Berlin, 1960) pp. 94-105. That the Matthean emphasis is on Jesus rather than on Mary is seen in the way the Evangelist refers several times over to "the child with Mary His mother" (2: 11) or "the child and His mother" (2: 13, 14, 20, 21).

<sup>101</sup> This is the term used for what Schürmann calls "das historische Faktum der jungfräulichen Empfängnis," which he traces to an "intimate family tradition" (*Das Lukasevangelium*, p. 61) and which he claims would have taken time to be transmitted to great church-centers.—In using this terminology, *Glaubensgut* and theologoumenon, one should recall the distinction made by K. Rahner, quoted above (p. 548). Protestant writers sometimes use similar terminology with different nuances. Thus, R. H. Fuller (*The Foundation of New Testament Christology* [New York, 1965] p. 202) writes: "For those who are concerned about the historicity of the 'Virgin birth' ('virginal conception' is a more accurate term), let it be stated that to believe in the Virgin birth is not to accept the historicity of a biological parthenogenesis but to adhere to the Christological intention of the narratives, which is to express the transcendental origin of Jesus' history. See the present writer's essay, *The Virgin Birth. Historical Fact or Kerygmatic Truth?* *BR* [= *Biblical Research*] I (1956), pp. 1-8. In a letter to me, J. Jeremias proposes to substitute 'Glaubensaussage' ('affirmation of faith') for 'kerygmatic truth', on the ground that the Virgin birth was never actually part of the kerygma as such. Accepting the correction, we may say that to believe in the Virgin birth is to adhere to the *faith* which the story expresses." As proposed above, *Glaubensgut* would not be the same as the *Glaubensaussage* in this comment of Fuller.—See further A. Weiser, "Mythos im Neuen Testament unter Berücksichtigung der Mariologie," in *Mythos und Glaube* (eds. H. J. Brosch and H. M. Köster; *Mariologische Studien* 5; Essen, 1972) pp. 67-88, esp. pp. 80-84.

“open” in the sense that they could develop genuinely within the Christian dogmatic and theological tradition in one direction or another—the NT assertion has to be understood for what it really is and not interpreted anachronistically. As less controversial, I may be permitted to cite the example of Paul’s assertion of the universal causality of Adam’s sin in Rom 5:12–21. That this is somehow related to the dogma of original sin is a commonplace since Trent (*DS* 1512). What Paul asserts there about it is not exactly the same as the formulation or conception of the matter in the Councils of Orange or Trent. It could actually have developed as it did, or not. In this case the openness of the assertion has been removed; what Trent affirms may be regarded as the *sensus plenior* of Rom 5.<sup>102</sup> So too with the assertions of Matthew and Luke on the matter of the virginal conception. If it eventually were to be judged that the traditional understanding of the virginal conception in a historical, biological sense is a matter of faith, then one would still have the obligation of asking whether that is the clear affirmation of the NT data. Here one must learn to distinguish between a NT assertion and the legitimate development of it within the Christian tradition. But this is complicated. For what I said at the beginning of my discussion about the so-called traditional teaching among Roman Catholics in the reiterations of the ordinary magisterium for centuries obviously colors one’s assessment of the normative character of such a development. Should dogmatic theologians agree on the normative character or binding force of the constant and ordinary magisterium—which does not seem to be the case at the moment—the Roman Catholic commentator could live with it. But he would still insist on taking the critical position that his discipline demands about the affirmation of the NT text itself. The Matthean annunciation scene may assert indeed the virginal conception of Jesus, and the Lucan may possibly do so, but the question as to whether they make of that assertion an affirmation of faith or a theologoumenon is still a vital question.

In summary, then, the “open” character of the assertion of the virginal conception of Jesus in the NT is seen in (a) the isolated declaration of it in the annunciation scenes of Matthew and Luke over against the silence of the rest of the NT data, which raises the question whether it was really a matter of Christian faith “from the beginning”; (b) the different treatment of the matter in the Matthean and Lucan annunciation scenes, where it is clearly asserted in the former and only possibly and figuratively so in the latter; (c) the hesitation about whether it is affirmed as a historical fact or asserted as a theologou-

<sup>102</sup> See further my commentary on Romans in the *Jerome Biblical Commentary* 2, 306–8 (§ 53:52–60).

menon to support some affirmation of faith. These, then, are the issues in the modern debate.

Finally, it must be stressed that the exegetes and theologians who have been involved in this debate have not denied the virginal conception of Jesus; in fact, in many instances, they have not even questioned it. They have indeed raised questions about it and have been honestly seeking to draw the lines between what is of the essence of Catholic faith and what has been uncritically associated with it in pious and unquestioning assumptions. They have been concerned to ascribe critically to the biblical sources only what they affirm, and to dogmatic or systematic development what it has interpreted. Lastly, they have been seeking honestly to assess the entire matter with the sophisticated attitude of their own generation. This may make of them minimalists in the Mariological debate. But who says that the maximalists have the corner on the truth?