



## How an Unwed Pregnant Teen Became Mother of God

a theological reflection by Sheila T. Harty, September 2008



The Christmas story has been swallowed whole by most Protestants and Catholics without chewing first. This poorly digested deposit of faith sits solidly in the stomachs of sated Christians gathered round their tannenbaums. At Christmas time each year, they reinforce these beliefs and traditions with music and theatre, feasts and gifts, coo-cooing over the baby Jesus. Yet, the inherited Christmas story is "*bad history and bad biology*."<sup>1</sup>

Asked which gospel tells the Christmas story, most people will assume all four: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But only the gospels of Matthew and Luke have an infancy narrative of Jesus with his miraculous birth. Matthew's gospel is earlier (85CE); Luke's a decade later (95CE). Paul's epistles are older than the gospels (50-64CE), but Paul mentions no miraculous birth; in fact, he writes that Jesus was "*born of a woman, born under the law*" (Gal 4:4). Mark's gospel (70CE) is the oldest, but Mark has no miraculous birth either; in fact, he refers to Jesus only as "*son of Mary*" (6:3). John's gospel (100CE) also has no miraculous birth; in fact, he refers twice to Jesus as the "*son of Joseph*" (1:45, 6:42).

Aside from the error in thinking that the gospels reflect actual events in history recorded by eye-witnesses, most Christians also fail to recognize that the two gospel versions of the Christmas story contradict.

### No Camels, Cows, Donkeys, or Sheep

Asked to recount what they know about the Christmas story, even biblical literalists get it wrong. Ordinary Christians will mention shepherds and angels, three wise men on camels following a star in the East to a stable with sheep, cows, and donkeys. They will mention innkeepers turning Joseph and the virgin Mary away when a census took them to the little town of Bethlehem with Mary on a donkey. They will describe the baby Jesus in swaddling cloths, laying in a manger in a stable, before the family escapes Herod and flees into Egypt. Just read the Christmas story in the gospels of Matthew and Luke; you will find no mention of:<sup>2</sup>

- three kings of the Orient — not kings or wise men but astrologers AND no number is given; we're counting their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.<sup>3</sup>
- camels — the magi<sup>4</sup> may have ridden camels, but it doesn't say so.
- sheep, cows, or donkeys in a stable — because there's no stable; we just assume a stable, because there's a manger; but people lived with their animals in, under, or next to the house, so there was always a manger — like a cat dish.
- a donkey on which Mary rode sidesaddle from Nazareth to Bethlehem.
- an innkeeper who turns them away — although an inn is mentioned.



<sup>1</sup> James Shelby Spong, "The Second Fundamental: The Literal Accuracy of the Virgin Birth—Part I," April 11, 2007, Online column: <http://www.dioceseofnewark.org/jsspong/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 60:3-6.

<sup>4</sup> The Magi or Magians were a Persian tribe, but Matthew didn't distinguish carefully among Eastern religious cults by referring to those who saw a star in the East as "Magi" (2:1-12); more accurately, the Chaldeans (prior to Babylonians and Persians) were the astrologers who interpreted celestial omens. Jona Lendering, *Magians: Old Persian Maguš* (Iran Chamber Society, 2007).

None of the above items are in either gospel story of Jesus' birth; they exist only in "*the collective inheritance of Western fantasy*."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, most people's recall of the Christmas story comes not from reading the bible but from seeing too many grade-school pageants or front-yard crèches. In fact, the stories in Matthew and Luke have only four items in common:<sup>6</sup>

1. Jesus was born in Bethlehem
2. Mary was the mother of Jesus
3. She was called a Virgin
4. Joseph was her betrothed

## Differences & Contradictions in God's Word

Other than that, the Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke agree on almost nothing else. Written some ninety to a hundred years after the birth of Jesus, these stories are "*virtually irreconcilable*."<sup>7</sup>

Matthew has no shepherds;

Luke has no wise men.

