

The Virgin Birth

An Inquiry into the Biblical Doctrine

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A Christology “From Above”

Since the rise of rationalistic theology in the 19th Century, the approach to discussing the person of Yeshua has seen a marked change. While the Christian Church had for centuries begun her inquiry into Christology¹ “from above,” humanistic rationalism required that such inquiry begin “from below.” In other words, while the Church had always begun with the deity of Yeshua and proceeded from there to His humanity, the theology produced in the 19th Century (and which still undergirds a great deal of the contemporary theology relating to Christology) began “from below.”² It was reasoned that the earliest followers of Yeshua must have first known Him as human and only then moved on to accept Him as divine. Undoubtedly, from a strictly historical perspective, this must have been the case. Moreover, one might welcome a Christology that begins “from below” as a needed corrective to the unbalanced Christology of the medieval Church in which the strong emphasis upon the deity of Messiah tended to eclipse His humanity.

Yet when we come to the Apostolic Scriptures and the Christology they teach, just the opposite is the case. Almost unanimously do they present a Christology that begins “from above.” Surely this is most obvious with John, whose Prologue to his Gospel describes the pre-existent *Logos* (Word) becoming flesh. He does not diminish the humanity of Yeshua in this, but rather makes clear that his starting point is “from above,” not “from below.” His Prologue begins describing the Word as already existing in the beginning, as having a relationship with God while at the same time being God (1:1). And the concluding verse of the Prologue (1:18) makes the same assertion: “The only one, himself God, who is in closest fellowship with the Father, has made God known.”³

The Epistle to the Hebrews follows the same pattern. There the author affirms the complete humanity of Yeshua: “Since the children have flesh and blood, He too shared in their humanity” (Hebrews 2:14). He “tasted death” (2:9) and was made perfect through suffering (2:10). Even more, He was subjected to the same temptations as we are (4:15) and therefore sympathizes with our weakness (5:8). But this is not where the author to the Hebrews begins his treatise. He begins with the statement that when God spoke through the Messiah, He did so through His Son (1:2) Who is the heir of all things and the Creator of all things (1:2). The Son is the effulgence of the Father’s glory and the express image of His being (1:3). And the author of Hebrews goes on to exclaim that as far as the highest beings in creation are concerned, the Son is infinitely superior. What angel was ever address by God as “Son?” And even more to the point, what angel ever received the title God (1:8)?

Paul follows the same pattern of a Christology that begins “from above.” In one of his earliest

¹ “Christology” is the traditional name given to that sub-section of theology that deals with the basic question of the person of Yeshua as the Messiah. The Greek word *christos* from which we derive our English word “Christ” means “anointed one” and is a translation of the Hebrew *mashiach*, from which we derive our English word “Messiah.” Thus, “Christology” is the study of what the Bible teaches about the Messiah, and particularly His relationship to the Father and the mystery of the incarnation. Primary in the study of Christology is the question of how Yeshua’s humanity and deity co-exist.

² “Our starting point must lie in the question about the man Jesus; only in this way can we ask about his divinity.” Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man* (SCM Press, 1968), p. 35.

³ For a discussion of the textual variants of this verse and the strength of the reading *monogenes theos* (“the only one Who is God”) over the textus receptus *monogenes huios* (“the only one Who is Son”), see my *The Messiah: An Introduction to Christology* (TorahResource, 2007), pp. 114–117.

epistles, that written to the Galatians, he wrote: “But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Torah....” In 2Corinthians 8:9, Paul does not describe Yeshua as moving from poverty to riches via the resurrection, but just the opposite: “For you know the grace of our Lord Yeshua Messiah, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor....” And this same incarnational history, “from glory to death to glory again,” gleaned from Yeshua’s own words in John 17, marks the structure of the confessional hymn that Paul incorporates into his epistle to the Philippians (2:5–11).

We might expect the Synoptic Gospels, in which we have the record of Yeshua’s birth and earthly life, to surely begin “from below” in their portrayal of the Messiah, but in fact they do not. Mark begins his Gospel: “The beginning of the gospel of Yeshua Messiah, the Son of God.”⁴ Moreover, Mark immediately quotes from Malachi 3:1 and applies it to Yeshua. In the original context of Malachi’s prophecy, the words apply to “the Master” (*haAdon*) Who “will suddenly come to His *own* Temple.” Mark’s story of the Messiah also begins “from above.”

But what of Matthew and Luke? Do they follow this same motif, of beginning “from above” in their descriptions of the Messiah? Yes, they do, but in a special way: by incorporating the story of the virgin conception.⁵ Matthew speaks of Mary, betrothed to Joseph, being pregnant “before they had come together” (Matthew 1:18). When Joseph was made aware of Mary’s pregnancy, he reacted as any pious man would—he determined to sever the betrothal contract, but to do so in a discrete manner in order to save Mary public embarrassment. But then an angelic visitor also appears to Joseph, alerting him to the fact that “the child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit” (1:20). Matthew goes on to relate that Joseph took Mary as his wife but “kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a son” (1:25), the obvious meaning of which is that he had no sexual relations with her until after the birth of Yeshua. The words “*until* she gave birth to a son” likewise imply quite clearly that Joseph and Mary did have normal marital relations afterwards. Matthew also relates an important fact regarding the naming of Yeshua: “and he (Joseph) called His name Yeshua” (1:25). Joseph’s naming Yeshua was an act of adoption, thus conferring upon Yeshua all the rights of legitimate sonship.⁶

