

VIRGINAL CONCEPTION OR BEGETTING? A LOOK AT THE CHRISTOLOGY OF MATTHEW 1:18-20

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For information on the birth of Jesus Christ, seasoned Bible students readily turn to the birth narratives written by Matthew and Luke. Scholars maintain that these two evangelists added their own source material to the Markan spine of the tradition of the life and deeds of Jesus. The stories of our Savior's birth are retold year after year in Christmas plays across the nation. Carols are sung at home and on street corners. Nativity scenes hold controversial places in today's media. The story of the birth of Christ seems to be well known to the public. Or is it?

A careful reading of the Greek text of Matthew shows that not all is as it seems in traditional theology. Does Matthew teach that Jesus was virginally *conceived*, or is there more to it? Does Matthew's theology of the birth of the long-awaited Messiah line up with the thoughts and expectations of the Old Testament? Is it possible that the church and the academy are guilty of reading *into* the birth narratives the Johannine word/logos Christology, thereby ignoring what the evangelist conveys to his Jewish readers? This article will look critically at the data concerning the origin of Jesus Christ in the birth narrative of Matthew. For the moment, let us set aside what we think Paul and John believe and focus on exegesis from Matthew's perspective, particularly Matthew 1:18-20.

A look at the first-century theological expectations of the coming Messiah is needed to set the context. What would a pious Jew have believed and thought concerning the long-awaited Christ? The Qumran community had quite a bit to say. The Essenes speak of the Messiah as God's son: "YHWH declares to you that...I will be a father to him and he will be a son to me. This refers to the branch of David, who will arise...As it is written I will raise up the hut of David which has fallen."¹ The Essene community also looked forward to the time

¹ 4Q174; Florentino Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.

“when God begets the Messiah.”² We hear in the dialogue between Justin Martyr and Trypho the Jew that “we all expect that Christ will be a man [born] of men.”³

This evidence lines up with the verses in the Hebrew Bible concerning the coming Messiah. 2 Samuel 7:14 speaks of a time when God *will become the father of the Messiah*, and the Messiah *will become* his son.⁴ Isaiah 9:6 tells us that a child “will be born to us.” Psalm 89:26-27 foretells one who “will cry out to Me, ‘You are my Father, my God, and the rock of my salvation.’ I also shall make him My firstborn, the highest of the king of the earth.” He is to be a descendant from the line of the woman (Gen. 3:15), from the line of Abraham (Gen. 17:5-9), and from the line of David (2 Sam. 7:12-14; Isa. 11:1; Jer. 23:5). It is rather well known that in “Palestinian Judaism the thought of God begetting occurs only in the connection with messianic expectation.”⁵ The author of the gospel, presumably Matthew of the twelve Apostles, was a Jew in his own right. He therefore believed all of these criteria which were commonplace among the Jewish people. Commentators such as Ben Witherington III affirm this statement when declaring that the Jews “expected messiah to be fully and only human.”⁶ James Dunn points out rightly that “Jesus should continue to be comprehended in Jewish terms — important that Jesus should be seen in continuity with the purposes of God from creation and in the calling of Israel.”⁷

The critical question has to be asked: does Matthew speak of the preexistence of Jesus Christ in his birth narratives? Is there any hint or allusion to the idea that the Messiah, against all the previously stated evidence, did not *come into existence* in the womb of his mother? Is it possible to exist before you are born? This is no small concern. The evidence that Matthew provides for his readers needs to be closely examined with later theological agendas set aside.

Matthew 1:18 reads: Τοῦ δὲ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἡ γένεσις οὕτως ἦν. Greek readers of the gospel would have read this as “Now the *genesis* of Jesus was as follows...” The particular word that needs to be examined is the word γένεσις. What is communicated by this specific word? γένεσις means “what has *come into being*” as distinct from the Creator.⁸ It would seem that the evangelist is conveying to his readers that Jesus had an actual beginning of existence. This

² 1 QS 2:11.

³ *Dialogue* 49:1.

