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Abstract

Cathy Jones and Sarah Jane Boss, the editors of *Maria*, commissioned my discussion paper on arguments against the historicity of the virgin conception as the first contribution of a range of papers on the topic which will follow in the journal. They also kindly offered me the right to reply to Sarah's response. I am glad to take up the opportunity in order to further the discussion.

Author

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Sarah Jane Boss has provided a helpful analysis of the nature of a miracle and its relationship to the virgin conception.¹ However, I prefer to find a natural explanation for the existence of the idea of the virgin conception if one seems relatively evident, and I think there is one to be found, thanks to New Testament scholarship. Hopefully, I will not be regarded as a grumpy Humean seeking to rationalise away the wonders of the Christian faith! My motive, having been a Marian devotee for many years, is to understand Mary more deeply as a figure of history. And Mary continues to fill me with wonder, even though I do not see the virgin conception as literal history. I am not even sure that the writers of Matthew and Luke did so.

However, I do accept Sarah's point that Christians have traditionally seen it as such – from the Church Fathers and on through the centuries until or despite the period of modern critical scholarship – and based their theology on that belief. I also accept that the virgin conception and birth have been regarded as an integral element of the theology of the Incarnation. Not only the Church theologians of history thought so, but one has only to do an Internet search to see how many Christians today argue that the historicity of the virgin conception is necessary for the Incarnation.

Nevertheless, I disagree with that. The Incarnation is primary and integral to the Christian faith in its beginnings much more so than the virgin conception. My evidence for stating this lies in the New Testament itself. Sarah has suggested some reasons why various New Testament writers (all bar Matthew and Luke) omit the story of the virgin conception. I think the argument from the silence of the rest of the New Testament is actually stronger than it appears to be in her argument. If one was to ask, 'From where do we know that God was incarnate in Christ?', the first answer you would get, I suggest, would be the Gospel of John. The famous Prologue (1:1-18) tells us that 'the Word became flesh and lived among us'. This is reinforced in the First Epistle of John. The second answer might be the Pauline Epistles. Perhaps the 'kenotic' hymn of Philippians 2:6-11 would be suggested, and then 2 Corinthians 5:19: 'in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself'. But the Pauline and the Johannine writings are also places where the virgin conception is not mentioned.

Sarah explains this omission by noting that something written to a target community for a particular reason (as in the case of an epistle) could not be expected to cover everything. That is true, but we know a great deal about Paul's theology from his letters. We know what he believed about the Incarnation, the Resurrection, the Eucharist, the Trinity, the Church, Christ as the perfect image of God, Christianity and the Jewish Law, and much more. The fact that there is no mention of the virgin conception is a strong argument against his knowing

¹ I have used the expression 'virgin conception' throughout. Sarah's 'virginal conception' is perhaps grammatically more correct, but I made a conscious decision to use the former, as to my mind it reads more easily and parallels the common usage of 'virgin birth'.



anything about it. And when he writes, 'born of a woman, born under the Law' (Gal. 4:4), does he not have a perfect opportunity to say something about the virgin conception?

John's Prologue is a powerful and abiding theological statement in a gospel which expounds the doctrines of Incarnation, Christology, and Trinity. It is difficult to argue that important, even essential, elements of the theology of the Incarnation that the evangelist knew about are nevertheless left out. While it is true that, in John, the institution of the Eucharist is also omitted, nevertheless we do read about the Last Supper albeit with a different narrative from the synoptics, and we have the symbolic descriptions of Jesus as the Bread of Life and the True Vine.

If the virgin conception is integral to and necessary for the Incarnation, then it is strange not to find it anywhere in these foundational texts. Either it was known to Paul and John; if so, we might wonder why they did not mention it, given its importance. Or, if it was not known to them, then we might doubt that it was widely regarded as important in the first century.² How was it handed down in a manner which bypassed these most seminal of Christian theologians? You could reply that it became central in the development of Christian doctrine; not everything was established in the early years. That is true, but this is not a discussion about the eventual suitability of the virgin conception as a way of describing the Incarnation, but about its historicity based upon the knowledge of it in the earliest Church.

