



The Synoptic Gospels: A Journey Into the Kingdom

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*Volume I:
From Bethlehem to
the River Jordan*



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THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS: A JOURNEY INTO THE KINGDOM: VOLUME I: FROM BETHLEHEM TO THE RIVER JORDAN.
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From Denial to Acceptance: Two Journeys to Fatherhood

We have spent some time with the story of Zechariah in the Gospel According to Saint Luke. We have also been introduced to Joseph, though only in passing. Now, we will join each of them in two dramatic journeys where they move from an initial denial of the fatherly roles to which they are called toward accepting, then even embracing, that role. In the case of Zechariah, the journey will involve moving toward living in the messianic age Gabriel has already delivered the message of. In the Gospel According to Saint Matthew, we will see how he first receives an explanation of why he responds to an unexpected explanation of why his journeys go from false starts to faithful response.

to fulfill some mission. Does this separation of John from a normal upbringing portend something about his life? Is it a formative experience that prepares him to proclaim the coming of the Lord? Or, is it a metaphorical return to the desert of repentance, where the Israelites wandered with Moses for forty years as they journeyed from faithlessness to covenant? Have you experienced a formative time of separation and preparation?

We now turn to The Gospel According to Saint Matthew to witness the experience of another man who will find himself disconcerted by news of impending fatherhood.

† MATTHEW 1:18–25 The Birth of Jesus, from Joseph’s Perspective

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said,

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

1. What does it mean to say Joseph is a “righteous” man?

2. What do you make of Joseph's dream encounter with an angel?

3. How do you understand the idea of prophecy as used in this setting?

In this segment of Matthew, we see both some similarities to Luke's gospel, and some differences. The similarities include an angelic messenger bearing remarkable news about a virgin giving birth. The differences include the audience to whom the angel gives this news and the perspective from which it is heard. As we shall see, Matthew's birth narrative is told from Joseph's perspective, while Luke's birth narrative is told from Mary's. Another major difference is that Matthew contains no references to the birth of John the Baptist.

While containing some of the same subject matter, Luke's and Matthew's birth narratives are not actually parallel stories; the texts do not show any signs of having flowed out of a common stream or tradition. They share no specific material, wording, or even perspective. Thus, they are not parallels that begin with a shared literary source that each evangelist uses when telling his narrative, and that end with the form taken in the synoptic Gospels. However, we consider them together here because they fall in the same general time frame and involve similar subject matter.

Preliminary Matters

The first verse of The Gospel According to Saint Matthew declares, in the context of his genealogy, that the Messiah has come and his name is Jesus. At the end of that seventeen-verse pericope, the genealogy returns to the coming of the Messiah as a defining moment in the history of the Israelites. Having prepared the reader for the nature of the topic he is to address, Matthew now returns to the identity and birth of the Messiah in chapter 1, verse 18. By bracketing the genealogical detail within these Messianic references, Matthew invites the reader to pay close attention to what the material might be saying about Jesus, and how certain issues about his identity are to be addressed in the birth narrative as a whole.

Joseph's Dilemma and his "Righteous" Response

Before we begin to explore an array of ideas about the virgin birth through historical, literary, theological, and communal lenses—those tools that we aspire to use to engage in the responsible interpretation of Scripture—let us consider this: Matthew tells us that Joseph has learned his fiancé, Mary, is pregnant. And he knows he is not the father. Nor can he conjure up an acceptable explanation about how she came to be in this condition. He receives this painful information in first-century Jewish culture, a society not known for permissiveness. Even in the wider Greco-Roman world, which, on balance, was not as particular about matters of sexual behavior, it is difficult to imagine that an engaged woman being pregnant, and her fiancé knowing he is not the father, would ever be acceptable.

But, it is not difficult to imagine Joseph going through stages of grief and anger at the knowledge of Mary's pregnancy, maybe even plunging into despondency for a time before arriving at a decision about what to do. He will dismiss Mary, put her quietly aside so she won't be disgraced. Joseph makes this decision even though he has been dealt a great blow, not only in matters of the heart, but also in ways that can affect virtually every aspect of his life. Then, as now, marriage involved serious personal, emotional, familial and financial considerations. It involved issues around family life, lineage, procreation, care for the elderly, economics, companionship, and property management and distribution. Particularly in the Mediterranean world of the first century, there were also questions of honor and shame. The camp in which Joseph finds himself is painfully apparent.