Matthew also connects the notice of the virgin conception to the words of Isaiah 7:14, “Behold, a virgin (הַעַלְמָה, *ha ‘almah*) will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel” (see Matthew 1:23). The Hebrew word *‘almah* does not necessitate the meaning “virgin” but has a wider sense of “a young, unmarried woman.” *‘Almah* could, of course, include a virgin, as noted by the fact that Rebecca, Isaac’s wife, is called an *‘almah* (Genesis 24:43). Yet in reality the norm must have been that young, unmarried women in Israel were virgins, for if they were not, severe consequences could result (see Deuteronomy 22:13ff). Surely the Lxx translators took *‘almah* to mean “virgin,” for they translated it with *parthenos* which strongly implies virginity. It is interesting to note that every Greek version of the Tanach translates *‘almah* in Isaiah 7:14 with *parthenos* until the translation of Aquila (c. 130 CE) who changed *parthenos* to *neanis*, “young woman.” It is clear that Aquila’s translation was driven by a concern to deprive Christians of a “proof text” in regard to the virgin conception of Yeshua, and this in itself proves that *parthenos* was widely understood to mean “virgin.”⁷ But regardless of the

⁴ This verse (Mark 1:1) contains a textual issue. In some manuscripts, the phrase “Son of God” is not found. But the strong weight of the manuscript evidence supports its inclusion. C. E. B. Cranfield gives his view: “There are very strong reasons for regarding it as original.” (C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Cambridge Univ Press, 1959), p. 38.

⁵ It is common to speak of the “virgin birth,” but obviously, the real miracle was the fact that Mary became pregnant without sexual intercourse. Thus, the “virgin conception” speaks more directly to the reality of this miracle.

⁶ “Joseph, by exercising the father’s right to name the child, acknowledges Jesus and thus becomes the legal father of the child.” R. E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Doubleday, 1979), p. 139.

⁷ See A. Kamesar, “The Virgin of Is 7:14: the Philological Argument from the Second to the Fifth Century,” *JTS* 41, (1990),

difficulties that the interpretation of Isaiah 7:14 presents,⁸ there is no question about Matthew's use of this text in his re-telling of the birth of Yeshua. Matthew clearly understood the *'almah* of Isaiah to be a virgin, and that the prophecy looked forward to the conception and birth of Yeshua.

Luke's account is essentially parallel to Matthew's except that more attention is given to the interchange between Mary and the angel, and the glory of her Son is made more explicit: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David" (Luke 1:32). Yet a question arises as to Mary's response when told that she would conceive and bear a son. She responds: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The issue revolves around why Mary would have thought that the conception would occur before she was finally married to Joseph. As a betrothed woman, why did she not presume that the angel's promise would have been fulfilled after her legitimate marriage to her betrothed? To postulate that she had taken some kind of vow of perpetual virginity makes no sense—why then would she have entered into a betrothal with Joseph? Nor does the text give any indication that the angel's notice affected the conception immediately. He simply says, "you *will* conceive...." Is it possible that Mary's response betrays her sudden state of bewilderment at the messenger's appearance and the bombshell character of his message? We know that in other cases, people who were confronted by an angel had difficulty comprehending the event. Zechariah is said to have been "troubled" and gripped with fear (Luke 1:12). John (Revelation 22:9) mistakenly offers worship to his heavenly visitor. Peter, on the Mount of Transfiguration, blurts out that three shelters should be built, when if he had thought more clearly, he probably would not have made that suggestion (Luke 9:33). So it is reasonable to think that Mary, startled by the appearance of the angel, must have thought it strange to be talking about children when she was not yet married.

Despite the questions that the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke raise, one thing is unequivocal: they both present the conception of Yeshua as a miracle of creation performed by the Holy Spirit upon Mary. As such, the Gospel accounts of Yeshua's life conform to the descriptions found in the Epistles, which present a Christology that begins "from above." We actually should expect this to be the case since the Apostolic Scriptures were written after the resurrection of Yeshua. None of His disciples would have questioned His true humanity. They had walked with Him, eaten meals with Him, and shared the common aspects of life with Him. The questioning of His humanity awaited the rise of Gnosticism and its effect upon various segments of the emerging Church. Rather, what became amply clear to the Apostles following the resurrection of the Messiah was the full reality of His divine nature. As such, the descriptions found of Yeshua in the Apostolic Scriptures naturally begin "from above" and move to a Christology "from below."

Are Matthew and Luke Reliable Witnesses?

Confronted with the clear message of Matthew and Luke regarding the virgin conception of Yeshua, some are discontent to receive their witness as *bona fide*. Some very notable scholars have suggested that there might be reasons to suspect the authenticity of these birth narratives. Not, mind you, on the basis of actual readings in the extant manuscripts of the Apostolic Scriptures, but by postulating a theory and finding supposed textual "hints" to bolster it. The leading champion of this approach is Bart

51–75.

⁸ Donald MacLeod, *The Person of Christ* (IVP, 1998), p. 26 writes: "...while Isaiah 7:14f contains enough problems to drive any exegete to distraction, the reference to a miraculous birth is probably the one certainty in the passage."

