Andrew T. Lincoln is Portland Professor of New Testament at the University of Gloucestershire. Among his many publications are commentaries on Ephesians (1990), Colossians (2000) and John's Gospel (2005), and the books *Paradise Now and Not Yet* (1981), *The Theology of the Later Pauline Letters* (1995), *Truth on Trial* (2000) and *Hebrews: A Guide* (2006). At present he is also researching and writing in the area of the Bible and spirituality.

BORN OF A VIRGIN?

Reconceiving Jesus in the Bible, tradition and theology

ANDREW T. LINCOLN

SPCK

First published in Great Britain in 2013

Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
36 Causton Street
London SW1P 4ST
www.spckpublishing.co.uk

Copyright © Andrew T. Lincoln 2013

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

SPCK does not necessarily endorse the individual views contained in its publications.

The author and publisher have made every effort to ensure that the external website addresses included in this book are correct and up to date at the time of going to press. The author and publisher are not responsible for the content, quality or continuing accessibility of the sites.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Anglicized edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, and are used by permission. All rights reserved.

The Nicene Creed prepared by the English Language Liturgical Consultation, based on *Praying Together* © ELLC 1998. The Nicene Creed as taken from *Common Worship: Services and Prayers* is copyright © The Archbishops' Council, 2000. Both are reproduced by permission.

Every effort has been made to seek permission to use copyright material reproduced in this book. The publisher apologizes for those cases where permission might not have been sought and, if notified, will formally seek permission at the earliest opportunity.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–281–05839–6
eBook ISBN 978–0–281–07136–4

eBook by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong

Typeset by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
First printed in Great Britain by Ashford Colour Press
Subsequently digitally printed in Great Britain

Produced on paper from sustainable forests

To Dee
with admiration, gratitude and love

Contents

Preface

Justification for revisiting a well-worn topic will be provided in the book's first chapter. Some readers may, however, find it helpful to know what led the writer to embark on its further exploration. As a Christian engaged in New Testament teaching and scholarship in both university and theological college settings in my early career, I had given lectures on the historical Jesus, on the resurrection narratives and on Matthew and Luke as a whole, but had not had to teach on the infancy narratives in any detailed fashion and so had had no particular academic reason to come to a clearly worked-out position on the virgin birth. I had, of course, read much of the scholarly literature and commentaries and so was aware of some of the problems and complexities surrounding the historicity and genre of the infancy narratives. I would be reminded of the issues of interpretation when reciting the creed and particularly at the Christmas season, not least when listening to sermons whose preachers seemed to be quite unaware of the thoughts of any critically informed members of their congregations about the status of the nativity stories. While I had clear views about the resurrection and its historical basis, I tended to bracket this issue of the status of the virgin birth. Unless asked directly about what I thought, I kept my reservations pretty much to myself, partly because of the confessional nature of some of the institutions in which I have taught. I did, however, have the experience of being invited to interview for a post at one well-known theological seminary and being requested to submit comments about its statement of faith that could be discussed at the interview. As part of my submission, I wrote,

> The statement uses the language 'being conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.' Whether this language has a historical base is difficult to determine, but it seems clear to me that in Matthew's and Luke's birth narratives theological interests frequently override historicity and, in comparison with the rest of the New Testament, that the virgin birth does not belong to the centre of the gospel, and so I am open to the possibility that the language of conception by the Spirit and virgin birth refers not to a biological or historical fact but is to be seen as the evangelists' depiction in narrative form of their conviction about the divine Sonship of Jesus.

My comments resulted in the immediate withdrawal of the invitation to interview! At another theological institution at which I taught I did find

myself objecting publicly and strongly when a rather conservative visiting bishop declared that in his view the virgin birth was the crucial and basic starting point in a robust apologetic for contemporary Christianity. This had to be precisely the wrong place at which to start. Both for the early Christians and for contemporary Christian faith, belief in the resurrection is the far more significant point of departure, and whatever one thinks about the place of the virgin birth in the Christian faith will be consequent upon a belief in the resurrection and not the other way around.