In Joseph's decision to put Mary aside quietly rather than to disgrace her publicly, we see evidence of spiritual love, desiring someone's highest good despite what they might have done. Also remember that people in similar circumstances to Joseph's do not always act compassionately and that the consequences can be anything but just.

Take, for instance, a literary example. In the Shakespearean comedy, *Much Ado About Nothing*, young Claudio has been forced to confront a rumor that his lady love, sweet Hero, has been seen in the arms of another man on the eve of their planned nuptials. Claudio does not forgive, and does not even follow Joseph's example of deciding to quietly break the engagement. Rather, Claudio responds in hot anger and humiliates Hero in the presence of the wedding party, leaving her in a state of disgrace. We soon learn that Claudio's rash behavior is based on a canard. Yet, in his ignorance, he had insisted on believing it, beating a pathway leading all toward tragedy. The unbearable situation is redeemed only by good fortune revealing the true facts, and Claudio tasting more than a touch of hard-earned and much-deserved humility.

And so we have Joseph, who, like Claudio, is confronted with a circumstance of the most wrenching nature. How will he answer?

1. Joseph's character is described as "righteous." It is a trait that guides him toward a humane response to Mary. How, precisely, does Joseph display righteousness?
2. What is the quality of that character trait? Can you give modern-day examples of this same quality of righteousness?
3. Could you respond to a serious personal wrong with the kind of spiritual love that Joseph displayed toward Mary?



The state of betrothal in first-century Judaism carried many more legal entanglements between bride and groom than our modern-day practice of engagement. Betrothal was more formalized and the financial involvements more complex. The gravity of this bond suggests that deviations from expected behavior would have more serious consequences than those that occur in modern engagements. Hence, the Judaic law imposed extremely serious punishments for certain sexual conduct, including by an engaged woman. The OT law is declared in Deuteronomy 22:13–29:

¹³Suppose a man marries a woman, but after going in to her, he dislikes her ¹⁴and makes up charges against her, slandering her by saying, "I married this woman; but when I lay with her, I did not find evidence of her virginity." ¹⁵The father of the young woman and her mother shall then submit the evidence of the young woman's virginity to the elders of the city at the gate. ¹⁶The father of the young woman shall say to the elders: "I gave my daughter in marriage

to this man but he dislikes her; ¹⁷now he has made up charges against her, saying, 'I did not find evidence of your daughter's virginity.' But here is the evidence of my daughter's virginity." Then they shall spread out the cloth before the elders of the town. ¹⁸The elders of that town shall take the man and punish him; ¹⁹they shall fine him one hundred shekels of silver (which they shall give to the young woman's father) because he has slandered a virgin of Israel. She shall remain his wife; he shall not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives.

²⁰If, however, this charge is true, that evidence of the young woman's virginity was not found, ²¹then they shall bring the young woman out to the entrance of her father's house and the men of her town shall stone her to death, because she committed a disgraceful act in Israel by prostituting herself in her father's house. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

²²If a man is caught lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman as well as the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel.

²³If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, ²⁴you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death, the young woman because she did not cry for help in the town and the man because he violated his neighbor's wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

²⁵But if the man meets the engaged woman in the open country, and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die. ²⁶You shall do nothing to the young woman; the young woman has not committed an offense punishable by death, because this case is like that of someone who attacks and murders a neighbor. ²⁷Since he found her in the open country, the engaged woman may have cried for help, but there was no one to rescue her.

²⁸If a man meets a virgin who is not engaged, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are caught in the act, ²⁹the man who lay with her shall give fifty shekels

of silver to the young woman's father, and she shall become his wife. Because he violated her he shall not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives.

The Judaic law does not bode well for an unmarried pregnant woman, especially one who is engaged. If Joseph weds Mary, and she is found to have been pregnant prior to the marriage—and, therefore, not a virgin—then her penalty under religious law is death.³ To make matters worse for Joseph, the term “righteous,” as used in first-century Judaism, related more closely to compliance with the Jewish law than it did to faithfully observing a sense of justice that arose, not only out of that law, but also out of wisdom and practicality and compassion and how human happiness is affected by the direction one chooses. These more complex notions about justice—that are not dependent solely on the written word—involve balancing principles and priorities while developing a righteous response.

In deciding to dismiss Mary because of her condition, Joseph is choosing a course that strays from a strict application of the Judaic law. This approach to the problem might well expose Joseph to the accusation that he is something quite other than “righteous.” Stoning Mary—not setting her quietly aside—was the obvious way to observe the law. After all, who would believe her defense?