Matthew's angel appears to Joseph in a dream after Mary is pregnant and the angel is unnamed;

Luke's angel appears to Mary in person before she is pregnant and the angel is Gabriel.

Matthew has Joseph living in Bethlehem;

Luke has Joseph living in Nazareth and traveling to Bethlehem for the census.

Matthew has no census and has Jesus born in Joseph's house in Bethlehem;

Luke has Jesus in a manger because there is no room for them in the inn.

Matthew has Herod out to get Jesus, and so the family escapes;

Luke has no massacre of the innocents and no flight into Egypt.

Moreover, these gospels contradict on the year of Jesus' birth—by 10 to 12 years! So this New Year's Eve, we will be celebrating either the year 2005 or 2017.<sup>8</sup>

- Luke says Jesus was born during the reign of Caesar Augustus (26 BCE to 14 CE) during a census registration for Jews while Quirinius was Governor of Syria, which was 6 CE according to Roman records and the Jewish historian Josephus.<sup>9</sup>
- Matthew says Jesus was born during the rule of King Herod (40 to 4 BCE), according to Roman records and Josephus; but Jesus' birth is probably closer to 6 BCE, given Herod's use of the wise men's rising star for killing all males up to two-years old.

As both Matthew and Luke refer to Herod in their Christmas stories, most scholars opt for the year 4 BCE for the birth of Jesus as reckoned by the end of Herod's reign.<sup>10</sup>

## How We Settled on December 25th

If we don't even know the year of Jesus' birth, why do Christians confidently celebrate it on December 25<sup>th</sup>? The date was found on a Roman calendar for the year 336 CE. That 4<sup>th</sup> century dating suggests interference from Emperor Constantine, after whom Christianity changed dramatically.

<sup>5</sup> Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), pg. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Spong.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973), pg. 54; also, Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), pg. 114.

<sup>8</sup> In the 6th century CE, Dionysius Exiguus (Denis, the Short) proposed a change of calendar reckoning to the year of the Lord from the then current use of the Roman A.U.C. (*Anno Urbis Condita*, "in the year from the building of the city of Rome"; that was, 753 BCE); but Dionysius calculated the reign of Herod wrong.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), Appendix VII: "The Census Under Quirinius," pp. 547-556.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 413, 554.

To unify his empire, Constantine blended Christian and Pagan traditions by officially recognizing their festivals and sanctioning dates for their celebration. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, two prominent Pagan festivals were celebrated in winter.

- The *Saturnalia* honored Saturn, the Roman god of agriculture, from December 18 to 24.
- The birth of *Mithras*, the Persian god of light, was honored from December 25 to January 1.

Outdoing each of these seven-day Pagan festivals, Christmas became a twelve-day celebration, merging Christian traditions with pagan ones, such as feasting, gift-giving, holly wreaths, and mistletoe. The twelve days were a compromise between Western Christianity, which celebrated Constantine's choice of December 25<sup>th</sup> for the birth of Jesus, and Eastern Christianity's choice of January 6<sup>th</sup> for the birth of Jesus—a span of twelve days.

The growing Christian Church accommodated the differences in their Eastern and Western branches by assigning the Luke version of the birth of Jesus to December 25<sup>th</sup> as Christmas and by assigning the Matthew version to January 6<sup>th</sup> as Feast of the Epiphany.<sup>11</sup> The Epiphany, coming twelve days later, commemorated the presentation of Jesus to the Magi from the East—who clearly needed the extra twelve days to get there.

## Matthew's & Luke's Genealogy for Jesus

Because Matthew is the first source for the virgin birth of Jesus—or, more accurately, virginal conception<sup>12</sup>—how he introduces this idea is significant. He has to explain away a rumor. There's a scandal circulating in the first century that Jesus was born illegitimate.<sup>13</sup> A hint of this is found in the Gospel According to John, where a member of the crowd says to Jesus: "*We were not born illegitimate*" (8:41).<sup>14</sup> Matthew is clearer: Mary was pregnant before living with Joseph, her betrothed, and he is more surprised than anyone.