Ehrman and his book *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*.⁹ In short, Ehrman's theory is that in the emerging Christian Church, there were numbers of factions or sects vying for pre-eminence in the establishment of Christian doctrine. Through the theological debates of the 2nd and 3rd Centuries, the "winners" established themselves as the voice of "orthodoxy." They therefore had the power to banish the doctrines of the "losers" and to expunge from the biblical texts any readings that supported their "un-orthodox" beliefs. Ehrman seeks proof for his theory by examining some textual variants and interpreting their existence as motivated by theological concerns of the scribes. Still, even he admits that the texts of Matthew and Luke, which affirm the virgin conception, are rock solid in terms of the extant textual witnesses.¹⁰

So what should we make of Ehrman's suggestion? Is the universal textual witness to the virgin conception of Yeshua the result of the "winners" destroying manuscripts that would have challenged the viability of this teaching? The answer is simple: arguments from silence tell us nothing. Surely one could conceive of such a scenario, but is there actually any evidence that manuscripts were changed or destroyed in order to affirm the theology of the winners? Every one of the examples Ehrman offers to support his theory can be explained on other grounds.¹¹ In other words, there is no real, concrete evidence that the manuscripts we have of the Gospels are actually the corrupted product of the theological "winners" of the later Christian Church. But even if, for the sake of argument, we were to concede the possibility that the "orthodox" Church of the 4th and 5th Centuries engaged in a wide-spread conspiracy to destroy all the manuscripts that gave witness to other than "orthodox" doctrines, can anyone actually believe that such a conspiracy would be 100% effective? Surely some manuscripts or scraps of manuscripts would have survived to bear witness to the "original" text. Further, the argument that the Gospels (particularly Matthew) were originally written in a Semitic language (Aramaic, Syriac, or Hebrew) and that their subsequent translation into Greek brought wholesale corruption, does not obtain. In regard to the subject at hand, that is, the virgin conception of Yeshua, all but one 5th Century manuscript of the Syriac Peshitta have the virgin conception plainly asserted by Matthew and Luke.¹² And if the late copies of Matthew in Hebrew¹³ offer any evidence of a supposed Hebrew original, they likewise all affirm the virgin conception, using almost identical language with the Greek texts of Matthew 1.

So the issue comes down to this: should we accept the Scriptures we have, based as they are upon the preponderance of clear, objective evidence, or dismiss the Scriptures on the basis of a conjectured scenario of history? The answer, it seems to me, is clear. The Scriptures we possess affirm the virgin conception without question, and thus, so should we.

Did the Early Messianic Sects Deny the Virgin Conception?

Several early Messianic sects are known to have existed during the period of the emerging Chris-

⁹ Published by Oxford Univ Press, 1993.

¹⁰ *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, pp. 54-55. In one early witness, a 5th Century Syriac manuscript, found at St. Catherine's Monastery on Mt. Sinai (sy^s), Matthew 1:16 reads "...Joseph, who was betrothed to a virgin Mary, begat Yeshua Who is called Messiah." Ehrman, along with the vast majority of textual scholars, agrees that this must have simply been a scribal error, for if a scribe had intended to excise the miraculous conception of Yeshua from this text, he hardly would have included the adjective "virgin" to describe Mary. See Ehrman, *Ibid*. Virtually all other manuscripts that contain the birth narrative explicitly state the virgin conception without variants.

¹¹ For an example of a scholarly critique of some of Ehrman's favorite "proofs," see Daniel B. Wallace, "The Gospel According to Bart," available at http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=4000 (accessed 2/20/07) and also available in pdf format at <http://www.torahresource.com>.

¹² See note 9 above.

¹³ I.e., the Even Bohan (also called the Shem Tov), the DuTillet, and the Münster texts.

tian Church, that is, in the 2nd Century and later. We know of these sects only through the writings of the Church Fathers, and they are most often referenced under the names Ebionites and Nazarenes, though Origen may refer to the two groups as sects of the Ebionites.¹⁴ They are distinguished, according to Origen, by the fact that one group denies the virgin conception while the other affirms it. Eusebius give us a similar notice,¹⁵ though Pritz suggests that Eusebius has misunderstood and mixed his sources¹⁶ and that this confusion continued to be followed by other Church Fathers who used the term “Ebionite” to refer to all “Jewish Christians.” Pritz’s conclusion is that

The Nazarenes were distinct from the Ebionites and prior to them. In fact, we have found that it is possible that there was a split in Nazarene ranks around the turn of the first century. This split was either over a matter of christological doctrine or over leadership of the community. Out of this split came the Ebionites, who can scarcely be separated from the Nazarenes on the basis of geography, but who can be easily distinguished from the standpoint of Christology.¹⁷

Thus, while one sect, the Ebionites, denied the deity of Yeshua and thus His virgin conception, the Nazarenes, who (according to Pritz) were the “direct descendants of the first Jewish believers in Jesus,”¹⁸ affirmed both the virgin conception as well as the deity of Yeshua. They likewise “seem to have had an embryonic, developing doctrine of the Holy Spirit” in harmony with that of the greater Church in that era. They also accepted the apostleship of Paul and his epistles as authoritative. In the works of the 4th Century Church Fathers, the Nazarenes are never condemned for their beliefs, only for their continued adherence to the Torah of Moses.