What are we to make of this decision? First, Joseph has diverged from a wooden, or literal, interpretation of Scripture and ventured into the cloudy and hazy world where the religious law is respectfully considered, but matters of personal judgment are also taken seriously. This is an approach to decision-making that literalists, legalists and authoritarians through the ages have not encouraged. Joseph has decided to do something other than strictly apply the law to what he believes to be the facts, and is still called a righteous man, so we must assess what this concept of righteousness is coming to mean. In this passage, we see for the first time the new righteousness that the Gospel According to Saint Matthew advocates. We see a certain honor paid to the Old Covenant, but the New Covenant emerges in a way that goes to the core intent underlying the written legal precepts. Matthew leaves some old understandings of the law behind and embraces new ones, particularly as Jesus declares them in the Sermon on the Mount.⁴ And, as we shall eventually see in Matthew, that new righteousness is measured by the human need for both justice and mercy. Jesus himself will declare that the new law is the law of love.

³We do not know the extent to which this law was enforced. Even if the standards were more lax in practice than as written, the codified penalties are so harsh that it is safe to assume people did not lightly brush them aside when pondering prohibited conduct and its potential consequences.

⁴Matthew, unlike Mark, will not advocate for radical breaks with some aspects of the Judaic law.

A Change of Direction: An Angelic Message

Having reached a resolution to his predicament that begins to establish the new righteousness, Joseph hopes to find some relief in sleep. It is in a dream state that he receives news from an unnamed angel about the circumstances underlying Mary's pregnancy. The circumstances are not what he had reasonably assumed. The hand of God is in the mix as the angel describes that Mary's condition has been created by the Holy Spirit. Joseph is told only of poignant and mysterious circumstances, but given no concrete explanation about how it has occurred. He is also told to take Mary as a wife, and to name the son "Jesus" because he will save his people from their sins. The name "Jesus" is derived from the Hebrew word "savior," and so is descriptive of the role the child will play in God's saving action. We are not told, though, how this saving action is to occur.

Matthew's declaration about prophesy and fulfillment are not given to Joseph, only to the reader. We also see that Joseph, who speaks nary a word (unlike his more talkative wife-to-be, whom Luke describes), follows the directions given him, and the will of God is carried out.

In this preternatural atmosphere, it is easy to assume that Joseph had some special knowledge about the mysterious, and equally easy to overlook that he was acting largely on faith. There is no objective way Joseph can verify that his dream involved a revelation of God through an angel. It might have been "an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of underdone potato," as Dickens' Ebenezer Scrooge would say, that caused this and Joseph's other odd dreams. The ideas about taking Mary as his wife, and naming the child Jesus, might easily have dissipated with the morning light and a return to the "normal" events of the day. Joseph could simply have rationalized his way right out of the mystery. But fortunately for all involved, including Joseph and his place in history, he followed the path put before him.

The Virgin Birth

Let us now address the virgin birth in a more comprehensive way. It is not a topic without controversy. To some people, a literal understanding of the story is a matter of fundamental importance to Christian faith. To others, the whole notion of a virgin giving birth sounds so much like superstition, and displays such an aversion to human sexuality, that it undermines the credibility of at least part of the Christian story. To still others, it is considered a matter of

considerable consequence on a symbolic or theological level, regardless of whether a biological miracle has occurred. We will start with the historical and theological setting, and proceed from that point toward a fuller understanding of the story's significance for contemporary Christian faith. In the process, we will seek to interpret this story, and the related theories and doctrines, in light of literary composition, theological meaning, historical context, and the concerns of the community of the faithful to whom Matthew's gospel is addressed.

The virgin birth appeared fairly late among the Christian writings that found their way into the canon. The letters of Paul, which comprise the oldest works in the New Testament, contain no reference to a virgin birth. Nor does the Gospel According to Saint Mark, the oldest of the canonical gospels. The fourth gospel, which most scholars concur was the last one to be written, also contains no mention of a virgin birth. Only in Luke and Matthew do we read these stories. Why did these two evangelists choose to tell their stories in this way, while the other New Testament writers either knew nothing of the tradition, or chose not to include it?

