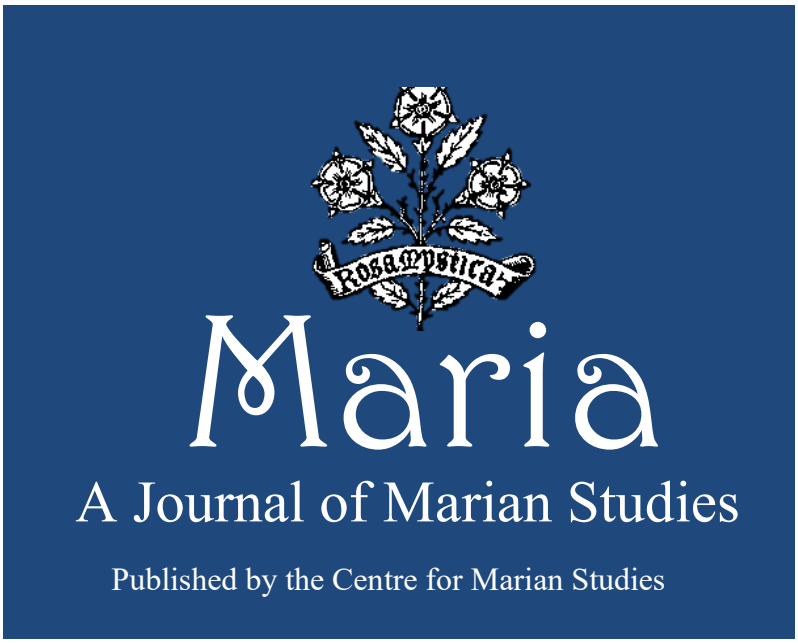
New Series
Volume 5
No. 2
November
2025



Pages 1-13

Author: **Chris Maunder**

Title: **Questioning the Historicity of the Virgin Conception of Jesus**

Abstract

This article makes the case for the non-historicity of the virgin conception of Jesus, in conversation with *The Birth of the Messiah*, the magisterial work of the late Raymond Brown. Brown followed mainstream historical-biblical approaches to the New Testament, but stopped short of denying the historicity of the conception because he could find no convincing explanation for the origin of the idea. This article concludes by suggesting that first century Christian exegetes, in narrating the conception and birth of Jesus, needed to draw upon precedents for miraculous births in the Hebrew Scriptures. These included angelic annunciations and births occurring unexpectedly late in the mother's life, but not virginal conception. Yet, late birth was unavailable because Jesus was known to have been the first born with siblings, and his mother remembered as having outlived him. Hence the concept of virgin conception evolved as a way of confirming God's overriding purpose and action in the birth.

Author

Chris Maunder was a Senior Lecturer in Theology & Religious Studies at York St John University until his retirement in 2020. He has published widely on Marian issues, including *Our Lady of the Nations: Apparitions of Mary in 20th-Century Catholic Europe* (OUP 2016) and *Mary, Founder of Christianity* (Oneworld 2022). He currently serves as the Treasurer of the Centre for Marian Studies.

Introduction

In this article, I want to outline the arguments against the historicity of the virgin conception of Jesus in Mary. Let me start by saying that I do not deny the powerful and wonderful truth of this poetic and symbolic story as a theological metaphor.

The New Testament has been subject to an historical-critical method of interpretation for many decades now. For the greater number of academics in biblical studies, including some who remain committed Christians, a non-literal understanding of the virgin conception is accepted almost without question, and the need to make an argument for it considered to be somewhat outdated.[1] The way in which the gospel writers are considered to have passed on historical data is summed up by M. Eugene Boring, in his volume, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (2011). He writes this about the ancient world in his chapter on Luke:

> History was understood to be a branch of rhetoric: good history writing was the art of persuasion. Nonetheless, they did not understand themselves to be writing fiction. They and their readers understood that the recounting of the facts was in the service of a higher cause, to which such facts as they had should be adjusted. The sense of "objective, scientific" history … would have been alien to them.[2]

It is instructive that, in this twenty-first century, comprehensive tome of some 723 pages, I could not find any reference to the question of the historicity of the virgin conception.

For many other Christians, the historicity of the virgin conception is accepted without debate. For example, conservative Protestant fundamentalism (to use that word in its original sense, rather than in association with political acts of violence) understands the Bible as literally true in every passage that narrates human and divine action, except those where the metaphorical or allegorical sense is made absolutely clear, as in the parables and prophetic writing.