But I did not have to address these matters in any more detailed fashion until I was asked to give some lectures on the use of the Jewish Scriptures in the New Testament birth narratives to a group of those training to become ministers and lay readers in the Church of England and the Methodist Church. Although my topic was not directly that of the virgin birth, it was obvious to me that what I had to say about the pervasive way in which the Jewish Scriptures played a role in the formation of the stories would raise questions about the historicity of all the material, including the annunciation accounts. The students came from a variety of theological traditions and so, if pressed on the historicity of the virgin birth, I wanted to be able to help my audience think through the options theologically and pastorally. Yet when I looked for resources for this part of my own preparation, for discussions that not only explored the texts and their historicity but also brought into play the Christian confessional tradition, systematic issues in Christology, and problems arising from contemporary knowledge and sensitivities, I became aware of the rarity of this type of treatment. The reflections begun then eventually became an essay for a symposium on Christology and Scripture.[1] Both the responses at that symposium and a continuing awareness that many thoughtful Christians find the virgin birth a difficulty and are not sure how to handle it confirmed that a fuller treatment might be worthwhile. Anyone familiar with the earlier essay will note that further study, though not changing the overall direction of the argument, has produced a change of mind on some issues, in particular whether it should be assumed that the New Testament has only one perspective on Jesus' birth. I began to discover for myself, therefore, that there was much more to explore about the New Testament itself than I had thought there would be! As it happened, however, major surgery and a longer than expected convalescence, followed

[1] Published as 'Born of a Virgin: Credal Affirmation and Critical Reading', in eds A. Lincoln and A. Paddison, *Christology and Scripture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London: T. & T. Clark International, 2007), 84–103.

later by another serious illness, combined with commitments to other projects, meant that beginning work on that fuller exploration had to be delayed for a considerably more extended period than I had anticipated. It is presented now as an attempt to gain greater clarity about the nature and scope of the problems.

I hesitate to mention it but there is one further personal curiosity that has only surfaced consciously recently. I now remember in childhood asking my parents why I was given my middle name and being told that it was the Christian name of a close friend of my father in theological college. Strangely, I never met this close friend and the family seemed to have lost touch with him. It later emerged that at least one of the reasons for this was that the friend had changed his views on theological matters and 'no longer believed in the virgin birth'! What's in a name? Perhaps it was meant to be that I should end up exploring this issue for myself!

More seriously, though none of them bears any responsibility for the conclusions reached here, there are some names that deserve mention for their help, stimulus, critique and support at various stages of my interest in this topic. They include Dr Stephen Barton, Professor David Catchpole and Professor Richard Burridge, and three colleagues at the University of Gloucestershire, biblical scholars Dr Lloyd Pietersen and Professor Gordon McConville, and, most especially, theologian – and my wife – Dr Dee Carter.

Abbreviations

Abbreviations for the titles of ancient sources other than the Bible follow SBL conventions.

JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JSHJ	*Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
NovT	*Novum Testamentum*
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
SJT	*Scottish Journal of Theology*
TS	*Theological Studies*

1

What is there to explore?

Three recent scholarly assertions suggest forcefully, but from quite different perspectives, that the attempt to explore the topic of Jesus' birth in the context of the Church's adherence to scriptural and credal formulations of a virginal conception is likely to be a futile enterprise. The first is the view of a Christian theologian, who, before his recent move to the United States, taught in a British university.

> Although . . . it is possible to set forth a robust two-natures doctrine of the Incarnation that conforms to Chalcedonian Christology in all other particulars apart from its denial of the Virgin Birth, such a doctrine does not reflect the teaching of scripture or the tradition. Consequently, such a NVB [No Virgin Birth] argument is wholly inadequate, indeed, is an unorthodox statement of how the Incarnation took place. (This is so overwhelmingly obvious that it is almost embarrassing to have to state it so baldly.)[1]

For Crisp, Scripture and tradition are so clear and unqualifiedly normative that it is futile to imagine that one could attempt to rethink this topic and still claim to be orthodox in one's Christology. The second is the opinion of a German New Testament scholar who was eventually barred from official teaching in a Protestant theological faculty.