Luke and Matthew tell the story because it adds something to their compositions. We have already seen how the Lukan birth narrative sets the stage for the rest of that gospel. For Luke, John and Jesus are paired figures, with John representing the grand tradition and culmination of the Old Order, and Jesus representing the dawning of the New. In the remainder of Luke's birth narrative, we will also see how parallels are drawn between Jesus and Augustus Caesar, as the reader is called to grapple seriously with the relative priorities of the claims of the Kingdom of God, and the claims of a worldly empire.⁵

Matthew also asks his audience to make a similar comparison. If anything, his contrast is considerably stronger than Luke's, as he displays a "conflict of kingdoms" theme throughout his work that Professor Boring, in his commentary on Matthew, shows is critical to the gospel story. For instance, the Herodian royal line in Matthew is uniformly portrayed in a negative light, beginning in the birth narrative. Jesus is presented as a royal figure to whom true homage is rightfully paid, whereas Herod is depicted as an evil monster. In this way, Matthew's beginnings invite (or even compel) the reader to see immediately a conflict of kingdoms, much as Luke's beginnings invite one to observe a change from the Old Order to the New, and a contrast between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Men. Both birth narratives provide a foretaste of what the rest of their Gospels will hold.

In telling of a virgin birth as part of their larger infancy narratives, these two evangelists add considerable weight to their gospels. Luke and Matthew have both chosen to underscore

⁵Even though Luke makes clear how we are called to set our priorities along these lines, he judiciously avoids using loose words that might call the Jesus movement into disrepute.

the infancy narratives by telling of a virgin birth, surrounded by angelic visitations, celestial signs, and other symbols forecasting an historical turning point and communicating something about the life of Jesus. It was the Greco-Roman practice to look back upon the events surrounding the birth of a great figure in order to find clues about his destiny. When the Christian movement ventured beyond its primarily Jewish beginnings, and made headway into the predominately gentile culture, the story of Jesus took on different hues so that the new audiences could understand its import and participate in it properly.

By the last quarter of the first century, when the gospels of Matthew and Luke were being written, Jesus was being proclaimed in the gentile world as a figure worthy of worship. It was a world accustomed to stories of divine births attended by unique signs. It was also a world that demanded credentials. Were there any such signs and credentials to be found in the story of Jesus? How could the Church establish for the surrounding culture the idea that the figure of Jesus was one worthy to follow, to worship?

The pagans told myths of their gods coupling with human women to sire demi-gods and heroes (witness Hercules and a plethora of other mythological figures). Yet, the trappings of the holy were not limited to remote figures of a mythological past. Relatively recent figures were the subjects of larger-than-life stories. Julius Caesar was thought to be the offspring of a god and a mortal woman. And after death, in the case of both Julius and Augustus Caesar, the Roman Senate declared them to be gods. So, the culture held, when one looked back upon the lives of the “divine” figures of the era to their beginnings, one could see the presence of divine actors on the stage.⁶

This line of tradition, at least in its popular Greco-Roman form, would not sit easily in Jewish thought. To the Jews, God was transcendent and pure, qualitatively different from the flawed deities of the classical world. Could there be a peaceful co-existence between the Jewish conception of God and a Roman one? The Romans expected to see supernatural signs dating from the beginning of one’s life that set destiny’s patterns. Could the Christian movement meet this expectation without straying into pagan ideas that suggested a certain physical intimacy in the relations between gods and women?

Luke and Matthew showed that the answer was yes. There was considerable Jewish tradition around God blessing aged and childless patriarchs and matriarchs with children. These blessings also said something about the children’s extraordinary destinies. We have seen

⁶We should not be too quick to scoff at these traditions. The Greco-Roman conception of deities was not necessarily grounded in literalism. Practitioners of ancient faith-rites often took mythological stories as symbolic accounts about the great issues of life, regardless of whether the events reported actually occurred in history.

this in Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Elkenah and Hannah. The children of all turned out to be great leaders of the Jewish people. Symbols could also be found around these earlier births, such as the fact that, while Esau was born first, his twin brother Jacob entered the world grabbing at Esau's heel. (Jacob eventually overtook Esau in birthright, blessing, and success.) In this tableau, the Jewish people, like the Romans, connected the circumstances of one's birth with his future greatness. When it came to studying Jesus, the Old Testament tradition set the stage for the New Testament story.

The early Christians, according to Professor John Dominic Crossan, of the University of Chicago, used the works of the Old Testament as “foundational . . . texts to understand Jesus, his movement, his destiny, and the lives and hopes of his first followers.”⁷ Could the Hebrew Bible serve as such a foundational text and prophetic tool to describe the destiny of Jesus as the Messiah in a way that spoke, not only to the Jews, but to the Gentile world as well? Could it validate the identity of Jesus as Son of God to those in the Gentile world that were proving to be increasingly receptive to the Christian message?