By contrast, the Roman Catholic Church's Magisterium accepts the historical-critical method of scriptural interpretation, and has done so since Pius XII's encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* of 1943. It also rejects fundamentalism, as stated in *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993).[3] The cultural context and genre of the writing have to be taken into account when reading and assessing biblical texts, and it cannot be assumed that everything which looks like history actually is. Yet, certain passages are regarded as being off-limits in

[1] A reasonably recent critical treatment of the virgin conception can be found in Andrew T. Lincoln, *Born of a Virgin? Reconceiving Jesus in the Bible, Tradition, and Theology*, London: SPCK, 2013.

[2] M. Eugene Boring, *An Introduction to the New Testament: History, Literature, Theology*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012, 571. In a footnote, he comments that modern historiography is not necessarily as objective and scientific as popularly believed! M. Eugene Boring, an ordained member of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), died recently, on June 27th, 2024.

[3] *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 July 2025).

terms of doubting historicity, because on them rests the doctrine of the Church. These include the bodily resurrection of Jesus and his virgin conception. Nevertheless, there has been discussion of the historicity of the virgin conception amongst Roman Catholic theologians, most notably, Karl Rahner, who suggested that at least people who disagreed on the issue could agree that the virgin conception narratives confirmed Mary's absolute commitment to Christ's mission, whatever her biological condition.[4] This was a key theme in my book *Mary, Founder of Christianity*, where I argued that the passages which narrated the virgin conception and birth of Jesus were highly appropriate metaphors for the contribution of Mary to the founding of the Christian faith.[5]

In my article, I want to focus on the magisterial work on the infancy narratives by the Roman Catholic priest and scholar Raymond Brown (1928–1998), entitled *The Birth of the Messiah*.[6] Although this book was published nearly fifty years ago in 1977, with a new and updated edition over thirty years ago in 1993, it still dominates the field and discusses the question of the historicity of the virgin conception in some detail. Brown's position was interesting in that he employed the historical-critical method to its full, and came under criticism from conservative Catholics for doing so. Yet, while accepting that he could not establish the historicity of the virgin conception, he remained convinced that it was the best explanation for the existence of the narratives, and he thought that it, being doctrine, should be accepted as part of the infallible teaching of the Church.[7] Therefore, he is an excellent dialogue partner given that he is an expert in all aspects of the infancy narratives, while he liked to refute the arguments against historicity where he could. When he accepted one of those arguments, it is an indicator of its strength.

I will present my – necessarily brief – analysis under six headings: (i) the divergence of Matthew and Luke; (ii) the silence of the rest of the New Testament; (iii) the virgin in the Hebrew Scriptures; (iv) classical Mediterranean culture; (v) the humanity of Jesus; (vi) the origin of the idea of the virgin conception. I will begin each section with a quotation from Brown's *The Birth of the Messiah.*

(i) *The Divergence of Matthew and Luke*

> This leads us to the observation that the two narratives are not only different – they are contrary to each other in a number of details … Indeed, close analysis of the infancy narratives makes it unlikely that either account is completely historical. (Brown, *Birth*, 36)

[4] Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol 19, trans. E. Quinn, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1983, 228.
[5] Chris Maunder, *Mary, Founder of Christianity*, London: Oneworld, 2022.
[6] Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, New Updated Edition, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993.
[7] Brown, *Birth*, 700-701.

The gospels of Matthew and Luke are the only ones which include the virgin conception, but it is obvious at first sight that the stories of the conception and nativity are very different. The common factors are:[8]

a. Jesus' parents were called Joseph and Mary;
b. Mary was a virgin at the time of the conception and so Joseph was not the biological father;
c. Mary and Joseph were betrothed, and they did not yet live together at the time of the conception, but they did so at the time of the birth of Jesus;
d. Joseph was descended from David, and Jesus inherited this lineage;
e. The birth of Jesus occurred in Bethlehem, although in Matthew the family started there and left for Nazareth for safety after the flight to Egypt, while in Luke they lived in Nazareth but were temporarily moved to Bethlehem by the census;
f. The conception by the Holy Spirit, the forthcoming birth, and a directive to name the child Jesus were revealed by an angel, although the angel spoke to Joseph in a dream in Matthew, and to Mary directly in Luke;
g. Angels also revealed that Jesus was to be a Saviour.
h. The events took place in the reign of Herod the Great.