The first seventeen verses of Matthew's gospel is a cryptic way to address this dilemma.<sup>15</sup> Matthew begins with a genealogy from Abraham to Joseph that is appropriate for securing the Davidic lineage for Jesus as prophesized of the Messiah.<sup>16</sup> The customary list of males, covering 42 generations of begets, is interrupted by four women.<sup>17</sup> Their inclusion is unusual for patriarchal Judaism.<sup>18</sup> As Raymond E. Brown wrote: "*Why bring on the ladies?*"<sup>19</sup> Nor are the women needed to fill out the Davidic lineage, as the men with whom the women conceive are already in the list and the women are foreigners.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>11</sup> From the Greek word *epiphaneia* for "manifestation."

<sup>12</sup> Or, more scientifically, "parthenogenesis."

<sup>13</sup> Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, Appendix V: "The Charge of Illegitimacy," pp. 534-542.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 541-542.

<sup>15</sup> "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife [Bathsheba] of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon. And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah. So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations." (Matthew 1:1-17, New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>16</sup> "Just as a covenant was established with David, son of Jesse of the tribe of Judah, that the king's heritage passes only from son to son, so the heritage of Aaron is for his descendants alone." (Ecclesiasticus 45:25, NRSV)

<sup>17</sup> "When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever." (II Samuel 7:12-13, New Revised Standard Version.)

<sup>18</sup> Torah law recognizes paternal lineage, but not for establishing Jewishness, which is matrilineal. Once Jewish, tribal and family affiliation—on which inheritance, kingship, and priesthood depend—is patrilineal.

<sup>19</sup> Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, pg. 71.

<sup>20</sup> Geza Vermes, *The Nativity: History and Legend* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), pg. 22.

Matthew then follows the genealogy with his story of the virginal conception, Jesus born not of Joseph but of the Holy Spirit, which negates the Davidic lineage. So the genealogy must serve another purpose. The clue is the unusual inclusion of the four women.<sup>21</sup> These women are known from Hebrew Scripture as "*sexually tainted*."<sup>22</sup>

The first is **Tamar** who disguised herself as a prostitute to her father-in-law Judah. Her incest story is told in the *Book of Genesis* 38.

The second woman is **Rahab**, a prostitute called "Rahab the Harlot." Her story is told in the *Book of Joshua* 2:1-21 and 6:22-25.

The third woman is **Ruth**, who seduced her mother-in-law's kinsman Boaz by going to his bed. Her story is the *Book of Ruth*.

The fourth woman is **Bathsheba**, "the wife of Uriah, the Hittite," whose adultery with King David was outed by the prophet Nathan. Her story is told in *II Samuel* 11-12.

If that's the lineage that produced the "Savior of the World" from sin, his ancestry runs through incest, prostitution, seduction, and adultery. Seems even appropriate...and that's the point. Despite these unlawful couplings, God works through them.<sup>23</sup> Matthew is covertly trying to spin the rumors of Jesus' illegitimacy to an acceptance of God's inscrutable ways. Luke has less need to do this: he's a Gentile living outside Palestine. Still, a doubt peeks through.

Luke has a genealogy for Jesus also,<sup>24</sup> which differs by more than two-thirds from Matthew's genealogy and is in reverse order. Luke begins with Jesus followed by the only parenthetical qualifier in the list: "*He was the son (as it was thought) of Joseph*" (3:23). Scholars who study and compare ancient manuscripts of the New Testament report that the verses in Matthew and Luke on the virginal conception went through numerous variants and scribal edits; some copyists even excised these passages.<sup>25</sup>

In the two Christmas stories, Matthew and Luke dealt with the charge of illegitimacy differently. Matthew, by beginning his birth story with a genealogy, is pointing out that, even if Jesus were illegitimate, God also works through human frailty.<sup>26</sup> Luke, by presenting a virginal conception with less ambiguity, is putting his weight behind the emerging alibi.

