BORN OF A VIRGIN?

N. T. Wright

JESUS' BIRTH USUALLY gets far more attention than its role in the New Testament warrants. Christmas looms large in our culture, outshining even Easter in the popular mind. Yet without Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2 we would know nothing about it. Paul's gospel includes Jesus' Davidic descent, but apart from that could exist without mention of his birth.[1] One can be justified by faith with no knowledge of it. Likewise, John's wonderful theological edifice has no need of it: God's glory is revealed, not in the manger, but on the cross.[2] Yet try to express any New Testament theology without Jesus' death and resurrection, and you will find it cannot be done. "Man shall live for evermore," says the song, "because of Christmas Day." No, replies the New Testament. Because of Calvary, Easter, and Pentecost.

Nevertheless, the birth stories have become a test case in various controversies. If you believe in miracles, you believe in Jesus' miraculous birth; if you don't, you don't. Both sides turn the question into a shibboleth, not for its own sake but to find out who's in and who's out. The problem is that *miracle,* as used in these controversies, is not a biblical category. The God of the Bible is not a normally absent God who sometimes intervenes. This God is always present and active, often surprisingly so.

Likewise, if you believe the Bible is true, you will believe the birth stories; if you don't, you won't. Again, the birth stories are insignificant in themselves; they function as a test for beliefs about the Bible.

Again, the birth stories have functioned as a test case for views of sexuality. Some believers in the virginal conception align this with a low view of sexuality and a high view of perpetual virginity. They believe the story not because of what it says about Jesus, but because of what it says about sex—namely, that it's something God wouldn't want to get mixed up in. This, too, has its mirror image: those who cannot imagine anything good about abstinence insist that Mary must have been sexually active.

More significantly, the birth stories have played a role within different views of the incarnation. Those who have emphasized Jesus' divinity have sometimes made the virginal conception central. Those who have emphasized Jesus' humanity have often felt that the virginal conception would mark him off from the rest of us.

None of these arguments bears much relation to what either Matthew or Luke actually say. But before we turn to them, two more preliminary remarks.

First, we are of course speaking of the virginal *conception* of Jesus, not, strictly, of the "virgin birth." Even if I come to believe in the former, the latter would remain a different sort of thing altogether. Neither, of course, should be confused with the "immaculate conception," a Roman Catholic dogma about the conception, not of Jesus, but of Mary.

Second, some things must be put in a "suspense account," in Marcus's happy phrase, while others are sorted out. The birth narratives have no impact on my reconstruction of Jesus' public agendas and his mind-set as he went to the cross. There might just be a case for saying that *if* his birth was as Matthew and Luke describe it, and *if* Mary had told him about it, my argument about Jesus' vocation to do and be what in scripture YHWH does and is might look slightly different. But as a historian I cannot use the birth stories within an argument about the rest of the gospel narratives.

I can, however, run the process the other way. Because I am convinced that the creator God raised Jesus bodily from the dead, and because I am convinced that Jesus was and is the embodiment of this God, Israel's God, my worldview is forced to reactivate various things in the suspense account, the birth narratives included. There are indeed more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in post-Enlightenment

metaphysics. The "closed continuum" of cause and effect is a modernist myth. The God who does not intervene from outside but is always present and active within the world, sometimes shockingly, may well have been thus active on this occasion. It is all very well to get on one's high metaphysical horse and insist that God cannot behave like this, but we do not know that ahead of time. Nor will the high moral horse do any better, insisting that God *ought* not to do things like this, because they send the wrong message about sexuality or because divine parentage gave Jesus an unfair start over the rest of us. Such positions produce a cartoon picture: the mouse draws itself up to its full height, puts its paws on its hips, and gives the elephant a good dressing down.

THE BIRTH NARRATIVES

The stories in question are complex and controversial. I simply highlight certain features.

Matthew's story, told from Joseph's point of view, reminds one of various biblical birth stories, such as that of Samson in Judges 13. Matthew's whole book is about the scriptures being fulfilled in Jesus. The angel, the dream, the command not to be afraid, the righteous couple doing what they are told—all is familiar. Like Samson, the promised and provided child has a dangerous public future: here, the true king of the Jews is born under the nose of the wicked king, Herod. This is a major theme in Matthew's gospel. His picture of Jesus' messiahship has both feet on the ground of first-century *realpolitik*.[3]

Matthew tells us that Jesus fulfills at least three biblical themes. He brings Israel into the promised land; *Jesus* is the Greek for *Joshua*. As Immanuel, he embodies God's presence with his people.[4] As the new David, he is the messiah born at Bethlehem.[5] In the genealogy, Jesus is the point toward which Israel's long covenant history has been leading, particularly its puzzling and tragic latter phase. Matthew agrees with his Jewish contemporaries that the exile was the last significant event before Jesus; when the angel says that Jesus will "save his people from their sins,"[6] liberation from exile is in view. Jesus, David's true descendant, will fulfill the Abrahamic covenant by undoing the exile and all that it means.