When searching the Scriptures—meaning, the OT, as the NT had not yet been compiled—Matthew settled on Isaiah 7:14 to provide a sign of the divine purpose in Jesus' beginnings. This passage of Isaiah 7, with emphasis added, is part of a longer saga during the reign of King Ahaz when the southern kingdom of Judea was under threat by two enemy kingdoms in 734–733 B.C.:

¹⁰Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, ¹¹“Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” ¹²But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.” ¹³And he said, “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanu-el. ¹⁵He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. ¹⁷The Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria.”

⁷This statement is found on page 16 of *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, in a chapter that addresses in some detail, from an historical perspective, a number of aspects of the birth narratives.

First note that this prophetic utterance did not address the eventual coming of the Messiah, but Ahaz's immediate dangers. Also note, from the emphasized verse, that the New Revised Standard Version does not use the word "virgin" at Isaiah 7:14 (as the King James Version does), but instead uses the phrase, "young woman." The NRSV's phrase is, in fact, the better translation of the Hebrew word, "*almah*," which is broad enough to encompass a young woman of marriageable age, and even a woman who had married but not yet had her first child. The word was not restricted to women who had never had sexual intercourse.

When the Hebrew Bible was translated into the Greek Septuagint, which was widely used in Jesus' time, the Hebrew word "*almah*" was translated as the Greek word "*parthenos*." There seems to be some disagreement among scholars over how closely the two words relate. Some think the Greek "*parthenos*" to be more synonymous with the Hebrew "*almah*" while others seem to think it more synonymous with our English word "virgin." Both the Hebrew and the Greek versions relate to events transpiring at the time of Ahaz, and make the point that the enemies he fears will themselves have their kingdoms laid waste. It is not, strictly speaking, a Messianic prophecy, and does not mean an actual virgin giving birth, but only alludes to the fact that before a young woman does give birth, and the child learns to choose, the opposing kings will fall.⁸ The prophecy was, in fact, fulfilled and Ahaz's kingdom was delivered from imminent peril.

What, then, are we to make of it? Matthew takes the text quite seriously. But perhaps he does not use it to display a concrete prophecy/fulfillment pattern. We have already discussed how Matthew takes Old Testament passages and ties them to his own community's experience. This practice is in keeping with the Jewish idea of *midrash*. To tell an old story and a similar new story together creates an echo effect.⁹ Just as the OT prophecy about a young woman giving birth foreshadowed relief from the oppressor in her time, the NT story about a young woman—called a "virgin" in the Septuagint and in Matthew—who will be giving birth to the Messiah, also speaks of relief from the oppressor then and now. The story honors Jewish perspective and simultaneously makes sense to Gentile audiences, as it affirms their expectations that extraordinary events will occur in connection with the birth of God's Anointed.

But some more literalistic ideas may also have been at work in the idea of the virgin birth. In antiquity, the belief was that semen contained *all* the material needed to create new life. The womb merely served as the good soil where that life could form. A child conceived by

⁸There is even some thought among scholars that Isaiah was in the presence of a particular young woman when he spoke, and that the reference was to the completion of events before she gave birth and her child learned right from wrong.

⁹See chapter 2, The Rabbi's Journey, *supra*, at page 31, for a more detailed discussion of the echo effect.

the Holy Spirit, the argument goes, would be one for whom God provides all the material for the fetal development and ultimate birth in a unique way.¹⁰ As such, God's creative work is found here in the conception and birth of the New Adam, much as God's creative work first occurred in Genesis, when the first Adam and Eve were formed out of dust.

This approach to the virgin birth makes Jesus become God's son in a more or less biological way, though by means other than the Greek and Roman gods were said to have practiced. But, this narrow biological understanding founders in a scientific age. While the ancients "knew where babies came from" in a general sense, they did not know of the respective functions of sperm and egg and the combination of chromosomes and other materials. We now know that genetic material is provided by both parents, not just the father. So, the idea that the birth of the New Adam was solely God's creative work, with no human contribution to the child's biological design, does not persevere in this era, even though its symbolic import remains.