## Prophecy at the Service of Narrative

Matthew centers the rest of his infancy narrative on Joseph's difficulty in dealing with the problem of Mary's pregnancy.<sup>27</sup> Although she becomes pregnant while betrothed, Jewish law would still require divorce—either in court or privately. "*Being a just man*," Joseph decides on the latter. Then the angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him that he should marry her anyway, because she has conceived by the "*Holy Spirit*."

As a Christian Jew, Matthew was addressing his gospel to Jews in Palestine. To add credibility to his account, he used the *midrash* style of sacred Hebrew storytelling,<sup>28</sup> which cites prophecies from Hebrew

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 71-74.

<sup>22</sup> Spong.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*; Brown, pg. 73; also, Robert A. Spivey and D. Moody Smith, Jr., *Anatomy of the New Testament: A Guide to Its Structure and Meaning* (New York: MacMillan, 1969), pg. 99.

<sup>24</sup> "Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work. He was the son (*as it was thought*) of Joseph son of Heli, son of Matthat, son of Levi, son of Melchi, son of Jannai, son of Joseph, son of Mattathias, son of Amos, son of Nahum, son of Esli, son of Naggai, son of Maath, son of Mattathias, son of Semein, son of Josech, son of Joda, son of Joanan, son of Rhesa, son of Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, son of Neri, son of Melchi, son of Addi, son of Cosam, son of Elmamad, son of Er, son of Joshua, son of Eliezer, son of Jorim, son of Matthat, son of Levi, son of Simeon, son of Judah, son of Joseph, son of Jonam, son of Eliakim, son of Melea, son of Menna, son of Mattatha, son of Nathan, son of David, son of Jesse, son of Obed, son of Boaz, son of Sala, son of Nahshon, son of Amminadab, son of Admin, son of Arni, son of Hezron, son of Perez, son of Judah, son of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, son of Terah, son of Nahor, son of Serug, son of Reu, son of Peleg, son of Eber, son of Shelah, son of Cainan, son of Arphaxad, son of Shem, son of Noah, son of Lamech, son of Methuselah, son of Enoch, son of Jared, son of Mahalaleel, son of Cainan, son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God." (Luke 3:23-38, New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>25</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 54-61, 137-140; also, Vermes, pg. 26.

<sup>26</sup> Spong.

<sup>27</sup> Brown poses a question in *An Introduction*, pg. 175, and explicates the charges further in *The Birth of the Messiah*, pp. 534-542; and Spong provides an answer in "The Second Fundamental."

Scripture for deeper meaning. In presenting Jesus as the expected Messiah, Matthew referenced particular texts in Hebrew Scripture as expectations of the Messiah, specifically: Isaiah,<sup>29</sup> Micah,<sup>30</sup> Jeremiah,<sup>31</sup> Nathan,<sup>32</sup> and Hosea.<sup>33</sup> In other words, Matthew used his "*narrative for the confirmation of prophecy*."<sup>34</sup> If you're countering a rumor of scandal, you need all the prophecies you can find.

Matthew used other stylistic parallels to stories from Hebrew Scripture, though not strictly *midrashim*.<sup>35</sup> Still, his intent was "*to make Jesus' origins intelligible against the background of the fulfillment of Old Testament expectations*."<sup>36</sup>

- Matthew's story of the Magi who saw the star at its rising echoes the story of Balaam, a seer in the *Book of Numbers*,<sup>37</sup> who saw a star rise as a sign.
- The story of Herod seeking to kill Jesus by massacring male children is a spin on the story of the Pharaoh in the *Book of Exodus*<sup>38</sup> who sought to kill Moses by slaughtering male Israelite children.
- Likewise, Joseph's dreams when the angel appeared to him reflect back to the patriarch Joseph's dreams in the *Book of Genesis* (37:5-11)
- And Luke's story of John the Baptist's elderly parents Zechariah and Elizabeth parallels the story of Abraham and Sarah also in the *Book of Genesis* (17:15-22).