Well-known problems abound. Why does the genealogy finish with Joseph if Matthew is going to say that he wasn't after all Jesus' father? This cannot have been a problem for Matthew, or he would hardly have followed the genealogy so closely with the story of the virginal conception. It was enough that Jesus was born into the Davidic family; adoption brought legitimation. Further, anyone can say that Matthew made it all up to fulfill Isaiah 7.14 ("the virgin shall conceive").[7] Since Luke doesn't quote the same passage, though, the argument looks thin. Is Bethlehem only mentioned, perhaps, because of Micah 5.2–4? Again, Luke doesn't quote the same passage but still gets Mary to Bethlehem for the birth. Some have questioned whether Herod would really have behaved in the way described in Matthew 2; the answer, from any reader of Josephus, would be a firm yes. One can investigate, as many have, whether there was really a star. One can challenge the flight into Egypt as simply a back-projection from a fanciful reading of Hosea 11.1.

These are the natural probing questions of the historian. As with most ancient history, of course, we cannot verify independently what is reported in only one source. If that gives grounds for ruling it out, however, most of ancient history goes with it. Let us by all means be suspicious, but let us not be paranoid. Just because I've had a nightmare, that doesn't mean there aren't burglars in the house. The fact that Matthew says something fulfilled by scripture doesn't mean it didn't happen.

What then about his central claim, the virginal conception itself, dropped almost casually into the narrative with no flourish of trumpets? Some have argued, of course, that there is instead a flourish of strumpets: Matthew has taken care to draw our attention to the peculiarities (to put it no stronger) of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, presumably in order to warn us that something even stranger is coming, or perhaps to enable us, when the news is announced, to connect it with God's strange way of operating in the past. He is hardly likely on this occasion, however, to have made up the story of Mary's being with child by the Holy Spirit in order to "fulfill" this theme.

What about Luke, who tells the story from Mary's point of view? His setting is just as Jewish as Matthew's, with verbal and narratival allusions to and echoes of the Septuagint. Like Matthew, he insists that with this story Israel's history is reaching its god-ordained climax. But his emphasis, unlike Matthew's, is on the very Jewish point that this birth is a direct challenge to the pagan power: in other words, to Caesar.

This fits with Luke's whole emphasis: the (very Jewish) gospel is for the whole world, of which Jesus is now the Lord. Israel's god is the king of the world; now, Jesus is the king of the world. Attention has focused on the census in Luke 2.2, whether it took place and could have involved people traveling to their ancestral homes, but Luke's point has been missed. The census was the time of the great revolt—the rebellion of Judas the Galilean, which Luke not only knows about but allows Gamaliel to compare with Jesus and his movement.[8] Luke is deliberately aligning Jesus with the Jewish kingdom movements, the revolutions that declared that there would be "no king but god."

The census is not, of course, the only query that people have raised about Luke's birth stories. Jesus' birth at Bethlehem seems to have been a puzzle to Luke (which he explains by the census), rather than something he has invented to make some other point. The fact that Luke does not mention the wise men, or Matthew the shepherds, is not a reason for doubting either; this sort of thing crops up in ancient historical sources all the time. Of course, legends surround the birth and childhood of many figures who afterward become important. As historians, we have no reason to say that this did not happen in the case of Jesus and some reasons to say that it did. But by comparison with other legends about other figures, Matthew and Luke look after all quite restrained.

THE VIRGINAL CONCEPTION

Except, of course, in the matter where the real interest centers. Matthew and Luke declare unambiguously that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived. What are we to make of this?[9]

It will not do to say that we know the laws of nature and that Joseph, Mary, the early church, and the evangelists did not. Mary and Joseph hadn't seen diagrams of Fallopian tubes, but that doesn't mean they didn't know where babies came from. Hence Mary's question to Gabriel (in Luke) and Joseph's determination to break the engagement (in Matthew).