I conclude that the historicity of the virgin conception was neither integral to nor necessary for first century belief in the Incarnation. It was a particular way of describing it which arose in one community, at least. Christian faith in the apostolic period was expressed in ways that were consonant with the context, historical and cultural.³ Even if we accept that some aspects of the Incarnation were expressed by means of symbolic and legendary narratives, this does not inhibit our living in its truth. Sarah claims that 'the virginal conception has a primal, or originary, character' and '... like the sacraments, its saving reality in the present is guaranteed by its historical reality in the past'. In my mind, these statements are true of the Incarnation rather than the historicity of the virgin conception.

Sarah also points out that some writers might prefer not to describe something that is mysterious and beyond description. Mark's omission of any resurrection appearances is an example. Yet we are left in no doubt in Mark's Gospel that the resurrection occurred, even if it is not described. Jesus foretells it and the women find his empty tomb, where they are told

² I concede here that a similar argument can be made against the importance of Mary in the early Church, i.e. that no evidence for it can be found in Paul and Mark. But at least she is prominent in John, and Mark certainly includes important and influential women at the critical moments of his gospel, as in 14:3-9, 15:40, 15:47, and 16:1-8, among whom we can assume that Mary was a leading figure.

³ As I wrote in my original paper, the Roman Catholic Church agrees that we need to take the original context and genre of biblical writing into account, although it continues to defend the historicity of the virgin conception, as this is doctrine. See *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 1993, produced and published by the Pontifical Biblical Commission and available at https://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/PBC_Interp-FullText.htm (last accessed on 4 December 2025).

that Jesus has risen and that Peter and the disciples will see him in Galilee. In Mark, there are no clues anything like these to the virgin conception.

Sarah's third reason for the omission of the virgin conception in most of the New Testament writings might have been because people were familiar with it. But Mark's is the first written collection of texts that describe the details of Jesus' life, and this includes many stories with which people were presumably familiar, such as the baptism of Jesus, healing and feeding miracles, the institution of the Eucharist (also described in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians) and Jesus' trial, crucifixion, and empty tomb. It would have been strange for him to have omitted the first great miracle of the life of the Son of God had he known about it.

In the conclusion to my paper, I offered a plausible solution to the problem which is often raised: that the idea of a virgin conception cannot have been invented because there is no obvious precedent for it in the Jewish or even Graeco-Roman cultures. I suggested that it originated as a story of the miraculous birth of Jesus from Mary as a very young woman,⁴ which then developed into a powerful theological metaphor based on the importance of the virgin as a symbol for Israel in the Hebrew scriptures. You can see the former, the straightforward story of the miracle birth, in Matthew, and the latter, the development of this into a beautiful and powerful set of metaphorical narratives in Luke. If John frequently utilises the metaphor of birth in his understanding of the new life brought about by Jesus' death on the cross, then why could not Luke also have used conception and birth as a metaphor?

Yet I do not think that Luke presented the virgin as a theological metaphor solely to represent the faithful poor of Israel or the nascent Church as abstract concepts. I think he had in mind real people among whom Jesus lived and because of whom the Christian faith took shape. These include the women that Luke remembered in 8:2-3 and 24:10, among whom Mary the mother of Jesus must have held a prominent position.

In contemplating the mystery of the virgin conception, we should not disregard the God-given gift of our rationality even while we recognise its limits when faced with the wonder of the Gospel. I will finish with another memorable quote from the late Anglican bishop, John Austin Baker:

Sound faith systems do not require us, in Lewis Carroll's phrase, to 'believe six impossible things before breakfast', but are always based on reason seeking to understand. The difference between knowledge and belief is that belief concerns itself with questions which, though of fundamental importance, are such that they can never be answered with absolute certainty – not in this life, anyway.⁵

⁴ Presumably with the Septuagint version of Isaiah 7:14 as an influential proof text.

⁵ From the 'Space in the City' talks at Winchester, 2004, at <https://spaceinthecity.org.uk/faith-and-doubt.html> (accessed 4 December 2025).