⁴ Granted, the original recipient of this passage was Solomon, but the previously stated Dead Sea Scrolls evidence, along with Luke 1:31-35; Heb. 1:5 show that the passage held serious Messianic implications.

⁵ “Birth,” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975, 1:178.

⁶ Ben Witherington, *Matthew*, Macon, GA: Smyth & Helweys, 2006, 52.

⁷ “Christology,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, New York: Doubleday, 1990, 1:989

⁸ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964, 1:682.

lines up with the Jewish beliefs about the Messiah being born. The astonishing thing about this is that the miracle occurs because of the Holy Spirit coming over Mary and creating this child (cf. Luke 1:35). Jesus seems to be the only person living today who has no human father, for God is his father.

Matthew understands that Jesus was created in the womb of his mother. This, I would state, is no mere conception, but rather a *begetting*. It points to the activity of God, that is the *Father*. If it is true that Matthew portrays Jesus as coming into existence 2000 years ago, we need to change the language from *virginal conception* to *virginal begetting*. There is a big difference, and the text is quite clear about it. The text was so clear that the scribes who copied the texts saw the potential problem with the word γένησις. The textual variant of this word is a very similar word: γέννησις. Bruce Metzger is only willing to state that “it is understandable that scribes very often confused these two words, which orthographically and phonetically are so familiar.”⁹

Rather clearer is the work *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* by Bart Ehrman. The thesis of the book is clearly stated: “Scribes modified their manuscripts to make them more patently orthodox.”¹⁰ Now, why would they do that? It would seem that the escalating debates over the nature of God and Christ in the first five centuries of Christian history led the scribes to be less than honest with the text. Ehrman writes, “They changed other passages to accentuate their own views that Jesus was divine, that he pre-existed.”¹¹ These may seem to be rather bold claims, but Ehrman goes on concerning the nature of the text in study:

Here I simply examine several corruptions that stress that Jesus’ appearance in this world was not his coming into existence...An interesting instance occurs in Matthew 1:18...Whereas the earliest and best manuscripts agree in introducing the passage with the words: “The beginning (γένεσις) of Jesus Christ happened in this way,” a large number of witnesses read instead, “The *birth* (γέννησις) of Jesus Christ happened in this way.” Matthew began his Gospel by detailing the “book of the γενέσις” of Jesus Christ (i.e., his genealogical lineage; 1:1), making it somewhat more likely that he would here (v. 18) continue with the description of the γενέσις itself.¹² And do the majority of textual scholars agree that γέννησις represents a textual corruption...When one

⁹ Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 2002, 7.

¹⁰ Bart Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, Oxford University Press, 1993, 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹² Donald Hagner in the *Word Biblical Commentary* agrees that Matt. 1:18 “picks up the γενέσεως, ‘origin,’ of 1:1 and suggests that the Βίβλος γενέσεως, ‘record of origin,’ now reaches its goal” (*Matthew 1-13*, Dallas: Word Books, 1993, 17).

now asks why scribes might take umbrage at Matthew's description of the "genesis" of Jesus Christ, the answer immediately suggests itself: the original text could well be taken to imply that this is the moment in which Jesus Christ comes into being. *In point of fact, there is nothing in Matthew's narrative, either here or elsewhere throughout the Gospel, to suggest that he knew or subscribed to the notion that Christ had existed prior to his birth...* And so the term γέννησις in Matthew 1:18 would represent an orthodox corruption."¹³

The evidence that Ehrman puts together is impressive and needs to be noted. Changing New Testament manuscripts and documents in order to promote one's own theological agendas is neither honest nor Christlike.

Matthew could have very easily used the word γέννησις if he wanted to express the simple idea of "birth." Rather, he chose a word, γενέσις, which has a narrow meaning of creation or coming into being. This has radical implications for the text. If Jesus *came into being* in the womb of his mother, then preexistence is impossible. Quite a few scholars have noted this fact about Matthew's Christology.

