

## The Beginning of the Son of God

“One day God came to Mary and said, ‘Mary, would you please be My mother?’” These were the words of a Catholic priest as he recently attempted to bring the mystery of the incarnation to the flock via television. Matthew and Luke would no doubt be puzzled and probably alarmed at the suggestion that Jesus had requested of Mary that she become his mother. After all, do human babies have any say in the matter of who will be their parents?

The concept that the Messiah could have arranged his own birth is strangely unbiblical, yet it arose early in post-biblical times. Justin Martyr believed that the spirit which was to overshadow Mary was actually the Logos himself preparing to be born of the virgin (Luke 1:35). Roman Catholic scholars are refreshingly candid in their admission that this post-biblical innovation has departed far from Luke’s intention:

Later church tradition made something quite other out of Luke 1:35. Justin Martyr wrote, “It is not right, therefore, to understand the Spirit and the power of God as anything other than the Word, who is also the First-Begotten of God.” In this interpretation the two expressions are being understood of the Second Person of the Trinity . . . It is to be noted that there is no evidence here in the Lucan infancy narrative of Jesus’ preexistence or incarnation. Luke’s sole concern is to assert that the origin of God’s Messiah is the effect of his creative Spirit on Mary.<sup>1</sup>

Raymond Brown is equally straightforward when he notes that:

For preexistence [i.e., Trinitarian] Christology the conception of Jesus is the beginning of an earthly career, but not the begetting of God’s Son. I stress the difference between conception Christology and preexistence Christology, because Christian theology soon harmonized the two ideas, so that the preexistent Word of God was described as taking flesh (John) in the womb of the virgin Mary. The virginal conception was no longer seen as the begetting of God’s Son but as the incarnation of God’s Son, and that became orthodox Christian doctrine.<sup>2</sup>

Luke understood the holy spirit as the creative activity of God. Just as the spirit had hovered over the waters in Genesis, so now on the occasion of the new

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<sup>1</sup> Fitzmeyer, *The Gospel According to St. Luke, Anchor Bible*, Doubleday, 1985, 350, 351.

<sup>2</sup> *The Birth of the Messiah*, Doubleday, 1977, 141, 142.

creation a unique human person was to come into being in Mary's womb. Mary was, according to Luke, going to conceive a child, not act as the receptacle of an already existing person desiring to pass from one world to another.

Our citation from the Catholic priest points to the departure of the church from early on in the second century. Luke could not have imagined any such idea that the Son of God effected his own conception and birth. Luke's account is as beautiful as it is simple. What he records is the creation of the Son of God by divine begetting in Mary's womb. Luke describes a direct causal relationship between the supernatural begetting/conception and the coming into being of the Son of God. This original orthodoxy was soon left behind as Christology was transmuted by contact with a quite different conceptual model, that of Gnostic aeons subordinate to the One God of Greek philosophy. Jesus then became a preexisting "god" who descended to the earth to take on human form. This unfortunate development is traced brilliantly by Martin Werner, formerly professor of systematic theology at the University of Bern. He laments the fact that as a result of this transformation in Christology the "historical Jesus completely disappeared." In the new dogma of the divinity of Jesus there was substituted "for the original concept of the Messiah simply a Hellenistic analogy such as that of a redeeming divine being."<sup>3</sup>

Surely the voice of Luke and Matthew needs to be heard again. At present that voice is drowned in the din of traditional incarnational Christology supposedly based on John 1:1ff. But did John really intend to overthrow the simple Messianic "conception Christology" of Matthew and Luke? For those of us who believe that there is a united New Testament view of who Jesus was and is, there is no choice but to accept the "primitive" Christology of the Synoptics and harmonize John with them. John has definitely not moved us into the world of Greek philosophy and preexisting secondary "gods." (Not until Nicea and Chalcedon did the subordinationist Christology of the earliest Fathers disappear.) John should be taken as the representative of the primitive Christology of the Synoptic kind: Jesus for John was the expression of the Divine Purpose in flesh. This is a far cry from the new orthodoxy which finally triumphed over all competitors at Nicea and has been with us all these years. Nicea was two steps removed from Luke. Luke's orthodoxy, on the admission of our Roman Catholic scholars, became heresy. And so it is to this day.

— Anthony F. Buzzard

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<sup>3</sup> *The Formation of Christian Dogma: An Historical Study of Its Problem*, Harper, 1957, 298.