

5. jesus' birth: incarnation



I also am mortal, like everyone else, a descendant of the first-formed child of earth; and in the womb of a mother I was molded into flesh, within the period of ten months, compacted with blood, from the seed of a man and the pleasure of marriage. And when I was born, I began to breathe the common air, and fell upon the kindred earth; my first sound was a cry, as is true of all. I was nursed with care in swaddling cloths. For no king has had a different beginning of existence; there is for all one entrance into life, and one way out. Therefore I prayed, and understanding was given me; I called on God, and the spirit of wisdom came to me.

Wisdom of Solomon 7.1-7 (NRSV)

-- late 1st century, B.C.E.

After the Romans sacked Jerusalem in 70 C.E., Jewish refugees scattered all over the Mediterranean. With some of them went the teachings of a Galilean peasant named Jesus. As these stories spread throughout the Empire, Jesus' reputation came into direct competition with a variety of well-established religious figures. It shouldn't be surprising then that before long, stories similar to the biographies of pagan deities began to develop about Jesus' life, ministry, and the pre-requisite miraculous birth. In his book *Born Divine, The Births of Jesus & Other Sons of God*, Robert Miller writes, "...whether Christian or pagan: ancient readers, before they even opened the biography of a hero, could expect to find a story about his divine begetting."

By the 80s, various versions of Jesus' miraculous birth were widespread enough that Matthew and Luke could incorporate two versions into their gospels and enhance Jesus' credibility in the competitive world of First Century god-men.

But then along came John. A virgin birth was not nearly good enough for the Gospel of John. Here Jesus' dramatic celestial origin is set before creation, with Jesus' cosmic essence being linked to light itself. This claim may seem like an odd jump until one remembers that every Winter Solstice, the Romans would have been celebrating Saturnalia or "Sol Invictus" (the "Festival of the Unconquered Sun"). On the longest night of the year, pagans gathered to shout: "Hooray! It may SEEM like the darkness will triumph, but we know better. Starting today, the sun will start its gradual return to warm the earth and bring light to the world." How could such imagery be anything but irresistible for the writer of John? **Jesus** is the light of the world! The light will triumph! Years later, as Rome transitioned to Christianity, this kind of connection may have contributed to Christians adopting Saturnalia as a celebration of celebrating Jesus birth—a perfect occasion to celebrate the birthday of the one who was to bring light into the world.

READ John 1:1-5, 10-14

Competing Scripts

In the Christmas pageant "Matt & Lucy's Version Births," the traditional trappings of a standard children's pageant are co-opted to expose performer and audience alike to the two very different birth narratives of Matthew and Luke. The play opens with Matt and Lucy volunteering to help with the pageant. The Director asks them to run the rehearsal while she takes care of some last minute details. Little do they know that the Director will give them each a different script. As the shepherds wander on to sing their song, Matt is desperately fumbling through his script unable to find any mention of them: "Hey! Who are these guys?!?" Lucy calmly points out that they're right there on page two of *her* script. Hmmm. Then come the kings, and it's Lucy's turn to have a conniption. "There are no kings in *my* script!!" The rehearsal continues to unfold with conflicting story lines, characters, and settings crowding the stage. Matt and Lucy become increasingly frustrated until, at the end of the rehearsal, the Director returns to explain how having two different stories gives us an appreciation of the diversity of ways early Christians expressed their understanding of who Jesus was.

Unfortunately, most Christians have not read the stories closely enough to realize that church tradition and Hallmark cards have synthesized two stories into one. While it makes for a nice crèche, it doesn't reflect the intentions of those who pieced together the canon and who deliberately offered us two distinct birth narratives to show how Jesus was interpreted by two different communities.

Instead of two rich parables appreciated for their unique perspectives, most Christians only know the Cuisinart version: one story blended to mush.

An Ordinary Event

“The day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus by the Supreme Being as his father, in the womb of a virgin, will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter.”