Nor can we say that if we believe this story we should believe all the other similar ones in the ancient world as well. Of course, the argument "miracles are possible, therefore virginal conception is possible, therefore Jesus' virginal conception may well be true," also commits one to saying, "therefore Augustus's virginal conception may well be true."[10] But that is not my argument.

My argument, rather, works in three stages.

First, the position I have reached about the resurrection and incarnation of Jesus opens the door to reconsidering what we would otherwise probably dismiss. Miracle, in the sense of divine intervention "from outside," is not in question. What matters is the powerful, mysterious presence of the God of Israel, the creator God, bringing Israel's story to its climax by doing a new thing, bringing the story of creation to its height by a new creation from the womb of the old. Whether or not it happened, this is what it would mean if it did.

Second, there is no pre-Christian Jewish tradition suggesting that the messiah would be born of a virgin. No one used Isaiah 7.14 this way before Matthew did. Even assuming that Matthew or Luke regularly invented material to fit Jesus into earlier templates, why would they have invented something like this? The only conceivable parallels are pagan ones, and these fiercely Jewish stories have certainly not been modeled on them. Luke at least must have known that telling this story ran the risk of making Jesus out to be a pagan demigod. Why, for the sake of an exalted metaphor, would they take this risk—unless they at least believed them to be literally true?

Third, if the evangelists believed them to be true, when and by whom were they invented, if by the time of Matthew and Luke two such different, yet so compatible, stories were in circulation? Did whoever started this hare running mean it in a nonliteral sense, using virginal conception as a metaphor for something else? What was that something else? An embroidered border, presumably, around the belief that Jesus was divine. But that belief, as I argued earlier, was a *Jewish* belief, expressed in classic Jewish god language, while the only models for virginal conception are the nakedly pagan stories of Alexander, Augustus, and others. We would have to suppose that, within the first fifty years of Christianity, a double move took place: from an early, very Jewish, high Christology, to a sudden paganization, and back to very

Jewish storytelling again. The evangelists would then have thoroughly deconstructed their own deep intentions, suggesting that the climax of YHWH's purpose for Israel took place through none other than a pagan-style miraculous birth.

To put it another way. What would have to have happened, granted the skeptic's position, for the story to have taken the shape it did? To answer this, I must indulge in some speculative tradition history. Bear with me in a little foolishness. Are they tradition critics? So am I. Are they ancient historians? So am I. Are they reconstructors of early communities? So am I. Are they determined to think the argument through to the end? I speak as a fool—I am more so. This is how it would look. (a) Christians came to believe that Jesus was in some sense divine. (b) Someone who shared this faith broke thoroughly with Jewish precedents and invented the story of a pagan-style virginal conception. (c) Some Christians failed to realize that this was historicized metaphor and retold it as though it were historical. (d) Matthew and Luke, assuming historicity, drew independently upon this astonishing fabrication, set it (though in quite different ways) within a thoroughly Jewish context, and wove it in quite different ways into their respective narratives. And all this happened within, more or less, fifty years. Possible? Yes, of course. Most things are possible in history. Likely? No. Smoke without fire does, of course, happen quite often in the real world. But *this* smoke, in *that* world, without fire? This theory asks us to believe in *intellectual* parthenogenesis: the birth of an idea without visible parentage. Difficult. Unless, of course, you believe in miracles, which most people who disbelieve the virginal conception don't.

Maybe, after all, it is the theory of the contemporary skeptic that is metaphor historicized. The modernist belief that history is a closed continuum of cause and effect is projected onto the screen of the early church, producing a myth (specifically, a tradition-historical reconstruction) that sustains and legitimates the original belief so strongly that its proponents come to believe it actually happened.

This foolishness is, of course, a way of saying that no proof is possible either way. No one can prove, historically, that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived. No one can prove, historically, that she wasn't. Science studies the repeatable; history bumps its nose against the unrepeatable. If the first two chapters of Matthew and the first two

of Luke had never existed, I do not suppose that my own Christian faith, or that of the church to which I belong, would have been very different. But since they do, and since for quite other reasons I have come to believe that the God of Israel, the world's creator, was personally and fully revealed in and as Jesus of Nazareth, I hold open my historical judgment and say: if that's what God deemed appropriate, who am I to object?