Did one evangelist, writing second (usually assumed to be Luke) know the gospel of the other? If so, then he was very cavalier in changing the details, and this might suggest that he knew that the details of the other's account were not established in tradition. If he did not know the other gospel, then we are talking about a common source, either oral or written. If both gospels used this source faithfully, while greatly expanding and embellishing it with their own additional material, then it can only have included the following:

> Jesus' parents Joseph and Mary were betrothed but did not yet live together. An angel announced that Mary would conceive a child through the Holy Spirit whilst still a virgin, and that they should name him Jesus, and he would be a Saviour. He was born in Bethlehem during the reign of Herod the Great.

With the exception of the names of the parents, no part of this narrative, including the birth in Bethlehem, occurs anywhere else in the New Testament, as we will see in the next section. The information that Jesus had Davidic descent, and that the family lived in Nazareth, were common knowledge in the New Testament tradition, and may or may not have appeared in the common source about the virgin conception.

The two gospel infancy narratives are otherwise very divergent, including their genealogies, and present considerable historical problems: for example, Quirinius, the governor of Syria linked to the census by Luke, took on this role ten years after the death of

[8] Compare the similar list in Brown, *Birth*, 34-35. He notes that the common material is all found in Matthew 1:18-2:1.

Herod the Great. There is no record of people being relocated during a census (Luke) or the massacre of children (Matthew). Doubts about the historicity of the infancy narratives of these gospels in general will surely translate to the virgin conception itself. On the other hand, there is the possibility that the common source alone derives from an historical tradition.

(ii) *The Silence of the Rest of the New Testament*

> In summary evaluation of the evidence, I would say that it is perfectly proper to speak of the silence of the rest of the NT about the virginal conception because not a single one of the "implicit references" has any compelling force. (Brown, *Birth*, 521)

The virgin conception does not appear at all in the New Testament epistles or in the gospels of Mark and John. Indeed, nor does Jesus' birth in Bethlehem (John 7:42 seems to tell against this). These are recounted only in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. It is difficult to understand why any early Christian writer would leave out such a wonderful thing as the virgin conception if it were known to have occurred. Paul has a high Christology as is clear from his letters: Christ is divine (Philippians 2:6); one speaks of him in the same breath as God the Father and the Holy Spirit in Paul's Trinitarian blessing; he is the only one perfectly in the image of God (2 Corinthians 4.4); and he is the 'Lord', which to any first century Jew placed him on a par with divinity. It would have suited Paul's general theological thrust to have added what so many later theologians did, that Christ was 'born of a virgin'. But for Paul, he was simply 'born of a woman, born under the Law' (Galatians 4:4).[9] This is a way of saying that he was a human being, and Jewish.

Mark declares that Jesus Christ is the Son of God (e.g. 1:11; 15:39). His is, most scholars believe, the earliest gospel, and he does present some details of Jesus' background. These include the existence of brothers and sisters, and Jesus being described as the 'son of Mary' (6:3), which some have argued implies knowledge of the fact that Joseph was not actually his father. But note Brown's refutation of such implications in the quote above. The words 'son of Mary' are on the lips of detractors, anyway. They might simply mean that Mark's sources knew about Mary but not anything about Joseph who may, as tradition suggests, have died before the ministry began; Mary and Jesus' brothers are mentioned several times as a family unit in the gospels and Acts. It would be extraordinary, in a gospel full of signs and wonders, for the virgin conception to have been known about and not included.

The same can be said of John's Gospel which, although the final version may well be the latest of the gospels to be written, draws upon much earlier traditions and sources. John includes powerful statements in his prologue, in which Christ is the *Logos* made flesh (1:1-11). He also speaks of believers 'who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of

[9] The biblical quotes in this article are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Updated on www.biblegateway.com (last accessed on 4 July 2025).

the will of man, but of God' (1:11), and so a radical disjuncture between the humanity of Christ and his followers is not encouraged by this gospel. 'Born of the Spirit' (3:3-8) and 'born of a virgin through the Holy Spirit' might be associated theological metaphors, but John certainly shows no direct knowledge of the virgin conception, which suggests that there were several different ways of expressing the miracle of Christ's presence in the world.