-- Thomas Jefferson, 1823

Even with all their differences, there are a number of elements in the birth narratives that seem uncontested until one considers the contexts of history, culture, and simple vocabulary. In fact, even traditional Christianity’s bedrock idea of the Virgin Birth doesn’t hold up to close scrutiny. Matthew’s version of the virgin birth, for example, seems to have been a mistake—an *honest* mistake—but a mistake, nonetheless. The author of Matthew found what he *thought* was a reference to Jesus’ birth in the Book of Isaiah. Here’s the rub: Matthew was using a *Greek* translation of Isaiah where the translators had made an error in translating the Hebrew. They took the Hebrew word *almah* and translated it as the Greek equivalent of our English word “virgin.” The problem is, everywhere else in Hebrew Scripture, *almah* means “young woman,” not virgin. “Well, the young woman *could* be a virgin!” True enough, but then why didn’t they use the word for virgin, *betulah* (which they do in over 50 other places)? So, as Bill Nelson says, “Isaiah appears to have referred to a young woman becoming pregnant (a rather ordinary event).”

“WHAT?!?” Jesus’ birth ordinary?!? Mary’s virginity questioned?!? Is this some liberal extremist plot to destroy Christianity? Only if you think Paul and Mark are liberal extremists. St. Paul says that Jesus was “Born of a woman” – a human being. Mark doesn’t even bother mentioning Jesus’ birth, evidently because there wasn’t anything unusual to report. And who are our earliest witnesses and closest to the action? Paul and Mark. Matthew and Luke come along later and, as Dom Crossan says, “upgrade” Jesus to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with all the pagans who were born of virgins.

And yet, for many Christians, unquestioning belief in the historical fact of the virgin birth has become a litmus test of whether you’re a “true” Christian or not. Some might claim that to question the veracity of such belief is to exclude those who prefer a more conservative theological perspective. To the contrary: if believing in the literal historical virgin birth is that important to one’s faith, then by all means, people are encouraged to believe as they wish. However, if something like the Virgin Birth is *that* important to someone’s faith, then perhaps it would be worth going the extra mile to make sure all the information is accurate—especially since what most people believe regarding the Virgin Birth is based on a scribal error!

Truth be told, all the fuss about the Virgin Birth is essentially just a distraction from Jesus' message. Clearly, it seems that many Christians would rather argue about the intricacies of doctrine than actually *respond* to the call to follow Jesus.

Jesus con Carne

The bottom line is this: who Jesus was and *is* is not dependent on a miraculous birth story. At the heart of Christianity is a Divinity, a Spirit, a Source of Life that we've come to understand as "incarnational." That's the shorthand word theologians use for a complex idea, that of Jesus being the human expression of divinity. Even the word "Incarnation" can be broken down into "In" – "carne" – *with meat*. Like chili "con carne," Jesus is divinity with meat, with flesh.

In a way that is so incomprehensible that it has proven difficult to describe, the Mystery of God was perceived to be uniquely present in Jesus. Paul believed this happened with the crucifixion and resurrection. Mark maintained God's spirit came upon Jesus at his baptism. Matthew and Luke trace Jesus' divinity to his conception and birth. And as we read above, John's Gospel suggests that the Spirit of Christ had been present at the dawn of Creation. As we move along in time and see the tradition develop, each successive storyteller claims their own way of describing Jesus' divinity, each grasping at mystery, each expressing a unique vision of Jesus.

Gospel writers tried to explain it with virgin births. Ecumenical Councils tried to define it with formulas and creeds. Failing all that, we are finally left with what Jesus evidently experienced himself: the call to make the love of God real in the world. And while that might be a nice sentiment, what made it such a compelling message that people were willing to go out and risk their lives sharing it with others? Because the Spirit of Life was present in the person and teachings of Jesus in a way that can only be described as *transformational*.

The message of the incarnation is that even though each of us is a clumsy mix of assumptions, prejudices, missed opportunities, and good intentions, God can have God's way with us. The truth to the Christmas affirmation, "God is with us," *Emmanuel*, is rooted in the sense that the Divine is involved in our affairs, gets dirty with us, and sometimes, just sometimes, even effects *beauty* in and through us—because the Spirit is incarnate in us.

Tolstoy on Incarnation

Once upon a time, there was an old shoemaker named Martin. He lived in a one-room basement apartment in a large city in Russia. All he ever saw through his one window looking out on street was snow—and feet walking by.