CHAPTER 12

THE MEANING OF THE BIRTH STORIES

Marcus Borg

TOGETHER WITH THE stories of his death and resurrection, the stories of Jesus' birth have been most instrumental in shaping Christian and cultural images of Jesus.[1] They are very familiar stories, in part because Christmas is the major holiday of the year in modern Western culture. Indeed, for many people, they are more familiar than the stories of Good Friday and Easter. They are also powerful stories. Part of their power comes from their familiarity; they take many of us back into the magical world of Christmas in childhood. But they are powerful for other reasons as well, as I will suggest in this chapter.

Tom and I see the birth stories quite differently. To state my conclusion in advance, I do not think they are historically factual, but I think they are profoundly true in another and more important sense. For reasons I will soon explain, I do not think the virginal conception is historical, and I do not think there was a special star or wise men or shepherds or birth in a stable in Bethlehem. Thus I do not see these stories as historical reports but as literary creations. As the latter, they are not history remembered but rather metaphorical narratives using ancient religious imagery to express central truths about Jesus' significance.

WHY NOT HISTORICAL

There are three primary reasons why I (and most mainline scholars) do not see these stories as historically factual. First, the tradition that Jesus

had a remarkable birth is relatively late. The stories of his birth are found only in the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke, both written near the end of the first century. Earlier writers (as well as the rest of the New Testament) do not refer to a special birth. Paul, our earliest writer, does not. Neither does Mark, our earliest gospel.[2] Moreover, though the gospel of John is probably later than Matthew and Luke, John does not include it, either.

At the very least, this indicates that it was possible to write a gospel without mentioning the birth of Jesus. There are two possible explanations. The tradition of a special birth was old, but these authors either didn't know about it or didn't consider it important enough to include. Or the tradition didn't develop until quite late, and the reason most New Testament authors do not mention it is because the stories did not yet exist. The second option seems more likely to me, to a considerable extent because of the next two reasons.

The second reason is the striking differences between Matthew's birth story and Luke's birth story. Without being comprehensive, I note the following differences.

1. The genealogy of Jesus. Both Matthew and Luke trace the genealogy of Jesus back through Joseph to King David and beyond.[3] But the genealogies differ significantly. Matthew takes Jesus' ancestry back to Abraham, the father of Israel; Luke takes it back to Adam, the father of the human race. Moreover, the genealogies differ even when they are covering the same period of time. From David forward, Solomon and the kings of Judah are the ancestors of Jesus in Matthew; in Luke, the lineage goes through the prophet Nathan, not King Solomon.

2. The home of Mary and Joseph. In Luke, Mary and Joseph live in Nazareth but because of the census travel to Bethlehem, where the birth occurs in a stable. They go back home to Nazareth after the birth. In Matthew, Mary and Joseph live in Bethlehem and the birth occurs at home (not in a stable). The family then moves to Nazareth after spending time in Egypt. Matthew has no trip to Bethlehem.

3. Birth visitors. In Matthew, "wise men from the East" follow a special star to the place of Jesus' birth. Luke has neither wise men nor star but instead angels singing in the night sky to shepherds who then come to the manger.

4. Herod's plot. In Matthew, Herod the Great orders the killing of all male infants under the age of two in Bethlehem. The family of Jesus escapes by fleeing to Egypt. Luke's story has neither Herod's plot nor a trip to Egypt.

5. Use of the Hebrew Bible. Both Matthew and Luke use the Hebrew Bible extensively, but they use it differently. Matthew uses a prediction-fulfillment formula five times in his birth story: "This took place to fulfill that which was spoken by the prophet."[4] Luke, on the other hand, echoes language from the Hebrew Bible without treating it as fulfillment of prophecy, especially in the great hymns that he attributes to Mary (the "Magnificat") and Zechariah (the "Benedictus").[5]

There are other differences as well. But these are enough to make the point that we have two very different stories. Though some of the differences can perhaps be harmonized, some seem irreconcilable.

Third, the stories look like they have been composed to be overtures to each gospel. That is, the central themes of each birth story reflect the central themes of the gospel of which they are a part. For example, for Matthew Jesus is "the king of the Jews," and so his ancestry is traced through the kings of Judah. For Luke, Jesus is a Spirit-anointed social prophet, and so his ancestry includes prophets. For Matthew, Jesus is "one like unto Moses," and the story of Herod's plot calls to mind the story of Pharaoh ordering the death of all newborn Hebrew boys in the time of Moses. Luke emphasizes the spread of the gospel into the Gentile world (especially in the book of Acts), and so the ancestry of Jesus is traced back not simply to Abraham the father of the Jewish people, but to Adam, the father of Jew and Gentile alike. In short, the stories look like the literary creation of each author.