What all this implies is that belief in the virgin conception, as a way of expressing the theological truth that Jesus was the unique Son of God, arose in particular Christian communities at some point during the development of the gospel tradition, but was not generally known at the beginning of the post-Easter life of the Church.

(iii) The Virgin in the Hebrew Scriptures

> … there is no reason to believe that the LXX of Isa 7:14 either referred to a virginal conception, or was so interpreted by Jews. It is Christian exegesis, witnessed in Matt 1:22-23, that has reinterpreted Isa 7:14 in light of an existing Christian tradition of the virginal conception of Jesus. (Brown, *Birth*, 524)

No one can deny that the virgin conception narratives, particularly that of Luke, are beautiful and poetic renderings of the infancy story, with powerful symbolism and frequent references to the Hebrew tradition. In Luke's version, we find several allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures in that Mary is the ark of the covenant; the queen mother as mother of the Messiah; the representative of Israel, especially its poor who wait on God, the *anawim.*[10]

As Brown points out, the key proof text quoted by Matthew 1:23 is Isaiah 7:14, although Luke does not refer to it. There the Septuagint, Greek, version is cited where *parthenos*, 'virgin', is used for the Hebrew *betulah*, which is better translated as 'young woman': 'Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman [*betulah* in Hebrew and *parthenos* in Greek] is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel' (Isaiah 7:14). There is also a possible confusion in that *parthenos* can be translated 'betrothed person', as in 1 Corinthians 7:36-8. Overall, therefore, it is easy to see that a Christian reading of Isaiah 7:14, even if not the origin of the idea of virgin conception, at least adds support to the belief that the Messiah was conceived and born of a betrothed woman and a virgin. The original text seems to refer to the child named *Immanuel* ('God with us') being a sign of the divine punishment of Israel by means of the Assyrian invasion in the eighth century BCE, but the New Testament reconfigures this as the child Jesus, the Messiah, being the presence of *Immanuel* in person.

[10] For the symbolism of the infancy narratives and their basis in the Hebrew tradition, see, in addition to Brown's *Birth of the Messiah*, Edward Sri, *Rethinking Mary in the New Testament*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2018.

It is true that there are no virgin conceptions in the Hebrew tradition before Mary; the miraculous births in its scriptures occur to women who thought they were barren or that their time was past: for example, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah. This line continues with Elizabeth in Luke's Gospel. The late birth expresses symbolically the concept of 'waiting upon God' among a Jewish nation who had to live through generations of disasters and still hoped for the coming of a Messiah as a righteous king and saviour. It also confirms God's action in, and blessing upon, the birth. There are angelic annunciations in the Hebrew Scriptures too, before the births of Ishmael, Isaac, and Samson.

The concept of 'virgin' is still used to describe a territory that has not yet been colonised. At the time of the writing of the gospels, it was a powerful metaphor in both Graeco-Roman and Hebrew cultures, denoting the unconquered and unconquerable, as in the virgin goddesses of Greece and Rome, or the pure and innocent. In the New Testament, Paul's letters several times describe the Church as 'blameless', for example: 'so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish' (Philippians 2:15). The Church in its pure form is unconquered and unconquerable by sin, because God has called it into being. Paul also uses the term 'virgin' explicitly: 'I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ' (2 Corinthians 11:2). In John's Gospel, Christ is often likened to the divine Bridegroom, and the Church is his Bride, echoing the theology of the Hebrew Scriptures in which God and Israel are imaged in these terms.

Hegesippus, in the second century, gives us further evidence that the Church in its pristine state, as a community of faithful believers, was likened to a virgin. He used this metaphor to describe the very early Church (when James was bishop in Jerusalem), but then he represented the tendency for people to follow the various 'heresies' that plagued the patristic theologians as a young woman led astray, 'seduced by listening to nonsense'.[11] He had clear precedents for this symbolism. The concern that Jewish fathers had over suggestible daughters is expressed in the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach (42:9-14). Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, Israel is referred to as the virgin daughter of God many times, and her unfaithfulness in turning to other gods likewise.