Thus, the idea that the messianic believers in the post-Apostolic era denied the virgin conception is not accurate. In fact, the earliest such sect, the Nazarenes, were known to have affirmed the virgin conception and the deity of Yeshua. Only later, a group (or groups) who divided away from the Nazarenes, referred to by some of the Church Fathers as Ebionites, was known for denying the virgin conception of Yeshua, His deity, and rejection of Paul and his epistles.

But in the end, we do not base our belief in the virgin conception of Yeshua upon the doctrinal position of various groups in the post-Apostolic eras. The clear teaching of the Gospels on the matter forms the primary basis for our affirmation of this important truth. That is to say, the Scriptures themselves are the sole foundation upon which we rest our beliefs.

Did the Virgin Conception Originate in Pagan Religions?

It is not uncommon for those who deny the virgin conception of our Messiah, Yeshua, to argue that the very notion of a virgin conception itself is derived from pagan religions. But before we look further into this argument, we should address its general viability. Such a theory rests on a premise that is

¹⁴ See Origen, *Contra Celsus*, 5.61 who writes of the “two-fold sect of Ebionites, who either acknowledge with us that Jesus was born of a virgin, or deny this, and maintain that he was begotten like other human beings....” See the discussion of Ray A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity* (Magnas, 1992), pp. 20–23. Other references to the Ebionites and Nazarenes in the writings of the Church Fathers and Historians are: Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 47; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.26.2; Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, 7.22; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.27; 6.17; Ephiphanius, *Panarion* 30.1.1; 2.1–8; 30:3, 7; 30:16.1; 30.26.1–2; 30.34.6.

¹⁵ *Ecclesiastical History* 3.27.2–6; cf. Pritz, *Ibid.*, pp. 23–24; Arland J. Hultgren and Seven A. Haggmark eds., *The Earliest Christian Heretics* (Fortress, 1996), pp. 119–20.

¹⁶ Ray Pritz, *Op. cit.*, p. 27.

¹⁷ Pritz, *Op. cit.*, p. 108.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

entirely untenable, namely, that the Apostles who wrote the birth narratives of the Gospels, had, for some unexplainable reason, accepted the pagan myths as true, and utilized them to describe the conception of Yeshua. Now it is clear that hundreds of years later, when the Christian Church had obtained possession of the throne of the Caesars, pagan influences came in like a flood. But to speculate that such influences had become the natural way of thinking for the Gospel writers themselves must be founded upon one of several possibilities: either (1) that the early influx of Gentiles into the believing community brought with them pagan ideas which the Jewish believers accepted, or (2) that the the Judaisms of the 1st Century, of which the early followers of Yeshua were a part, had taken certain pagan ideas into their own beliefs to such an extent that they formed an integral part of their basic theology. Either of these premises, necessary to sustain the argument that the pagan myths were the source for expressing the virgin conception of Yeshua, is clearly unfounded. First, the Apostolic Scriptures consistently teach that pagan beliefs and practices are entirely incompatible with faith in Yeshua. Paul, in one of his earliest epistles, writes concerning the well-known reputation of the Thessalonian believers that they had “turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God” (1Thessalonians 1:9). Indeed, the stance of the Jerusalem Council as recorded in Acts 15 makes it clear that any association with idols or idolatrous practices stood outside of the norm for the followers of Yeshua. Paul writes to the Corinthians that idolators have no place in the kingdom of God, then immediately affirms, “and such *were* some of you” (1Corinthians 6:9–10, emphasis added). Having become true believers in Yeshua, the Corinthians were no longer led astray by the deceptions of idolatry (1Corinthians 12:2). Thus, detachment from paganism was at the bedrock of what constituted the faith and theology of the Apostolic assembly.¹⁹ It is entirely out of the question, then, that the Apostles themselves, who penned the Gospel stories of Yeshua’s birth, would have, without second thought, incorporated into their story what they knew to be pagan myths.²⁰

Secondly, it is well known and received that the Gospel stories relating the birth of Yeshua are found in those sections of the Apostolic Scriptures that evidence a strong Jewish milieu, and that the earliest followers of Yeshua were themselves Jews with a strong connection to their Jewish history and theology. Happily, in our day, the almost unanimous voice of biblical scholarship admits this without reservation. To postulate, then, that the birth narratives incorporate a piece from the most degrading aspects of polytheistic mythologies is likewise to presume that the Judaism out of which the Gospels were written had not only accepted such pagan notions but had done so in such a way as to make them normative. But this suggestion is preposterous since it runs contrary to everything we know of the early Judaisms.

Since the facts militate against any suggestion that early Judaisms had so easily incorporated pagan ideas of a virgin conception into their theologies, some have suggested that the idea of a virgin conception was actually latent in early Jewish beliefs, based upon the birth stories of important figures (such as Isaac, Samuel, and Samson), or the Father/Son language of texts such as 2Samuel 7 and Psalm 2. Support for this view is often sought from the writings of Philo, a hellenistic Jewish philosopher roughly contemporary with Yeshua. With regard to the stories in the Tanach in which barren women are given

¹⁹ Cf. 1Corinthians 10:7, 14; 2Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 5:5; 1Peter 4:1–6; 1John 5:21.