Among these differences, there are some similarities. These include the names of Jesus' parents, his birth while Herod the Great was still king, and the tradition of Jesus growing up in Nazareth. Beyond these details, there are two major similarities: conception by the Spirit, and birth in Bethlehem. I will leave the first until later in this chapter and comment about the second now. How does one account for the common

emphasis upon Bethlehem? One possibility, of course, is that Jesus really was born in Bethlehem, even though the two stories disagree about why Mary and Joseph were there.

A second possibility is that Jesus was born in Nazareth, but the story of his birth in Bethlehem arose because of Bethlehem's significance in the Hebrew Bible. It was the ancestral home of King David, and there was a tradition that the great and future king of Israel would be descended from David. This is the point of the famous passage in Micah 5.2: "But you, O Bethlehem . . . from you shall come forth one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days." By the time of Jesus, many thought of the great and future Davidic king as the messiah. On this view, the early Christian conviction that Jesus was the messiah and Son of David created the story of Jesus being born in "the city of David." Certainty is impossible, but I think the second option is more likely.

What then is left historically from these stories? Jesus was born before the death of Herod the Great, and thus probably not later than 4 B.C.E.[6] His parents were Mary and Joseph.[7] He was probably born in Nazareth, not Bethlehem. He was born into a marginalized peasant class.

THE TRUTH OF THE BIRTH STORIES

Thus I do not see the basis of the birth stories as history remembered. Yet, though I do not think the birth of Jesus happened this way, I think these stories are true. To use by now familiar terminology, I see these stories as history metaphorized, that is, as metaphorical narratives. And the history that is being metaphorized is not the birth itself, but the Jesus story as a whole. With beauty and power, these symbolic narratives express central early Christian convictions about the significance of Jesus.

Light in the Darkness

Light shining in the darkness is a central image in the birth stories. It is most obvious in the star of Matthew's gospel, shining in the night sky and leading the wise men of the Gentiles to the place of Jesus' birth. Luke uses the imagery in his story of "shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night." The "glory of the Lord shone around them" as an

angel told them of the birth of Jesus, and then "a multitude of the heavenly host" filled the night sky, singing "Glory to God!"

The symbolism of light and darkness is ancient, archetypal, and cross-cultural. It has many rich resonances of meaning. Darkness is associated with blindness, night, sleep, cold, gloom, despair, lostness, chaos, death, danger, and yearning for the dawn. It is a striking image of the human condition. Light is seen as the antidote to the above and is thus an image of salvation. In the light, one is awake, able to see and find one's way; light is associated with relief and rejoicing that the night is over; in the light one is safe and warm. In the light there is life.

Many texts in the Hebrew Bible use this symbolism. Light is associated with creation: "Let there be light" is the first of God's creative acts in the book of Genesis.

Light is a metaphor for God's illumination of the path: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."[8]

In texts from the Hebrew Bible often read in churches during the season of Advent, light is associated with God's acts of deliverance:

> The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them has light shined.[9]
>
> Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and God's glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.[10]

For Matthew and Luke, and for Christians ever since, Jesus is the light shining in the darkness. The author of John's gospel makes the same affirmation with compact perfection: "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."[11] Jesus is the light who brings enlightenment; indeed, he is "the light of the world."[12] This is the truth of this theme of the birth stories. And it is true independent of their historical factuality.

A Tale of Two Lordships

The conflict between two lordships runs through the birth stories. In Matthew, the conflict is between rival claims to be "king of the Jews."

Herod the Great saw himself as the king of the Jews and indeed was the reigning king. But for Matthew, Jesus is "the king of the Jews." Moreover, by portraying Herod as acting like Pharaoh, Matthew calls to mind Israel's story of the ancient conflict between the lordship of Pharaoh and the lordship of God. Jesus, not the Herods and Pharaohs of this world, is the true king and lord.

Luke does this differently. For Luke, the conflict is between the lordship of Caesar and the lordship of Christ. Luke signals this most clearly in the words spoken by the angel to the shepherds and in the chorus sung by the heavenly host:

> I bring you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah the Lord. . . .
>
> Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors.[13]

Much of this language was also used about Caesar, the emperor of Rome. In an inscription from 9 C.E. found in Asia Minor, Caesar is spoken of as "our God" and as a "Savior" who brought "peace" throughout the earth, and whose birth was "good news" to the world. In other texts, he is also spoken of as divine and as descended from a divine-human conception. By echoing language used about the Roman emperor, Luke affirms that Jesus, not Caesar, is the good news, the true savior and Son of God who brings peace.