James D. G. Dunn clearly points out that "The point which bears upon our study is that Matthew presumably understand this as Jesus' *origin*, as the *begetting* (= becoming) of Jesus to be God's Son...The thought of preexistence is not present at all in this context."¹⁴ Ben Witherington III rightly adds that "Nothing is said about God coming down in the guise of a human...Early Jews did not by and large view messiah or the ultimate son of David in that way."¹⁵

The most explicit quotes (or maybe the most honest with the text?) come from Raymond Brown in his exhaustive study of the birth narratives:

In this commentary I shall stress that Matthew and Luke show no knowledge of preexistence; seemingly for them the conception was the becoming (begetting) of God's Son...There is never a suggestion in Matthew or in Luke that the Holy Spirit is the male element in a union with Mary...The manner of begetting is implicitly creative rather than sexual...The fact that Matthew can speak of Jesus as "begotten" (passive of *gennan*) in 1:16, 20 suggests that for him the conception through the agency of the Holy Spirit is the *becoming* of God's Son...There is no

¹³ Ehrman, 75-76, emphasis added.

¹⁴ James Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980, 50. In private correspondence James Dunn now states that there is absolutely no literal preexistence of Jesus Christ presented in the Scriptures.

¹⁵ Witherington, 52.

suggestion of an incarnation whereby a figure who was previously with God takes on flesh.¹⁶

Raymond Brown is quite clear in his exegesis. Matthew presents us with a Jesus who began to exist in the womb of his mother because of the miracle of the Holy Spirit. If Jesus began to exist at that particular point, then he could not have preexisted in any literal way. A serious fact must be laid down: preexistence and begetting are irreconcilable opposites. You cannot have a being who has existed forever at a point in history *begin to exist* in the womb. The father of church history, Adolf Harnack, put this important statement quite nicely: “The miraculous genesis of Christ in the Virgin by the Holy Spirit and the real pre-existence are of course mutually exclusive.”¹⁷ The church father Tertullian is also rather frank: “For [God] could not have been a Father previous to the Son, nor a judge previous to sin. There was, however, a time when neither sin existed with Him, nor the Son.”¹⁸ It is interesting to see how believers and commentators handle the virginal begetting of Jesus told by Matthew.

Matthew tells us that Mary was found to be with child ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου. This is an echo of verse 16, where we see that Joseph was the husband of Mary, ἐξ ἧς ἐγεννήθη Ἰησοῦς. This motif is repeated once again in verse 20, where “the child which was begotten in her is ἐκ πνεύματός ἐστιν ἁγίου. The preposition ἐκ/ἐξ is very specific. If Matthew wanted to communicate an Incarnational Christology implying preexistence, he would have used διὰ. Irenaeus quoted some who believed that “This Christ passed through Mary just as water flows through a tube.”¹⁹ Select women are named in Matthew’s genealogy. With each of these women (Tamar – v. 3; Rahab and Ruth – v. 5; Bathsheba – v.6) the preposition ἐκ is used.

Matthew demonstrates that the Messiah is of the line of David and Abraham (1:1). If he carefully shows his readers that each descendant was ἐγέννησεν (over

¹⁶ Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977, 31, 124, 140, 141.

¹⁷ Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan, London: Williams and Norgate, 1895, 1:105.

¹⁸ *Against Hermogenes*, ch. 3.

¹⁹ *Against Heresies*, 1.7.2. Fitzmyer comments on Luke 1:35: “Later church tradition made something quite other out of this verse” (cited in Anthony Buzzard, *Jesus Was Not a Trinitarian*, Morrow, GA: Restoration Fellowship, 2007, 203-4). He goes on to say that Justin Martyr had to read the accounts of the virginal begetting through the lenses of an elevated Johannine Christology. This seems to be one of the problems with interpretation in the second century. Roger Haight in his monumental study *Jesus: Symbol of God* declares that post-biblical Christology “overrides and excludes themes contained in other New Testament christologies, especially those christologies of the synoptic gospels that clearly depict Jesus as an integral human being” (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002, 279).