> The statement that Jesus was engendered by the Spirit and born of a virgin is a falsification of the historical facts. At all events he had a human father . . . Any interpretation which fails to take a clear stand here is to be branded a lie.[2]

For Lüdemann the historical facts about Jesus' birth are so obvious that, once this is observed, any attempt to think theologically about the matter is not only futile but is to indulge in a cover-up of the truth. The third is the conclusion of a well-known writer on the historical Jesus who is also

---

[1] O. D. Crisp, *God Incarnate: Explorations in Christology* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2009), 101–2. This section of Crisp's book was originally published as 'On the "Fittingness" of the Virgin Birth', *Heythrop Journal* 49 (2008), 197–221 (217).

[2] G. Lüdemann, *Virgin Birth? The Real Story of Mary and Her Son Jesus* (London: SCM, 1998), 140.

a Catholic layperson. '"Virginal conception" is a theological claim about Jesus and not a biological claim about Mary and the only thing sillier or sadder than taking "virginal conception" literally is opposing it literally.'[3] Unlike Lüdemann, Crossan thinks there is something to talk about theologically but nevertheless dismisses any further historical consideration of the virgin birth[4] tradition as futile, indeed as silly and sad.[5]

What then can be the justification for an exploration of the traditions about Jesus' birth that attempts to be literary, theological and historical in its orientation? And isn't any discussion that involves the virgin birth bound to be not much more than a rehashing of the tired old debates between more conservative and more liberal versions of Christianity? Despite what appears to be so overwhelmingly obvious, but in very different ways, to these three scholars, the situation is rather more complex, and this introductory chapter will try to explain more fully why this is so. To put it briefly at the outset, there are many, and the present writer is among them, who unapologetically find themselves sympathetic both to some of the concerns of Crisp about the status of Scripture and credal tradition, on the one hand, and to some of the concerns of Lüdemann and Crossan about the historical problems of the virgin birth tradition, on the other. Our identity as Christians is shaped by the Church's confession that Jesus Christ is God incarnate and we see no incompatibility in maintaining that identity while attempting to read Scripture and understand tradition critically. In fact, both Christian discipleship and intellectual integrity demand that we do so. Where, as in the case of the tradition about Jesus' birth, there are perceived problems and Christians take different stances, then these need to be investigated seriously. Crisp appears to think that the historical tradition is unambiguous and there are no serious difficulties in holding it. Lüdemann and Crossan appear to think that the historical difficulties are so overwhelming as to no longer require discussion. How is such a chasm between perspectives possible? At the very least, then, part of any exploration will still involve the need

---

[3] J. D. Crossan, 'Response to Robert M. Price', in eds J. K. Beilby and P. R. Eddy, *The Historical Jesus: Five Views* (London: SPCK, 2010), 85.

[4] For the sake of convenience and stylistic variation, 'virgin birth' is employed interchangeably in this book with the more accurate designation for the topic under discussion, namely, 'virginal conception'.

[5] This has not, however, prevented him from having written about it, see e.g. J. D. Crossan, 'Virgin Mother or Bastard Child?', in ed. A.-J. Levine, *A Feminist Companion to Mariology* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 37–55 and M. J. Borg and J. D. Crossan, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus's Birth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), esp. 99–127. It is worth noting that, despite what they claim as so obvious, both Crisp and Lüdemann in their writings also devote considerable efforts to stating the obvious.

to explain what are the historical difficulties in the tradition and to evaluate these rather than simply dismissing this aspect of the debate either as potentially putting one outside the bounds of Christian orthodoxy or as sad or silly. Far too many honest Christians have genuine problems about how to take the tradition for the former form of dismissal to be fair and far too many intelligent Christians believe the virgin birth to be historical for the latter form to be appropriate. Again, if one were to conclude that historical and other difficulties were weighted against the virgin birth tradition, then there would still be at the very least the need to discuss whether and why there might be a theological claim in this tradition that should nevertheless be considered seriously.