Finally, there was an ancient idea spread to malign the circumstances of Jesus' birth. The Matthean and Lukan communities both preserved a tradition that Jesus was the Son of God in a way that involved unique conception. This tradition led opponents of the Christian movement to argue that, if "God" was Jesus' father, Jesus must have been illegitimate, and this sort of God-talk was just a way to dodge the issue. A Roman philosopher of the late second century, Celsus, who was particularly nasty toward Christians, claimed that the story of the virgin birth was a cover-up of Jesus' actual illegitimacy, a status shameful in antiquity to both parent and child. There was even an idea that Mary had been raped, and Jesus was the rapist's son. As Crossan relates, "The illegitimate father was, [Celsus] claims, a Roman soldier named Panthera, in whose name we catch a mocking and reversed allusion to *parthenos*, the Greek word for the young woman from Isaiah 7:14." This idea about Jesus' birth was intended by the Church's opponents as a vicious attack, not as an objective theory.

Any approach to the virgin birth creates problems that need to be addressed. In light of modern scientific understanding, Mary's contribution of genetic material moots the argument that the unique creation God was making in Jesus was required to have a divinely pure biological basis. Ideas around illegitimacy also present problems, particularly in light of their speculative nature and the fact that they arose out of an attack intended to discredit the early Christians.¹¹

¹⁰Judeo-Christian tradition holds that all material, genetic or otherwise, is grounded in God as creator, or in God as Being Itself.

¹¹The idea does offer a redemptive aspect, though: *if* Jesus is shamefully illegitimate, but is uniquely loved and valued by God so as to be called his son, then we are forced to conclude that God is the God of the disadvantaged, the despised, and the devalued. He is the father of last resort and, hopefully, we experience him also as the father of first priority.

If we are looking for a third way, we could consider a simpler alternative to speculative ideas of illegitimacy or notions of a strictly biological miracle. Luke Timothy Johnson is a Roman Catholic scholar teaching at a Methodist institution, Candler School of Theology at Emory University. In his book *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*, Professor Johnson criticizes the Jesus Seminar (of which Crossan is a leading member), and others who seek to reconstruct an historical picture of Jesus by using cross-cultural anthropology and other tools.¹² While Johnson is not himself a literalist, he does see the current trend toward historical research as misplaced. He suggests that, “[i]f the virgin birth seems historically unlikely, one would think that a normal birth would be the logical alternative.”¹³ Johnson discourages following some writers down a speculative or overly hypothetical path and implicitly suggests that, from the standpoint of historical probability, it is more likely that Joseph is the father than some unknown and unnamed character. While he does not argue for this point, it is consistent with other Roman Catholic scholars, such as John Meier and Raymond Brown, who do not believe the tools of the historian can answer the question definitively.

And so, the questions remain: What is the virgin birth, and what does it mean? Those who embrace a literal view can freely continue to do so; they have their own right to interpret. Those who have problems with a literalistic approach to this story have some options to explore when formulating their own understanding of what the story is about.

Whether literal fact or symbolic statement, the truth and importance of the story remain. It is about God’s power to create and to make a new creation. It is about Jesus’ greatness being foreshadowed in the circumstances of his birth. It is about identifying Jesus as the Son of God in a way that you and I do not claim, even though we, too, are children of God. It is about remarkable beginnings, with a re-creation of the human race along a line different from that sinful one that the first Adam followed. It is about God being among us, and within us, and our responding faithfully to that reality, just as Joseph responded faithfully to the news that was given him. These are the truths that underlie a major strand of our Christmas stories and celebrations, regardless of whether the virgin birth is to be understood literally or symbolically.



¹²C.S. Lewis also criticized searches for the historical Jesus. (See *The Screwtape Letters*, ch. xxiii).

¹³*The Real Jesus*, at 33.

1. Does Joseph's initial decision to dismiss Mary strike you as kind? Cruel? Weak? Humane? Righteous? Why?
2. What does the transformation of "righteousness" from observance of the written law to practicing justice and mercy say about our relationship to God? About how we should interpret Scripture? How do we practice "righteousness"?
3. Do we still, in present times, look at beginnings as foreshadowing the events of one's life? Think of stories about George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.
4. This chapter suggests that there is more about the meaning of the virgin birth to be found in its symbolic significance than in its strict, literal interpretation. But, does that rule out literalism? Are we called to believe that God's exercise of power and dominion over the natural order—including deviation from the norms he has established—is a place where we can find the holy? Are we also called to find the holy in the ordinary workings of the world? Where have you found it?