40 times in the first chapter) by his father, why would Matthew change the meaning when he gets to Jesus in 1:18-20? The likelihood is slim to none.

Joseph, portrayed as a righteous and God-fearing man, decides that he will not shame his wife. He encounters the angel of the Lord in a dream who declares the will of God to him. This angel has a very important statement not only for Joseph, but for all readers as well. He explains that “ἐν αὐτῇ γεννηθὲν ἐκ πνεύματός ἐστιν ἁγίου (that which has been begotten in her is out of Holy Spirit).” The word that I translated “begotten” is γεννηθὲν, which is the aorist passive participle of γενναῶ. γενναῶ in the secular world of New Testament times “has the meaning of *come into being*.”²⁰ Interestingly, in our modern translations, this word is softened and translated as “conceived.”²¹ Nevertheless, the Greek is clear: Jesus was *begotten* in Mary. To beget is the role of the Father to bring into existence what does not previously exist. Matthew emphasizes over and over again that Jesus began to exist in the womb of his mother. Interesting news from the angel indeed!

Matthew portrays the Holy Spirit as the acting agent of God in the creation of the Son of God. Just as the spirit brooded over the waters in Genesis 1:2 before the original creation, the spirit again broods over Mary for the head of the New Creation. One should not think that the spirit is taking over the male role in birth. The spirit represents God in His creation. J. Nolland says it well when he declares that “The Spirit can be readily understood here with reference to power from God resulting in the extraordinary.”²²

Upon a close reading of the text, some conclusions jump out rather clearly at this point. It was important for Matthew to show that Jesus was rightly in the lines of both Abraham and King David. He also wants to point out that Jesus had a γένεσις, or a *created beginning*. It happened in the way of the Holy Spirit coming over Mary and begetting Jesus in her womb by miracle. To be begotten means to come into existence. There is not a hint in the birth narrative of either Matthew or Luke of any notion of preexistence. In fact, both evangelists use words quite explicitly to make the point that Jesus had a particular beginning in space and time, as does every other son born of a father. The miraculous thing about this is that Jesus was the only human born without a human father. Jesus Christ could very well say that “God is my Father” not only in the Messianic sense, but also in a literal sense.

These facts, which counteract the idea of a literal preexistence of the Son, have troubled theologians, scribes, and commentators throughout the years. Any

²⁰ *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 1:176.

²¹ The NASB notes in the margin that the word literally means *begotten*, but all other modern standard translations omit this fact.

²² “No Son-of-God Christology in Matthew 1:18-25,” in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 62, 1996, 18:3.

first-century Jew who was raised in the Hebrew Bible would pick up the gospel of Matthew and find a soothing continuity with his past. The promises of the birth of the Messiah were fulfilled through a miracle of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary. A first-century Jew would not find a new theology of a literally preexistent Messiah which was never spoken of in the Jewish Scriptures (77% of the Christian Bible).

Charles Swindoll in his *Jesus: When God Became a Man* shifts away from clear direction that Matthew has set forth. Watch how he does this: “Many people assume that Jesus’ existence began like ours, in the womb of His mother. But is that true? Did life begin for Him with that first breath of Judean air? Can a day in December truly mark the beginning of the Son of God?”²³ Dr. Swindoll undercuts all the painstaking work that Matthew has done in getting his readers to understand that Jesus *did indeed* begin his existence in the womb of his mother.

Swindoll goes on to ignore the text of Matthew’s birth narrative and introduce more confusion. “Here’s an amazing thought: the baby that Mary held in her arms was holding the universe in place! The little newborn lips that cooed and cried once formed the dynamic words of creation. Those tiny, clutching fists once flung stars into space and planets into orbit. That infant flesh so fair housed the Almighty God.”²⁴ Would any Jew reading the Greek in Matthew have come to this conclusion? Hardly, if they were being honest with the text.