The theme of two lordships is powerful and central to the biblical tradition as a whole. Explicitly, the birth stories affirm that Jesus is the true lord. Implicitly, they leave us with a question: where are you going to see your lord? In the power and wealth of Herod and Caesar, of kingship and empire? Or in this Galilean Jewish peasant who saw things very differently? Where are you going to see the decisive manifestation of God? In the domination system? Or in Jesus who was executed by the domination system?[14]

Thus, like Easter itself, the birth stories affirm the lordship of Christ. His lordship has both existential and political dimensions. Existentially, we are in bondage to many things, and the lordship of Christ is the path of personal liberation. Politically, the lordship of Christ challenges systems of domination in the name of God's passion for justice. It is no accident that the rulers of this world, both at the beginning of Jesus' life and at the end, seek to destroy him.

Virginal Conception

What is the truth of the story of a virginal conception? Two related claims seem most important.

First, the theme of remarkable births is part of the tradition of Israel. According to the book of Genesis, Abraham the father of Israel was given the promise that he would have many descendants. Yet he and his immediate descendants (the patriarchs of Israel) all have difficulty having children. Sarah and Abraham, we are told, were ninety and one hundred years old when they finally conceived Isaac. Isaac married Rebekah, and they also were infertile until their old age, when they conceived twins, Esau and Jacob. Jacob became the child of promise, but he and his beloved wife Rachel also had difficulty conceiving. The theme continues in the stories of the conception of Gideon and Samuel. Both were deliverers of Israel in a time of crisis, and both were born to barren women. This repeating theme suggests that the people of God come into existence and are sustained in their existence by the grace of God. Humanly speaking, it was impossible that God's promise would be fulfilled, but by God it was.

Matthew and Luke are both playing this theme. Just as God had acted in the history of Israel to create and sustain the people of God through remarkable births, so also God had now acted in the birth of Jesus. Just as Israel came into existence through the grace of God when humanly speaking it was impossible, so the early Christian community as the continuation of Israel came into existence through the grace of God. This is one dimension of meaning in the story of the virginal conception of Jesus.

There is a second nuance as well. Namely, the story of Jesus being conceived by the Spirit affirms that what happened in Jesus was "of God." The activity of the Spirit of God in his life was projected back to the beginning of his life. What happened in Jesus was not "of the flesh" but "of the Spirit." The story of Jesus' virginal conception affirms that Jesus was "born not of blood or the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God."[15] It is a metaphorical affirmation of Jesus' identity

and significance. Like the voice in the transfiguration story, it affirms, "This is my beloved son; listen to him."[16]

Thus I do not see the story of the virginal conception as a marvel of biology that, if true, proves that Jesus *really* was the Son of God. Rather, it is an early Christian narratival confession of faith and affirmation of allegiance to Jesus. To say "What happened in Jesus was of the Spirit" is not a factual claim dependent upon a biological miracle, but a way of seeing Jesus that immediately involves seeing him as the decisive disclosure of God. He was not possessed by another spirit, as some of his critics said, but was animated by God's Spirit. This is the truth claim in the story of Jesus' conception by the Spirit of God.

The truly important questions about the birth stories are not whether Jesus was born of a virgin or whether there was an empire-wide census that took Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem or whether there was a special star leading wise men from the East. The important questions are, "Is Jesus the light of the world? Is he the true Lord? Is what happened in him 'of God'?" Answering these questions affirmatively lays claim to our whole lives.

Much more could be said about the meanings of these stories for Christians. Like all good stories, their resonances are many. But I will conclude by noting one more dimension of meaning, which I owe to Meister Eckhart, a Christian mystic, theologian, and preacher from the thirteenth century. In one of his Christmas sermons, Eckhart spoke of the virgin birth as something that happens *within us*. That is, the story of the virgin birth is the story of Christ being born within us through the union of the Spirit of God with our flesh. Ultimately, the story of Jesus' birth is not just about the past but about the internal birth in us in the present.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What does the virgin birth mean to you?
2. Why is the virgin birth important to the story of the birth of Jesus?
3. What does it say theologically about the Christ Child?; the purpose & passion of God?