²⁰ Furthermore, if for the sake of argument, one were to admit the possibility that the polytheistic mythologies of the pagan religions formed the basis for the virgin conception in the Gospels, one would be at a loss to explain why such paganism remained confined to this doctrine alone. Would it not be reasonable to presume that if such pagan beliefs formed the basis for the virgin conception that they also influenced many other teachings of the Apostles? If paganism is allowed to be the basis for the virgin conception, then one wonders why it is not also seen as the basis for the substitutionary death of Yeshua for His people; for the inspiration of Scripture; for the miracles recorded in the Gospels; for the resurrection and ascension of Yeshua; and for His return and the consummation of the kingdom, set as it is in apocalyptic language. For aspects of each of these essential teachings can find some parallel in the pagan myths. My point is simply that if paganism is sought as the source for the virgin conception in the Gospels, there is little reason to accept any of the Gospel accounts as theologically credible.

the ability to conceive, surely these demonstrate God's ability to give children through miraculous means. But, for instance, in the case of Isaac, the paternity of Abraham is clearly stated (Genesis 25:19). And in the birth narratives of Samuel and Samson, there is no indication whatsoever that the conception of either was apart from the means of normal procreation. Regarding the Father/Son texts of 2Samuel 7 and Psalm 2, these pertain not directly to a physical birth but to the coronation of a king, utilizing well-known Ancient Near Eastern motifs describing the relationship of a Great King to his Vassal. And the same may be said of those texts which describe God as the Father of Israel (for example, Exodus 4:22; Hosea 11:1). This metaphoric language describes the covenant relationship between God and His chosen people, for in this covenant God is viewed as the Great King and Israel as His Vassal.

Some have suggested that the writings of Philo offer a possible indication that the concept of a virgin conception was feasible within the Judaisms of his day. This is because in some of Philo's writings, he appears to teach that Isaac, Jacob, and others were conceived by divine fiat apart from an earthly father.²¹ However, to read Philo's words in this manner is entirely to miss his point and the allegorical and mystical hermeneutic that he employs. His purpose in *De Cherubim*, for instance, is to show how wisdom and transcendent knowledge is something implanted into the soul of man by God Himself. Nowhere does he teach that the actual material body of anyone was the result of a virginal conception. After surveying the relevant section from *De Cherubim*, Machen gives this summary:

Did Philo really believe that Isaac and the other Old Testament characters in question were actually born without human father by the direct agency of God? ... To maintain such a view would be to misunderstand the whole nature of Philo's allegorical exegesis. As soon as one attains the slightest insight into the allegorical method of using the Old Testament, one sees clearly that when Philo speaks of a virgin birth or a divine begetting in the passages which are now in view, he is thinking of a divine begetting of the soul of man, or a divine begetting of certain virtues in the soul of man, and not at all of a divine begetting of human beings of flesh and blood who actually lived upon the earth.²²

What then of the pagan myths themselves? The myths most often brought forward are those of Perseus, whose mother Danae conceived him by Zeus who rained gold upon her, or of Hercules (Herakles), who was the child of the mortal woman Alcmene and Zeus. These demigods, however, are not taken to be as close a parallel as are the stories of historical personages such as Plato²³ and Alexander the Great²⁴ who were said to have been conceived by a god consorting with their respective mothers. Josephus also reports a scandalous story involving a woman, Paulina, who was deceived by Decius Mudas through the help of the priests of Isis, into thinking that she was consorting with the god Anubis.²⁵ Some have pointed to this notice by Josephus as indicating the credence given, even among the upper classes of Roman and Greek society, to the stories of the union of mortal women with pagan gods.

To those who claim that the idea of the virgin conception of our Messiah derived from such pagan myths, a number of responses are in order. First, in none of these mythologies are the mortal women stated to be virgins.²⁶ The conception of the hero is simply said to be the product of the gods. More important, however, is the obvious fact that in all of these mythologies, the driving force for the union is

²¹ For example, see *De Cherubim* 40–51.

²² J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth* (Harper & Row, 1930), p. 303.

²³ *Diogenes Laertius*, iii.2, see Origen, *Contra Celsum* i.37

²⁴ Reported by Plutarch, *Vit. Alex.* ii.2–4. See Perrin, "Plutarch's Lives" in *The Loeb Classical Library*, vol. vii.

²⁵ *History of the Jews*, 18.3.4.

²⁶ The fact that Justin Martyr uses the term "virgin" when referencing these stories should be understood within his use of them for apologetic reasons (even if such use was doubtlessly shortsighted). See J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth*, pp. 335–36.

the shear, unabated sexual lust of the god for a mortal woman. It is unthinkable that such myths, full as they are of immorality of the basest sort, could have provided in the mind of any true Apostle a fitting explanation for the birth of the Messiah. Yet those who suggest that the pagan myths were the fountain from which the idea of a virgin conception sprang require this very thing.

Secondly, we should not be surprised to find in our world the counterfeit of the real. Did not the magicians of Egypt, through their demonic arts, counterfeit the first signs given by Moses and Aaron to Pharaoh (Exodus 7–8)? Is not the deception of astrology based upon the very luminaries God created to reveal His own glory? Are not all false religions manufactured in such a way so as to deceive by mimicking what only God Himself can do and provide? It should not surprise us, then, that the enemy would do all in his power to confound mankind by inducing the writers of pagan myths to lampoon the miracle of the incarnation in the most degrading fashion. But when the Gospel accounts are compared to those counterfeit fabrications, it is clear to any one of faith what is real and what is not; what is holy and what is profane.