It is perhaps not surprising that the present writer, whose primary area of expertise is study of the New Testament, who pursues that study with a theological interest and as a member of a church that recites the creed, and who encounters not only diametrically opposing views among both biblical scholars and theologians but also a great deal of confusion among students and church members on this topic, should optimistically think that further exploration might not prove merely a waste of time over a matter of little consequence. The hope that such an enterprise might not be entirely futile is also fuelled by the belief that the situation in which it now takes place is one that has shifted from the old discussions between conservatives and liberals where one's stance on this topic could simply be reduced to whether or not one believes in the supernatural. Phenomena such as post-liberal theology and post-critical approaches to the Bible have produced a rather different climate in which to discuss such an issue and it is one that affects also those from both evangelical and Roman Catholic traditions. It should also not be surprising that, when it comes to the main part of this book, its exploration will start with a more detailed investigation of the New Testament traditions, the area of the writer's expertise, where it produces some fresh insights, and then look at later developments and the theological issues raised in the process. Here there will be less detailed interaction with secondary literature, and the writer's need to seek indulgence from church historians and systematic theologians for straying into their areas of expertise will be readily apparent. The order in which the exploration is presented should not, however, be thought to reflect a simple two-stage hermeneutic in which constructive theology straightforwardly builds on the foundations supplied by biblical and historical study. The impetus for study of the topic in the first place is theological, and a dialectical relationship between critical reading of Scripture and constructive theology is involved at every stage.

An initial justification for the exploration and the way it will be conducted has been offered. But it is worth stepping back and approaching the matter more slowly. Why focus on Jesus' birth at all? What is the significance of anyone's birth in relation to that person's life as a whole? Though some have always turned to astrology to discover the significance of the time of their birth, for most people there is little to explore about the meaning of their births other than to state the obvious – they constitute the beginning of their lives. Any further significance is to be found only within the context of those lives as a whole. If those lives are deemed to have special importance, then their beginnings, in retrospect, are caught up in the impact of lives that have made a difference. In studying such lives due attention will then be paid to the formative influences on them from the very beginning, and the circumstances of their birth to particular parents at a particular time and a particular place can be said to take on meaning. There are, however, other instances in which talk of the significance of a birth would appear to make sense. They have to do with exceptional aspects surrounding a birth. Those who discover they were given up for adoption at birth might have good reason to reflect on the meaning of their arrival in the world in such circumstances. Other unusual factors may contribute to giving special significance to a child's birth, ranging from dramatic rescues from death of women about to give birth to medical choices between the life of the mother and the life of the child. But what about reflection not just on the significance of our birth but also on that of our conception in particular? For many, who know themselves to be the biological product of their present parents' act of procreation, thinking any further about this may be a case of 'too much information, thank you.' But for others it is their conception and not simply their birth that can become crucial in constructing their identity and that raises important questions. Did my parents have difficulty in conceiving and was I wanted and planned or 'an accident'? Was it in fact my present parents who conceived me or was someone else involved? If both nature and nurture have shaped who we are, then accurate knowledge about our conception is not just a matter of curiosity. Advances in medical technology and the complexities of family life can lead to further pressing questions about who supplied the genes that formed my genetic identity at conception and how these have affected my life. Those born with a physical handicap or who develop a major disease often wish to know if there is some genetic explanation and this requires accurate information about the parties who conceived them. Those who are products of IVF treatment or find themselves with adoptive parents or in a one-parent

family or with a same-sex couple understandably often think that such information will give them a better sense of who they are. If there is no transparency or disclosure about these matters they can become ticking time bombs within families. It is hardly surprising, for example, that in the UK in 2005 the law was changed in the interest of children so that donors of sperm or eggs no longer had the right to anonymity and had to be prepared to be identified.