## The Mistranslation of Virgin

Matthew, however, did not have access to the scriptures in Hebrew. No one did. By then, most Jews didn't even know Hebrew; they used Aramaic or Greek. The Hebrew Scriptures were lost to time; only the Greek translation, the *Septuagint*, was available.

When Matthew wrote "*the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they will call him Immanuel*," he made three errors.

1. The Hebrew word in Isaiah is "*almah*," which means "young woman"; the *Septuagint* translated that as "*parthenos*," which means "virgin." Hebrew has a word for "virgin" (*bethulah*), which Isaiah did not use. The word *almah* is found elsewhere in Hebrew Scripture retaining its meaning of "young woman"<sup>39</sup> Matthew's misuse of this mistranslation was pointed out in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century by the Jewish writer Trypho.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>28</sup> "Rabbinic midrash is a homiletic reflection or meditation on the Bible, which seeks to reinterpret or actualize a given text of the past for present circumstances." Renée Bloch (*Midrash*, 1957), distilled by A. Wright, *The Literary Genre Midrash* (Staten Island NY: Alba, 1967), as cited in Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, Appendix VIII: "Midrash as a Literary Genre," pg. 558.

<sup>29</sup> "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." (Isaiah 7:14); and "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onwards and for evermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this." (Isaiah 9:6-7) (New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>30</sup> "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days." (Micah 5:2, New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>31</sup> "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land." (Jeremiah 23:5); and "Thus says the Lord: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more. (Jeremiah 31:15)

<sup>32</sup> "For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who led out Israel and brought it in. The Lord said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel." (II Sam 5:2, New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>33</sup> "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." (Hosea 11:1, New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>34</sup> Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press, 1990), pg. 328.

<sup>35</sup> Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, Appendix VIII: "Midrash as a Literary Genre," pg. 560.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>37</sup> "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel." (Number 24:17, New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>38</sup> "Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, 'Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.'" (Exodus 1:22, New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>39</sup> Genesis 24:43; Exodus 2:8; Proverbs 30:18-19.

<sup>40</sup> And Trypho answered: "The Scripture has not, 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son,' but, 'Behold, the young woman shall conceive, and bear a son,' and so on, as you quoted. But the whole prophecy refers to Hezekiah, and it is proved that it was fulfilled in him, according to the terms of this prophecy. Moreover, in the fables of those who are called Greeks, it is written that Perseus was begotten of Danae, who was a virgin; he who was called among them Zeus having descended on her in the form of a golden shower. And you ought to feel ashamed when you make assertions similar to theirs, and rather[should] say that this Jesus was born man of men. And if you prove from the Scriptures that He is the Christ, and that on account of having led a life conformed to the law, and perfect, He deserved the honour of being

2. Matthew used the third-person plural pronoun in the phrase "*they will call him Immanuel*"; whereas Hebrew Scripture used a third-person singular, "*she shall call him Immanuel*," which the *Septuagint* wrongly translated in the second person singular "*you*." This error buffered Matthew's next error.
3. He took the prophecy out of context.<sup>41</sup> Isaiah was addressing the military challenges of his day. Isaiah's prophecy was that a siege on Jerusalem would be lifted. In the mytho-poetic language of Hebrew, Isaiah used analogy to measure when. Instead of saying simply "*the siege will pass before eight years*," Isaiah said: "*the siege will pass by the time a child, born of a young woman now pregnant, has reached the age of wisdom*," which is the ability to choose between good and evil—usually seven years old.

Raymond E. Brown, the dean of New Testament scholarship, is emphatic that the Isaiah prophecy does not predict a virginal conception.<sup>42</sup> Brown stated that the virginal conception of Jesus is a "*minority view*," "*scarcely attested*," of "*dubious historicity*," with a "*slender basis in scripture*."<sup>43</sup>

### Translating Jesus to Greco-Roman Ears

Graeco-Roman myths and legends circulated also within the eastern Mediterranean world, influencing Jewish Christian thinking. When Hellenized Jews took the story of Jesus into the Greek and Roman world, the efficacy of preaching and teaching prompted the adoption of words and images familiar to the Graeco-Roman culture. For example, a rising star was the sign of a Greek hero's birth.<sup>44</sup> But in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, facts about birth were not fully understood. Given the mystery of fertility, supernatural parentage was often conveniently claimed.

