

## JESUS' VIRGIN BIRTH: MIRACLE OR MYTH OR...?

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OCCASION: I've been asked to comment on a proposed "Confessing Christ" catechism.

1 On the parabola of the incarnation (God's coming to, & leaving, earth), both ends have **transcendence stories** logically mixing heaven & earth. "Logically" in the sense that it would be illogical to the heaven-to-earth-to-heaven Story, the incarnation, to have the subordinate beginning-&-end stories *unmixed*, i.e. only of heaven or earth.

2 To the "modern" (Enlightenment) mind, both the **beginning-story** (the virgin birth) & the **end-story** are offensive, violating the law of parsimony: there are other ways to explain Jesus' unusualness. True, if the project is (as the Jesus Seminar assumes) to explain him: it's quite otherwise if the project is, as we Christians claim, to worship him, to worship God in & through him. In the latter case, what is to the former perspective myth is, rather, miracle (whatever account[s] one gives of the parabola's beginning-&-end transcendence-stories). The theological project here is paradoxical: it is to make, of the incarnation's two-ended "miracle," the best sense we can manage. (Nothing odd or dissembling about this. Astrocosmologists try to make, of the stars, the best sense they can: theologians, the best sense of why the stars & why human life & why & how the Faith.)

3 Religions & philosophies **offend** one another: "offense" is the name of the bump where they collide. As a Christian, I am offended by the "modern" materialistic-atheistic paradigm. My earliest (Christian) forebears experienced, & understood, the offense their Jewish & pagan neighbors took ("took": they didn't intend to give it) at their witness, worship, & work. The NT word for it is *σκανδαλον scandalon*: Virgin Birth & Resurrection, in the Jesus story, are, to outsiders, unacceptable "scandalous" mixings of heaven & earth in which earth is miraculously transformed by heaven.

4 If you are (in the said way) "scandalized" by both Virgin Birth & Resurrection, the Incarnation is for you only a metaphor: both your feet are outside the miracle-as-fact circle ("fact" here meaning direct divine physical transformation, an idea scandalous to "science," i.e. to the Western ["modern"-materialist] paradigm of knowledge).

5 So where are you if you straddle, with one foot in (affirming the NT's Resurrection) & one foot out (viewing the Virgin Birth only as metaphor of the uniqueness of God's intention in Jesus' birth)? This is the position of almost all on the national steering committee of the UCC's retrieval movement, "Confessing Christ" (in contrast to the UCC's "Biblical Witness Fellowship," whose creed puts both feet in the miracle-as-fact circle anent both Virgin Birth & Resurrection).

6 These straddlers are in a logically weak position: miracle (physical transformation) at Jesus' earth-end but not at his earth-beginning? A perhaps legitimate-honorable escape is to point to the category of mystery, which transcends the transcendence-stories. But the "mystery" escape threatens to reduce the Resurrection down to the alleged myth-level of the Virgin Birth: the cost of the escape may be, theologically & devotionally, too high.

7 "The Great Spirit," in a Native American saying I cherish, "puts the cure near the disease." Materialism, which began among the Ionian Greeks almost three millenia ago & bloomed in modern "natural sciences," especially physics, is now under severe challenge by postmodern physics (beginning, I would say, with Arthur Compton's 1920 Nobel Prize). "Miracle" is no longer captive to the neat old knowledge/faith, fact/value, science/miracle polarities. When everything's mysterious, is not everything also miraculous? And hasn't the fact/metaphor debate been transposed into a new key? And doesn't this breathe new life into Credo [I believe] in the Virgin Birth, as well as the Resurrection?

8 Wider-angle: Things are tough all over when it comes to transcendence-stories (even current astrophysicists' Big Bang/Crunch, which are only analogies from the nontranscendent). Our Christian fore-&-aft (Virgin Birth & Resurrection) transcendence-stories (under the general heading of "Incarnation") have a special, but not unique, burden of proof ("proof" having now come on hard times, no longer captive to the materialist claims of empirical science; & even "empirical" has opened up to new reaches of meaning, including transcendence-experience, motive of transcendence-stories).