Similar reflections impinge on exploring the birth and conception of Jesus. Does the meaning of Jesus' birth derive from what was believed to be the significance of his life as a whole? This question receives further force when we remember that at the time of Jesus it was conventional in telling of the lives of great people, particularly when little was known of their origins, to depict their births in a way that already displayed unique features befitting their future greatness. Or does the meaning of Jesus' birth derive from circumstances surrounding the birth itself, such as his parents living at a time of expectations of a Jewish Messiah in the context of the Roman occupation of Israel? Was it in fact the conception that made this birth significant, because, as some of the traditions appear to claim, there was no male involved or the male involved was someone other than Joseph, the man who reared him? What difference does knowledge about his conception make to Jesus' identity? How might the divergence between ancient views on conception and modern knowledge of genetic identity affect our assessment of such issues? It could well be, of course, that a mixture of the above factors played some part in the meaning that is given to Jesus' birth – the beliefs of his followers about the outcome of his life, something unusual about his conception, and the context of contemporary religious and cultural understanding. A major part of exploring the traditions about Jesus' conception and birth will be to attempt to discover how far this is the case.

The significance of a person's birth is, however, not reducible simply to the results of investigating the original event or the interpretation given it by those closest to it or by those most immediately affected by the impact of the life that followed. Meaning can accrue over a longer period of time. This can be seen to a limited extent within a person's own lifetime and is aided by the practice of marking the day of our birth by a yearly commemoration. Apart from serving as a reminder of the ageing process, this can be a time not only of celebration but also of reflection, a time of thinking about what we have done with the gift of life, of remembering those who brought us into life, and over time added or different significance is often given to the way we think about our birth and the role it

plays in the stories we tell ourselves about our lives. Something similar applies to the birthdays of those who are close to us. Even after their deaths we remember the birthdays of parents or grandparents and each time attach different memories and meanings to the lives that began on those days. With great figures from the past, particular anniversaries, such as the fiftieth or one hundredth commemoration of their birth, can become the occasion for fresh investigation of their contribution to public life or to a particular discipline and of their continuing impact. In the case of Jesus, where the Christian Church looks back to its origins in his life as well as confessing his living presence, it is again hardly surprising that the meaning attached to his birth, and to the role of his mother, has accrued over the centuries. The Church's creeds highlight his birth in confessing God's purposes of salvation for humanity, theological reflection on the incarnation and the Trinity give further significance to this particular birth, and artistic and musical treatments of the nativity and of the Madonna have made their own contributions to its meaning. Not least, the yearly celebration of Jesus' birth at Christmas, dating from the fourth century, with its accompanying liturgy, carols, sermons, nativity scenes and special customs, often taken over from non-Christian practices and reconfigured, makes a huge impact on how Christians think about the meaning of Jesus' birth. At the same time, more recent critical thinking about Scripture and tradition, about miracles and biology, has played its part in the type of meaning Christians attach to the birth of their Saviour. Any full exploration of that significance, then, will need to take account not only of its historical aspects but also of both its traditional and contemporary dimensions in Christian thought and life.[6]

This account of the growing significance of some births and of Jesus' in particular should not be allowed to disguise the fact that in the latter case the stakes have now been raised considerably. Christians hold that the birth of which we are speaking is not simply that of a figure in history, Jesus of Nazareth, but is also in some sense related to his identity as the second 'person' of the triune God. It is the point in history at which the Son of God or the Word assumed human form. Exploring *this* birth has momentous significance. And it is this claim that accounts to a considerable extent for the strongly held but diverging convictions about Jesus' birth. If this was its import, assert some, then surely the manner in which

[6] For reflections on the significance of liturgical recollection of Christmas and its difference from historical reconstruction, see T. O'Loughlin, 'Losing Mystery in History: The Challenge of Recalling the Nativity', in ed. J. Corley, *New Perspectives on the Nativity* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2009), 180–99.