*In the pre-Christian Roman Empire, virgin birth was a shorthand symbol commonly used to designate a man's divinity.*<sup>45</sup>

Religious leaders, in particular, were frequently believed to be born as the result of a divine being acting upon a virgin<sup>46</sup>—as was so for Zarathrustra. Numerous virgin births were claimed throughout the ancient world.<sup>47</sup> The gods Apollo, Bacchus, and Perseus. The mythic heroes Jason, Minos, and Hercules. The great rulers Sargon, Alexander, and Augustus Caesar. And the sages Pythagoras, Apollonius, and Plato. All birth stories of great people are mythological in their attempt to interpret retroactively the meaning of that greatness.

The birth of Jesus was no exception. His virginal conception was a cultural fusion of pagan myths and legendary heroes—the Christian adaptation being "a miracle." In other words, "*Christology developed backwards*."<sup>48</sup> A virgin birth became part of the master story.

*elected to be Christ, [it is well]; but do not venture to tell monstrous phenomena, lest you be convicted of talking foolishly like the Greeks.*" (Dialogue with Trypho, by Justin Martyr, Chapter LXVII, 150 CE)

<sup>41</sup> "Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For 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. The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria.'" (Isaiah 7:10-17, New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>42</sup> Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, pp. 149; also, *An Introduction*, pg. 219.

<sup>43</sup> Brown, *Biblical Exegesis and Church Doctrine* (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 1985), pp. 34-40; also, *The Virgin Conception*, pg. 53; *An Introduction*, pg. 219; and *Birth of the Messiah*, pp. 145-149.

<sup>44</sup> Warner, pg. 183.

<sup>45</sup> Warner, pg. 34; also see, Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), pp.297-314; also, Campbell, *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), pp. 237-290.

<sup>46</sup> Warner, pp. 34-38; also, Brown, *The Virginal Conception*, pg. 61.

<sup>47</sup> Spong, *Born of a Woman* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), pp. 56-57.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 43.

## So Do We Take Down the Crèche?

The crèche, introduced by Francis of Assisi in 1223,<sup>49</sup> inflates a lot of material into one diorama. Not only are all the elements from the gospels of Matthew and Luke included, but also elements from nonbiblical sources. Much, it seems, is needed to fulfill the dramatic potential of the Christmas story. As Bishop Spong has said:

*There is no reputable biblical scholar of world rank today, either Catholic or Protestant, who still treats the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke as literal history, not a single one.*<sup>50</sup>

The infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke were created less to satisfy the curiosity of Christians about the early life of Jesus than to proclaim his Messiahship and Kingship.<sup>51</sup> The gifts from the wise men confirmed that exalted status: gold for a king; frankincense for the divine; myrrh for power over death.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, the Jews' expectation of the Messiah included no virginal conception; that concept is Hellenistic and Egyptian.<sup>53</sup> Nor does one need "a supernatural birth to be declared Son of God in a Jewish context."<sup>54</sup>

The Christian proclamation of Jesus' kingship as the Messiah was a missing part of the gospel "good news," because Jesus did not proclaim himself.<sup>55</sup> The gospels are not history but theology; their intent is not a biography of Jesus but a proclamation of the Christ. The meaning is profound, but not literally true.

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<sup>49</sup> Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, pg. 419, n. 34.

<sup>50</sup> Spong, *The Second Fundamental*.

<sup>51</sup> John McKenzie, SJ, *The Power and the Wisdom: An Interpretation of the New Testament* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1965), pg. 79.

<sup>52</sup> Spong, "The Second Fundamental."

<sup>53</sup> Koester, pg. 306.

<sup>54</sup> Spong, *Born of a Woman*, pg. 26.

<sup>55</sup> Koester, pg. 80.

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