9 Time now to quote, on V.B., from said catechism (2nd line of this Thinksheet): "17. 'He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit.' Can we express 'conceived' in other terms? Yes, by this we mean God's joyous life, by the power of the Holy Spirit, was infused into the world." This violates the hermeneutic rule "When the plain meaning makes common sense, seek no other sense." Confirmands (age 13+) have had enough sex ed to know what "conceived" means, but not enough philosophical ed to know what "infused" means! The answer also violates another hermeneutic rule "Stay within the story." Within the story here, the plain meaning is that a woman gets pregnant, & the male factor is named (in the First & Third Gospels) as "the Holy Spirit." For this catechesis committee, the horror of God-as-**male** justifies both violations: for me, it justifies neither. The plain fact is that God is masculine throughout the Bible, though male only here & in Jesus.

Further, this catechism is, by its "17," forced to fudge also its "18. 'and born of the Virgin Mary.' Is the Virgin birth an essential doctrine to the faith? Yes, by Virgin we mean that Jesus' coming was a result--not of human passion or biological accident, but by the intentional will of God. Through the birth of Jesus, we see God was humbled, and exalted." This answer bypasses the Synoptic Gospels in favor of a heretic-Manichaean split, anent procreation, between the (good) "intentional will of God" & the (bad) "human passion or biological accident." Besides insulting my parents, this anti-sex perversion of the Christian doctrine of sexuality demeans (pro)creation (except in the instance of Jesus) as outside "the intentional will of God." Again, the assumption being that Jesus came by Joseph/Mary sexual intercourse, what's to be made of Joseph/Mary cold sex (without "human passion")? And can you imagine this mess bouncing around the brainpan of a 13-year-old?

10 Yes, I should put up or shut up: what're my answers? For starters: "17....Unlike ours, Jesus' conception was by a direct & special act of God, for he himself was God come among us 'in the flesh' ('incarnation' is the Latin word for it)." (This, in response to [my wording] "What do we Christians mean when we say that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit?") "18....A 'virgin' is someone who has not had sexual intercourse. The Holy Spirit's impregnating of Mary was not a physical act: the Holy Spirit does not have a physical body. But neither had Joseph's body ended Mary's virginity when Jesus was born. That's why we call this story the 'Virgin Birth.' Some Christians step outside the story & say that Joseph was Jesus' 'real' father; but the story fits better with the way Jesus called God his Father." (This, in response to [my wording] "What do we Christians mean by the Virgin Birth?")

11 Jesus' virgin birth (better, virginal conception) is not docetic (the heresy claiming that Jesus only "seemed" to be human): his physical body had an agent (Mary) at the beginning & an agent (Pilate) at the end....The birth stories function to teach the deity of Jesus, as does his pre-existence in Jn....The NT has other hints of Jesus' unusual-special coming into the world. E.g., Phil.2.7 (the "emptying" [kenosis]) & Heb.1.2 NRSV ("a [or "the"] Son)....Inherently, Jesus' Virgin Birth does not have the public-evidential standing his Resurrection has. Nor the importance: the Resurrection is the founding fact-event of our Christian Faith. But the creeds' parallelism of the two gives the impression (creates the illusion) that the two doctrines have equal standing. This is grossly exaggerated in the Protestant fundamentalist use of the Virgin Birth as a shibboleth, a test of faith (& the Faith)....The great Roman Catholic Gospels-scholar, Raymond Brown, argues for the historicity of the Virgin Birth on the grounds that (1) the Matthew & Luke birth-stories are independent of each other & (2) the virginal conception is the only point of tangency between the two. Biblical criticism is not decisive, he says: people decide for or against the Virgin Birth's historicity on the basis of the inspiration of Scripture, church teaching, or philosophical attitude towards divine intervention....The NT's focus on Jesus' coming is christological, a focus easily lost by modernity's biological (sex-organ) interest (as it was by antiquity's interest, foreign to Scripture, on the sex-as-sin notion, whence came the idea that Mary's conceiving was "immaculate"). The Gospels' virginal-conception stories intend no insult to man/woman sex: no biological offense....And no theological offense (e.g., docetism [above])....And no political offense, though a story representing heaven impregnating earth is "politically incorrect" in representing heaven in only one gender, & seeming to slight the human male.