Therefore, the idea of a faithful virgin, who is unconquerable in her dedication to the one true God, certainly existed in the Jewish tradition. She was Israel in its most perfect form. Isaiah 7:14, at least in its Greek translation, links the word 'virgin' to a young woman giving birth. While the Isaiah passage, as Brown says, does not imply a virgin conception, it was an important proof text for it. The great vision of the Church as a woman in the heavens giving birth to Christ appears in Revelation 12, and so it is not such a great leap to the belief in the mother of Jesus being a virgin, representing the matrix in which Jesus comes forth as saviour. As we have seen, Luke relates her to the ark of the covenant and also to the *anawim*, the faithful remnant made up of the poor people of Israel waiting upon God. While this usually

[11] Hegesippus, quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea in *Church History* IV,22; see also III.32.7.

gave rise to the image of childbirth late in the mother's life, the Christian belief in the newness and freshness of the Incarnation transfers this to childbirth for a very young woman. Luke includes both metaphors in his gospel, the late birth of John the Baptist by Elizabeth representing the end of the prophetic line which looks forward to the Messiah, and the early birth of Jesus by the Virgin Mary representing the new circumstances which will come into being because of the Incarnation The ancient community of Israel, as figured by John the Baptist, evolves into the new community of the Church, the body of Christ.

(iv) Classical Mediterranean Culture

> In short, there is no clear example of *virginal* conception in world or pagan religions that plausibly could have given first-century Jewish Christians the idea of the virginal conception of Jesus. (Brown, *Birth*, 523)

There have been many outlandish and unfounded attempts to align the details of the birth of Jesus with other major figures from the ancient Mediterranean, including divinities like the Egyptian Horus. I am not going to repeat those here. It is clear that the story of the virgin conception and birth is quite different from anything in the classical world that might be claimed as an equivalent.[12] Jesus was not born in any manner resembling the divine impregnation of human women that one finds in the stories of Zeus or Apollo, for example. There is no detail about how the conception occurred, except that, as Joseph is reassured in his dream, 'the child conceived in her [Mary] is from the Holy Spirit' (Matthew 1:20). The Roman emperor Augustus, under whose reign Jesus was born, was not born of a virgin, even if supernatural events were narrated as occurring at his conception.[13]

Mary in Luke and Matthew is not a goddess in the mould of the virgin goddesses Athene, Artemis, Hecate, and others.[14] She was clearly understood to be a human being in the same way as the patriarchal heroines of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is true that her cult helped Christians in later centuries to replace goddess worship across the Mediterranean with Marian devotion. Yet this depended on the simple fact that she was the most prominent woman in Christianity, and not on any particular aspects of her story. The virgin whose return coincides with the birth of a child giving rise to an age of peace in Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue*, a poem of 40 BCE, was not identified as a parallel to Mary until the fourth century, an age when Christianity was becoming dominant.[15]

---

[12] A contrast discussed in Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke-Acts in its Mediterranean Milieu*, Leiden: Brill, 2003, 87-88.

[13] Suetonius, *The Life of Augustus*, citing Asclepias of Mendes' *Theologumena* (e.g. https://lexundria.com/suet_aug/90-101/r, accessed 18 November 2025).

[14] See, for example, J. McGuckin, 'The early cult of Mary and inter-religious contexts in the fifth-century Church', in C. Maunder (ed.), *Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, London: Continuum, 2008, 1-22.

[15] On Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue*, see Brown, *Birth*, 564-570.

Yet, at the same time, it is true that the ancient world was rife with legends about the births of very prominent people in political life, such as Alexander and Augustus, and also philosophers like Plato. The concept of the virgin having a special relationship with the divine was certainly extant, as evidenced by the Vestal Virgins at Rome and the original priestesses of Delphi.[16] Mary the Virgin Mother is a prophetic figure in the conception and birth narratives.[17] As François Bovon has remarked, the Jewish tradition was so bound up in the Graeco-Roman culture of the Mediterranean, that even its rejection of that culture drew upon symbols and metaphors influential in it.[18] In Acts, we read of 'Hellenists', Jews who had taken on the trappings of Greek culture, including the language, possibly by living outside Israel for a time, so much so that they formed separate communities.

As far as the writing of the infancy narratives in the context of the ancient Mediterranean is concerned, Richard Burridge showed that the gospels were not so different from the biographies of the age as had previously been thought.[19] Charles Talbert adds that readers of biography in the classical period would have expected stories about the hero's life before they entered the public realm.[20] The infancy narratives are an equivalent to John's prologue, a summing up of the message of the gospels by means of a powerful introduction, an overture.[21]

The idea of Jesus having a miraculous birth, even if couched in the unique expressions of the Hebrew tradition, will have been understood to represent a direct riposte to the growing emperor worship of the Roman Empire. Christians were under threat when they rejected the claims on them made by the emperor cult, and the statement that Jesus was the Son of God had political as well as religious implications.[22] It placed him above the Emperor. Eventually, this way of expressing the interaction of God with the human world triumphed over its classical rivals with the establishment of the Christian Roman Empire in the fourth century.