Martin's wife was dead and his only son had died at 13. He was depressed. But one day a holy man came with a Bible he wanted rebound. While reading the gospels that night Martin fell asleep.

"Martin!" a voice called to him in a dream, "Look in the street tomorrow, I will come visit you." He awoke the next morning, convinced the voice had been that of Jesus. Martin faced the day with great anticipation.

Stepping to the stoop to keep a sharp lookout, he noticed old Stephen, a retired soldier, shoveling snow, and invited him in for a cup of tea. The conversation was strained as Martin, distracted, kept looking out the window, waiting for Jesus. The morning passed. No Jesus.

Martin then noticed a poorly dressed woman with baby and invited her in. It's a bitterly cold day, and he offers her his wife's coat, a blanket for baby, and some cabbage soup. All the while, Martin kept glancing out the window, expectantly waiting. Early Afternoon. No Jesus.

An old woman passes by, carrying a basket of apples and a sack of woodchips for fire. Martin sees a boy snatch one of her apples, but the woman grabs him and there's a scuffle. Martin runs out and convinces the woman to let him go. They strike a deal that if the boy carries the woodchips for her, she'll give him an apple. Martin felt good to have helped them settle their differences. And for a moment he'd forgotten what he'd been waiting for. Then he remembers. It's late afternoon, and still no Jesus. He puts his tools away, sweeps the floor, and sets the table for cabbage soup.

Feeling foolish for having believed that Jesus would come, Martin lights a lamp and begins to read from the Bible: "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger, and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of these, the least of my brothers or sisters, you did it to me.'"

Leo Tolstoy's story of Martin the Cobbler is entitled, "Where Love is, There is God also." What we *do*, for better or for worse, is the measure of the incarnation in the world. The incarnation is finally not just about Jesus alone, but about us. Wherever we find ourselves, the Mystery of Life dwells within us, not limited to a time or place, but a part of every aspect of our lives. And wherever there is love, there is God also.

Discussion Questions (following each DVD chapter)

Chapter 1

If it's not that important whether or not things happened exactly the way the gospel writer recorded it, what is the purpose of the nativity accounts in Matthew and Luke?

In Luke's birth narrative, Luke essentially contrasts Jesus and Caesar in asking, "what kind of Son of God do you want?" Discuss.

Describe some of the other divine births and miraculous portents common in the ancient world.

What is Matthew looking to say in his telling of the birth story?

Chapter 2

According to Brueggemann, what is Luke up to in his telling of the birth of Jesus?

Both Crossan and McLaren describe how Jesus and the incarnation provide a "clearer vision of God." Discuss.

Describe the characteristics of pre-critical naiveté.

Chapter 3

What are the implications of “doing Christology all over again”?

Spong describes at least five different Biblical explanations of how “God got into Jesus”: Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. Explain.

Name some of the reasons why the virgin birth is not to be taken literally.

What does the “Ground of Being” have to do with the incarnation?

Chapter 4

If the fuss over the Virgin Birth is just a distraction from the call to follow Jesus, what’s the point of the incarnation?

Describe Spong’s understanding of the divine/human continuum.

How does Athanasius’ thought fit in with the “continuum” suggested by Spong?

The lack of humanity in the church drives Dave Tomlinson crazy. Discuss.

If sharing a meal around a table, presence, and welcoming the stranger are among the basic characteristics of the incarnation, what are the implications for the future of being a follower of Jesus?

Additional Questions

How is a metaphorical reading of the Birth Narratives going to affect your celebration of Christmas?

How would re-imagining “God as the life power itself, the power of love itself” change our understanding of incarnation?

***Saving Jesus Redux* Theme Question:**

What element or learning from this session do you think will be most important in “Saving Jesus” in the 21st century?

For further study:

Make two columns on a piece of paper. Identify them at the top as the Matthew and Luke columns. Don't bother with Mark and John – they'd simply be empty columns. Read Matthew and Luke's birth narratives and note in each column the chronology, the characters, and major events. From your knowledge of the gospels in general and from what you've discovered in this exercise, what can you surmise about the message, the influences, and the theology of Matthew and of Luke?