it occurred is unlikely to be through the normal human means of producing children. But, others retort, this view assumes that God only works significantly in the world through exceptional or miraculous circumstances. And, still others add, if the exceptional circumstances included no human father being involved in Jesus' birth, then that surely calls into question whether, whatever else he might have been, Jesus of Nazareth was a human being like us. Exploration of the tradition of this birth, then, unavoidably raises not only historical questions but also major theological ones. What might the claim that God takes incarnate form mean? Does it involve God intervening in the course of human history in a way that has biological implications? Or did the means by which this particular human being became the incarnation of the Word include his birth through the usual human process of procreation? Does belief that Jesus Christ was God incarnate necessarily entail belief in his virginal conception? These questions arising from Christian belief and from its sources in Scripture and creed are bound to be at the heart of any investigation of the tradition. There has been a long history of reflection on and debate about them and this itself suggests it would be foolish to imagine there is nothing here worth further exploration.

Despite such considerations, as we indicated at the beginning, the question 'What is there to explore?' continues to be raised in a rather dismissive way. On the one hand, there are those who take the rationalistic view that no educated post-Enlightenment person could seriously entertain the notion of a virgin birth, the birth narratives are no different from fairy tales, and so the matter is simply not worth further discussion. On the other hand, there are those who think that an appeal to the gospel birth narratives and a belief in miracles makes Jesus' virgin birth a fact and so only a non-believer would think there is anything further to argue about.[7] These more popular attitudes on both sides, and the speaking past each other that they involve, are also found in the writings of biblical scholars and theologians who think that the issues surrounding Jesus' birth all boil down to whether one is prepared to believe in the supernatural and in miracles and, once that has been established, no further exploration is really necessary. At one end of the spectrum, there are those who hold that if Scripture and the creed state that Jesus was born without a human father and all things are possible for the God who is the Creator of the universe, then only those who disbelieve in the miraculous powers of such

[7] Belief in Jesus' virginal conception is, of course, a major feature of Islam, but that is a topic that cannot be explored here.

myself objecting publicly and strongly when a rather conservative visiting bishop declared that in his view the virgin birth was the crucial and basic starting point in a robust apologetic for contemporary Christianity. This had to be precisely the wrong place at which to start. Both for the early Christians and for contemporary Christian faith, belief in the resurrection is the far more significant point of departure, and whatever one thinks about the place of the virgin birth in the Christian faith will be consequent upon a belief in the resurrection and not the other way around.

But I did not have to address these matters in any more detailed fashion until I was asked to give some lectures on the use of the Jewish Scriptures in the New Testament birth narratives to a group of those training to become ministers and lay readers in the Church of England and the Methodist Church. Although my topic was not directly that of the virgin birth, it was obvious to me that what I had to say about the pervasive way in which the Jewish Scriptures played a role in the formation of the stories would raise questions about the historicity of all the material, including the annunciation accounts. The students came from a variety of theological traditions and so, if pressed on the historicity of the virgin birth, I wanted to be able to help my audience think through the options theologically and pastorally. Yet when I looked for resources for this part of my own preparation, for discussions that not only explored the texts and their historicity but also brought into play the Christian confessional tradition, systematic issues in Christology, and problems arising from contemporary knowledge and sensitivities, I became aware of the rarity of this type of treatment. The reflections begun then eventually became an essay for a symposium on Christology and Scripture.[1] Both the responses at that symposium and a continuing awareness that many thoughtful Christians find the virgin birth a difficulty and are not sure how to handle it confirmed that a fuller treatment might be worthwhile. Anyone familiar with the earlier essay will note that further study, though not changing the overall direction of the argument, has produced a change of mind on some issues, in particular whether it should be assumed that the New Testament has only one perspective on Jesus' birth. I began to discover for myself, therefore, that there was much more to explore about the New Testament itself than I had thought there would be! As it happened, however, major surgery and a longer than expected convalescence, followed

[1] Published as 'Born of a Virgin: Credal Affirmation and Critical Reading', in eds A. Lincoln and A. Paddison, *Christology and Scripture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London: T. & T. Clark International, 2007), 84–103.