The Virgin Conception and Yeshua as the Davidic Messiah

One of the arguments often raised against the Gospels' record of the virgin conception is the question of Yeshua's legitimate claim to Davidic lineage. Since the Messiah is clearly prophesied to be from the house of David,²⁷ anyone making a claim to be the Messiah would therefore need to be from that line. The virgin conception, some have maintained, makes it impossible for Yeshua to claim Davidic lineage since such lineage came through one's father. There are, however, a number of important answers to this line of reasoning.

First, it is clear that in some cases, one's tribal connection could be through the mother. The daughters of Zelophehad are an example. Having no son, the inheritance of the father is given to his daughters and the tribal inheritance passed through them to their sons.²⁸ But was Mary from the tribe of Judah? Even from the early centuries of the Christian Church, some have maintained that Luke 1:27 assigns Mary to the "descendants of David,"²⁹ understanding the phrase to describe Mary rather than Joseph:

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.
(Luke 1:26–27)

It is possible that all of the descriptions apply to Mary in this text: (1) virgin, (2) engaged to Joseph, (3) of the descendants of David, (4) named Mary. But the fact that the term "virgin" is repeated in the final clause would strongly suggest that "of the descendants of David" describes Joseph, not Mary. For if the phrase were descriptive of Mary, then it would be more nature for the final clause to read "and her name was Mary." The addition of "virgin" is necessary since the former clause related to Joseph. Thus, the argument that tribal lineage could be traced through the woman, true as it may be, most likely does not apply in the case of Yeshua.

Indeed, it is clearly the purpose of Matthew to trace the lineage of Yeshua through Joseph, for he begins with Yeshua as the "son of David" and ends with Joseph the husband of Mary. The fact that

²⁷ 2Samuel 7; 23:5, cp. Psalm 89; Isaiah 9:1–7; 11:1–9; Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15; Ezekiel 34:23–24; 37:24; Hosea 3:5; Psalm 110:1–4; 132:11; Matthew 22:42; Mark 12:35; John 7:42.

²⁸ Numbers 27:1–7; 36:1–12; 1Chronicles 7:14–19.

²⁹ Ignatius, *Ephesians*, xviii; Origen, *Dialogues*, xliii, xlv, c, cxx; Chrysostom, *Hom. Matthew*, ii.

Matthew emphasizes three periods of 14 generations (1:17) may also signal his intent to show that Yeshua was in the line of David, since 14 is the numerical equivalent of David's name.³⁰

But could Yeshua claim Joseph's lineage if he were not, in fact, his natural father? The answer is "yes," and this through adoption. The fact that Joseph rather than Mary names Yeshua (Matthew 1:25) signals his legal position as father to Yeshua. Adoption in the Ancient Near East was well known and gave the adopted person clear legal rights, including inheritance.³¹ Further, that adoption of orphans was known in ancient times is clear from historical as well as archaeological records. Leon lists four inscriptions from Jewish tombs in ancient Rome to this effect.³² R. Shimon ben Pazi (3rd Century Amora), in his midrash on 1Chronicles 1:14 is recorded as stating: "... anyone who raises an orphan boy or girl in his house, Scripture considers it as if he bore him."³³ Likewise, in the midrash,³⁴ the statement is made (pertaining to Israel viewed as an orphan), "he that brings up a child is called a father, and not he that gives birth."

This accords with the words of Luke 3:23, "When He began His ministry, Yeshua Himself was about thirty years of age, being, as was supposed, the son of Joseph..." The English word "supposed" gives the sense of something perceived but not true, and the Greek word *nomizo* which it translates can have this meaning. But the word can also describe what is generally held to be true or customary. We could just as well translate the phrase "he was, as commonly held, the son of Joseph,"³⁵ meaning that Joseph was recognized by his community as the legal father of Yeshua. Thus, from a legal status, Yeshua was the rightful heir of Joseph. And it is therefore in no way contrary to the message of the virgin conception that Mary and Joseph are called His parents.³⁶

Such a legal arrangement is by no means foreign to the Torah. In the laws of the Levirate, the children fathered by a deceased husband's brother are reckoned as *bona fide* heirs of the deceased even though they did come from him through procreation. Likewise, the adoption of Ephraim and Menassah by Jacob, through which they were granted the status of sons rather than grandsons and given their share in Jacob's inheritance, illustrates the point that through legal declaration, a person may be granted all the rights and privileges of sonship even without direct physical generation from the father.

But there is an additional aspect of Yeshua's relationship to Joseph that we must mention. For though Yeshua was legally the adoptive son of Joseph, He was so in a unique way. In normal adoptions, the child is actually the offspring of a human father and thus the "birth father" is distinguished from the "adoptive father." Not so in the case of Yeshua. The only human father that could lay legal claim to Him as a father was Joseph. And it would therefore be equally true that from an historical viewpoint, it could have only been through Joseph that Yeshua could be reckoned as in the line of David. Like King David himself, who was granted the promise of an eternal dynasty not through lineage but by God's sovereign choosing and appointment, so Yeshua was chosen and sent to be the fulfillment of that promise.

In fact, though the Gospels record that Yeshua was often called the "son of David,"³⁷ they offer not one instance in which His detractors contest His Davidic lineage. Surely those who wanted to disprove the claims of His messiahship could have easily done so if His Davidic lineage was openly suspect. That

³⁰ 4 = 7, 6 = 7, 4 = 7, giving a total of 14. Of the 1080 times the name David is found in the Tanach, the majority of times (794) it is spelled דוד rather than דוד.