---

[16] For the status of virgins in antiquity and how this relates to Mary, see Mary F. Foskett, *A Virgin Conceived: Mary and Classical Representations of Virginity*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002, and Philippe Borgeaud, *Mother of the Gods: From Cybele to the Virgin Mary*, trans. L. Hochroth, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. 2004. See also Giulia Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, trans. A. Goldhammer, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.

[17] So N. C. Croy & A. Connor, 'Mantic Mary? The Virgin Mother as prophet in Luke 1.26-56 and the Early Church', in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 34.3, 2011, 254-276.

[18] François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1 – 9:50*, trans. C. M. Thomas, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 47.

[19] Richard A. Burridge, *What are the Gospels?: A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

[20] Talbert, *Reading Luke*-Acts, 73.

[21] Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus' Birth*, London: SPCK, 2008, refer to the conception and birth narratives as overtures or preludes in the form of parables to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

[22] See, for example, J. D. Crossan, 'Virgin mother or bastard child', in A.-J. Levine (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Mariology*, Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005, 37-55.

Overall, therefore, the virgin conception narratives had clear connections with ideas in classical culture, and they would have made sense to the increasing numbers of Gentiles converting to Christianity. But they are not derived from it in any direct sense.

(v) The Humanity of Jesus

> [The virginal conception of Jesus] was an extraordinary action of God's creative power, as unique as the original creation itself (and that is why all natural science objections to it are irrelevant, e.g., that not having a human father, Jesus' genetic structure would be abnormal). (Brown, *Birth*, 531)

Jesus Christ is, according to the Christian faith, fully human and fully divine. In what sense is someone born from a virgin conception fully human? Does this, along with other examples of sensational miracles in the gospel, sail too closely to the docetism that the New Testament rejects, in which Christ is a supernatural being only seeming to take on the condition of becoming a human being?[23]

Brown's answer to this in the quote above seems to me to dodge the question. Admittedly, Brown was a biblical scholar, and theological anthropology may have been something that he did not wish to tackle in any depth. Yet, the question of Jesus' humanity does seem to need an answer from those advocating the historicity of the virgin conception. If Jesus had sprouted wings in his lifetime, he would have been an angel, and there would not have been an Incarnation in which he was fully human and fully divine. Likewise, a virgin conception sets him apart from other human beings. The question of genetic structure has only arisen in the twentieth century, but it is not irrelevant and cannot be dismissed easily.

There are scientific discussions around at the moment which consider the possibility that humans, like some other species, might be able to produce offspring by what is known as *parthenogenesis*, the conception of a child without fertilization by a male.[24] If this is possible, it may occur in both virgins and non-virgins. It is true that human parthenogenesis, according to the scientific evidence, often results in a tumour and not the birth of a human being. But there have been documented cases of hybrid birth, that is, where some parts of a human body, for example, the blood, lack the male chromosome although other parts are

[23] It should be noted that Brown, *Birth*, 528-529, comments that the virgin conception in the early centuries of the Church was an argument for Jesus' humanity, as Gnostic docetists doubted that there was a conception at all!

[24] Scientific material on human parthenogenesis is a bit sketchy, but see the articles by A. Awad Hegazy, A. Ibraheem Al-Qtaitat, and R. Awad Hegazy, 'A new hypothesis may explain human parthenogenesis and ovarian teratoma: A review study' in *International Journal of Reproductive Medicine*, 21,4, May 2023, 277–284, available at https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10227352/ (last accessed on 4 July 2025), and G. J. de Carli and T. C. Pereira, 'On human parthenogenesis' in *Medical Hypotheses* 106, September 2017, 57-60, available at: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0306987717302694 (last accessed on 4 July 2025).

normal in that respect. This is not virgin conception, of course, but it seems to be the limit of the current evidence. One problem for the researchers is that parthenogenesis occurring in a woman involved in regular sexual activity is unlikely to be noticed as such. But those interested in this phenomenon are keen to build up a large sample of human genetic profiles to check.