From there, it only gets worse: “Angels watched as Mary changed God’s diaper. The universe watched with wonder as The Almighty learned to walk. Children played in the street with Him.”²⁵ Swindoll concludes: “What you are seeing is the Incarnation — God in human flesh.”²⁶ This is rather strange and seems to completely ignore Matthew’s explicit Christology. James Dunn counters by saying that “with Matthew there seems to be *no thought of pre-existence involved*.”²⁷ Without the idea of any existence before the miracle birth, Swindoll’s assertions become ridiculous. Raymond Brown again clarifies: “In Matthew’s book of *genesis* a new creative act brings into being the Messiah.”²⁸ One who is *brought into being* surely cannot have been in existence prior to that act!

²³ Charles Swindoll, *Jesus: When God Became a Man*, Anaheim, CA: Insight for Living, 1993, 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁷ Dunn, 211, emphasis added.

²⁸ Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, New York: Doubleday, 1996, 175.

A quick revisiting of the Qumran documents referred to earlier is in order at this point. The most often quoted of the two passages is 4Q174 which deals with the Messianic nature of the title “Son of God.” The other is talked about not nearly as much (and not nearly as much as it deserves). 1QSa 2:11 looks forward to the time “when God begets the Messiah.” This Jewish sect understood that the Messiah was to be begotten (in time) by the Father at a specific point in history. They did not feel that it had already happened, but they were looking forward to it. How did they come up with this assertion? One would only think of the royal Messianic Psalm 2. In what was originally a coronation announcement of the anointed king,²⁹ the Psalm looks forward to a time in history when God will say to the Messiah, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you.” What day did the miraculous begetting occur, according to Matthew? The day when the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary and produced a Son in her womb. Note again the words of the angel of the Lord to Joseph in Matthew 1:20: “that which has been *begotten in her* is of Holy Spirit.” It would seem that the day that Mary conceived in her womb was the day when “God begat the Messiah.” The author of Hebrews understands Psalm 2:7 in the same light and combines it with the Messianic 2 Samuel 7:14 in Hebrews 1:5. He equates the time of the begetting, the “Today” of Psalm 2:7 with the time when “I will be a Father to him and he will be a Son to Me.” Hebrews, like Matthew’s birth narrative, understands the *begetting of the Christ* to be a central idea of Messianic expectation clearly understood from the Hebrew Scriptures.

In conclusion, what should we do with all of the evidence presented? Should we ignore it and read into it our non-Matthaeian theology of preexistence, like Justin Martyr? Or should we change the Greek text like the guilty scribes and try to cover up the fact that Jesus had an actual genesis, as Bart Ehrman showed in *Orthodox Corruption*? Dare we ignore the simple and clear definitions that standard Bible dictionaries give of *genesis* and *gennao*? Should we ignore what prominent and prestigious scholars such as Raymond Brown, James D. G. Dunn, and Adolf Harnack say about the total lack of preexistence in the mind of the evangelist?

No, we of the Protestant tradition need to hold to our motto of *sola scriptura*. We need to let the text speak for itself and not let any of our preconceived notions overshadow the truths explained in the birth narrative. Matthew needs to be heard. His words need to be understood and treated with the same respect that readers give to the Sermon on the Mount, the many parables, and the Olivet Discourse. Let me be clear that I am not saying that we read the Matthaeian birth narrative in exclusion of the other biblical authors and their respected theologies. Yet, the evangelist must be given a chance to be heard and understood for his contribution to the canon of Scripture. Honest readers and listeners at this point

²⁹ Psalm 2:2 calls the king the *mashiach* (מָשִׁיחַ).

can echo the conclusion from James Dunn concerning the clearly portrayed concept of the virginal begetting — “the most striking feature of Matthew’s christology.”³⁰ Striking indeed. Very striking to many. To others it is rather obviously overlooked. To the rest, this conclusion may leave some uncomfortable feelings about what kind of Jesus the eyewitness Matthew embraced, believed, and communicated to his readers for the last 2000 years.

³⁰ Dunn, *Christology*, 49.