³¹ See Frederick W. Knobloch, "Adoption" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (Doubleday, 1.76-79).

³² Harry J. Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome* (Hendrickson, 1995), pp. 232-33.

³³ b. *Megilah* 13a.

³⁴ Mid. Rab. *Exodus* 46.5.

³⁵ See *BDAG*, "nomizo," p. 675.

³⁶ Luke 2:27, 41, 43.

³⁷ Matt 1:20; 9:27; 15:22; 20:30-31; 21:9, 15; Mark 10:47-48; Luke 3:31; 18:38-39.

they did not, even at His final trial, fits the general tenor of the Gospels, namely, that Yeshua's Davidic connection was accepted within the Jewish community of His day, even by those who were opposed to Him.³⁸

Why is Paul Silent about the Virgin Conception of Yeshua?

A valid question that arises in the study of the virgin conception is why its mention is missing from the Pauline epistles. If this teaching were so foundational for the early Christology of the Apostles, would we not expect Paul to include it in his epistles? At first hearing, this question may seem to offer strong support to those who claim the virgin conception was the brainchild of the later Christian Church. But on further reflection, this argument loses its force.

First, while it is evident that Paul nowhere mentions the virgin conception directly, he clearly professes a Christology that accords with the Gospel accounts, one in which the pre-existence of Yeshua is well affirmed. He writes in Galatians 4:4 that "God sent forth His Son," and in Philippians 2:6–11 he incorporates a confessional hymn that explicitly sets forth the eternal pre-existence of the Messiah before His appearance as a babe in Bethlehem. In 2Corinthians 8:9 Paul portrays Messiah as "rich" yet becoming poor for the sake of those He would save. Surely the pre-existence of the Messiah and the virgin conception are two realities cut from the same theological cloth.

Secondly, Paul's epistles generally contain very little historical information about the life of Yeshua. He admits to having seen the Messiah (1Corinthians 9:1) and receiving his apostolic office directly from Him (Galatians 1:12). The closest he comes to recounting an historical event of Yeshua's life, however, is when he very briefly retells the story of His final Pesach. Yet even this, he says, was a truth handed on to him by others (1Corinthians 11:23–24). He regularly speaks of Yeshua's death and resurrection, sometimes adding His ascension and intercession (Romans 8:34), but he always focuses on the salvation accomplished by these momentous events rather than giving narrative descriptions. He never describes even one of Yeshua's miracles, nor does he mention the wilderness temptation or the transfiguration, nor any of the other significant events we recorded about Yeshua in the Gospels. But then why would we expect him to? The very disciples of the Master, themselves eyewitnesses to these events, were still alive in Paul's day and were themselves engaged in recording Yeshua's life and teachings. It would have been presumptuous for Paul to think that he needed to supplement the writings of Matthew or John when he had no first-hand knowledge of the events himself. Moreover, capable writers such as Mark and Luke, Paul's own associates, were busy collecting the testimony of the disciples and compiling them into the inspired texts we know as their Gospels. Rather than seeming odd, Paul's silence regarding the birth of Yeshua and the virgin conception is perfectly in line with the general character of his epistles. Demanding that Paul speak of the virgin conception is to require of him something he never intended to do. He doubtlessly left this to others he deemed more qualified for the task.³⁹

Thirdly, the very question why Paul never explicitly mentions the virgin conception may itself be based upon a faulty assumption, namely, that the virgin conception was widely known in the lifetime of Yeshua and the years immediately following. Once the Gospels were finished and widely circulated,

³⁸ The statements of some Pharisees in John 8:41, that "we are not born of fornication," may not be an underhanded slur on Yeshua's paternity (as is often thought) but a continuation of their degrading use of "Samaritan" to describe Him (cf. v. 48). A common line of argumentation against the Samaritans was to call their genealogy into question as well as to charge them with dabbling in magical/demonic arts.

³⁹ I am not suggesting by this line of argumentation that the Gospels were in their final, canonical form in Paul's time, nor that they were circulating in this form that early. What I am saying is that the process of gathering and preserving the history and teachings of Yeshua was certainly underway in Paul's lifetime, and it seems most reasonable to presume that he was aware of this on-going enterprise. See David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity* (Eerdmans, 1995).

surely this was known and received. Historically, however, only Mary and Joseph were recipients of this most private reality. And even if we should presume that Mary confided in her cousin Elizabeth (and the text does not explicitly state that she did), it seems probable that she would have done so because Elizabeth was a close and trusted relative and friend. We know from Luke 1:19, 51 that Mary was more private than public in her demeanor, “treasuring” these things in her heart. The birth of Yeshua took place in Judea, far from the eventual home of Mary and Joseph in Nazareth, so there is no reason to think that the events surrounding the birth were widely known. Even when returning to Nazareth, the threats of Herod may have offered good reason for Mary and Joseph to remain silent about Yeshua’s birth. And it seems probable that Joseph died before Yeshua entered into His public ministry since he is never mentioned in connection with it. Likewise, Elizabeth was old when she bore John the Baptizer, so Mary may have been left as the sole keeper of the secret of Yeshua’s miraculous conception. We might rightly ask, then, what would have prompted her to divulge that secret?

Would it have been in accord with the character of Mary...that after she had undergone experiences of the most mysterious kind and submitted to a command which ran counter to every instinct of her soul, she would proceed to engage in idle gossip about the matter, thereby subjecting herself and her holy child to the basest slander? Some women might have acted so, but hardly the one who “kept all these sayings, pondering them in her heart.”⁴⁰

We may well speculate that it was not until after the final events of Yeshua’s life; after Mary’s soul was pierced by standing at the execution stake of her son; after the unspeakable joy in the victory of His resurrection and outpouring of the Spirit at Shavuot of that year, that Mary realized it was time to speak. Now that the claims of Yeshua had been vindicated, rather than being fodder for wagging tongues the truth of the virgin conception of Yeshua would be understood in light of the corroborating events. Perhaps Mary first confided in her closest friends, requiring some time for the story to find its way to the ears of the Apostles and other leaders of The Way. But when the story was finally told, there is no indication that it aroused any opposition from those who were already disciples of the Master.

Finally, an argument based upon the silence of Paul really tells us nothing. While arguments from silence may at times help to solidify more substantive arguments, taken by itself it is very weak indeed. There is no reason to think that Paul’s silence on the matter in anyway contradicts or controverts the clear message of the Gospels regarding the virgin conception.

Does the Virgin Conception Matter?

Some might wonder why the virgin conception of our Messiah even matters in the long run. Isn’t it enough just to accept Yeshua as the promised Messiah of Israel and Savior of sinners? Does it really matter whether His conception within the womb of Mary was the result of the Holy Spirit or of Joseph? Yes, it matters. First and foremost because the Scriptures state this to be the case, and do so unequivocally. Our faith rests upon the bedrock of divine revelation and so we must take such revelation seriously. If God by His Spirit inspired the words of Matthew and Luke (and He did), then these words are eternally true and relevant, and to disregard them or excise them from the text as unworthy interpolations is to begin an unravelling of the Scriptures that will not end until they are entirely irrelevant.

Secondly, the virgin conception, as noted in the opening of this article, emphasizes a Christology that

⁴⁰ J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth*, Op. cit., p. 264.

begins “from above.” Far from explaining the mystery of the incarnation, however, the virgin conception introduces and confirms its inexplicable nature. It does so by signaling that the “man Messiah Yeshua” (1Timothy 5:2) did not have His beginning in the womb of Mary. That which was formed in her by the creative power of the Spirit was none other than the eternal Son of God. Isaiah’s promise of a “sign” is therefore powerfully fulfilled in the historical fact of the virgin conception, and regardless of the difficulties that Isaiah 7:14 presents to the modern exegete,⁴¹ in Matthew’s mind it foretold the stupendous miracle that would mark Yeshua as uniquely different than anyone else born within earth’s history. This is precisely Mark’s point when he records the words of the angel to Mary (Lk 1:35):

The angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.”

Thus, the miraculous conception was to signal that the Child would be at once human and the “Son of God,” that He is God with us (Immanuel, Isaiah 7:14), Miraculous One Who Counsels (*pele’ yo’eitz*), God Who is Victor (*El gibor*), Owner of Eternity (*avi-yad*), Prince of Shalom (*sar shalom*) (Isaiah 9:6[5]).

Thirdly, while the virgin birth speaks to the messiahship of Yeshua (tying Him back to the prophecies of Isaiah and thus to His divine nature), it likewise is essential for understanding His humanity. For though He was born of a virgin, He still was, in every way, “born of a woman” (Galatians 4:4), a phrase used by Paul to emphasize the true humanity of Yeshua. Yet in Pauline theology, the solidarity of the human race with Adam as the head of the race resulted in two realities: the imputation of sin to all of Adam’s offspring (Romans 5:18) and the imparting of the sinful nature to all who proceeded from him (Romans 5:12; Ephesians 2:3). This raises a question which is counterpart to the issue of Yeshua’s divine nature. For on the one hand we wonder how One Who is fully human could, at the same time, be divine. But the question may also be stated this way: could a person be fully human without at the same time possessing a sinful nature? The answer, of course, is that the sinful nature is not integral to the human nature, for Adam was created as completely human without at first possessing a sinful nature. Granted, he had the ability to sin, but before the fall into sin he was still a human being in every sense. So a sinful nature is not a necessary component of being human.

More to the point is the fact that Adam stood as the representative of the human race, his disobedience, and the death that resulted thereby, being imputed to all of his progeny: “...through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men...” (Romans 5:18). From a strictly theological standpoint, Yeshua could not be the progeny of Adam in the sense of having participated in the penalty of death that resulted from his transgression. In this sense, the virgin conception isolated Yeshua not only from the sin imputed to those related to Adam as the appointed representative of the race, but also from inheriting from Adam a sinful nature. In a mysterious and unexplainable fashion, Yeshua was born in a way similar to Adam’s being created: both were the result of divine fiat apart from the procreative act of man. As such, Yeshua was born without a sinful nature and stands as the “last Adam,” being the righteous representative for all who would be saved by Him.

So also it is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living soul.”
The last Adam became a life-giving spirit.
(1Corinthians 15:45)

⁴¹ For much help in understanding Isaiah 7:14, see Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus*, vol. 3 (Baker, 2003), pp. 17–32.