I do not have expertise in the scientific theories around this subject, but what strikes me is that nowhere can I find reference to the possibility of parthenogenesis leading to the birth of a male. This is because the person being born would lack the Y chromosome that is contributed by the male. For this reason, the discussion seems to assume that the offspring would be female unless it is a hybrid. Therefore, the current state of science does not really help us to imagine the virgin conception of Jesus as a possibility under the laws of nature. It would have to involve a miracle that suspended them in some way. But it is difficult to see how that could be the case without compromising the central Christian belief that Jesus was fully human. Did his embryonic development not fall within the ranges of human possibility? How would his DNA be constituted?

I do not want to rule out divine agency *a priori* as some kind of rationalist; I believe in miracles and the power of prayer, for example. But the implications in the case of the virgin conception seriously threaten the doctrine of the full humanity of Christ, in my view.

The second area of difficulty with the virgin conception and Christ's humanity is that, while Christ is the only human being who most perfectly conforms to the *imago Dei*, image of God (2 Corinthians 4:4; Hebrews 1:3), nevertheless he is the pattern for all of us being fully human: 'Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father' (John 14:12).

In what sense can the believer follow the example of Christ if he was born of a virgin, and was the practitioner of miracles such as walking on water and raising the dead? We cannot do so unless these things are metaphors for wonderful actions on Christ's part which are accessible to us even though they might be difficult. For example, we might be able to cast aside the prejudices of the context in which we were raised, rise above the problems and concerns that oppress people, and help to lift others from despair and hopelessness to find a new meaning and purpose even in hardship. These things are achievable in Christ who is the pattern for our humanity, and through him we are raised to the level of the divine. But for Christ to be our exemplar, he must be fully human like us, 'yet without sin' (Hebrews 4:15), which means that the characteristics of his human life are within the range of possibilities of ours.

(vi) The Origin of the Idea of the Virgin Conception

> In a pre-Gospel period, as attested by Paul and the sermons in Acts, the *resurrection* was the chief moment associated with the divine proclamation of the identity of Jesus … Mark tells *the reader* that already at the *baptism* Jesus was the Son of God (1:11) … In the later Gospels … the question of Jesus' identity is pressed back beyond the baptism in different ways. The Johannine Prologue presses it back to pre-existence before creation, while Matthew and Luke press it back to Jesus' *conception*. (Brown, *Birth*, 29-31)

Brown stuck to his opinion that the evidence supported the historicity of the virgin conception more than it disproved it, although he conceded that there was no conclusive proof either way. The main reason for his view is that he could find no convincing explanation for the origin of the idea, neither in Jewish tradition, nor in Graeco-Roman nor in any other ancient tradition. Therefore, it was best to assume that it had actually happened, as attested to in the Church consistently from 200 to 1800 CE.[25] However, I think Brown has provided a part-explanation of the origin himself in his acceptance of the predominant twentieth century historical-critical view of the development of Christology in the early Church, which is summarised in his quote above. This will help us develop a simple but, I think, convincing answer to this question.

In twentieth century biblical criticism, there was an observation that the earliest sources, which included Paul's letters and the speeches in the first few chapters of Acts, spoke about Jesus being proclaimed Son of God and Messiah at his resurrection as, for example, in Romans 1:3-4: '[Jesus Christ] was declared to be Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead'. First century Christian exegetes then realised that, if Jesus was revealed to be the Son of God and Messiah at his resurrection, then this must also have been the case in his lifetime and ministry. Hence the earliest gospel Mark used the baptism of Jesus, the beginning of his ministry, as the moment of divine proclamation, while the 'messianic secret' preserved the memory that the truth of Jesus' identity was not realised in his lifetime.[26] The later gospels Matthew and Luke returned further back to the conception of Jesus, and John's Gospel identified Jesus with the eternal *Logos*, existing throughout the history of the world and beyond.[27] Brown accepts that the development of Christology in the churches of the first century was not necessarily as uniform or smooth as this suggests, but nevertheless the New Testament does present what appears to be a logical progression.[28]

---

[25] Brown, *Birth*, 529.

[26] The 'messianic secret' in Mark's Gospel derives from an observation in the early twentieth century by William Wrede that, several times in Mark, Jesus urges the disciples not to reveal his messianic identity.

[27] This understanding of Christological development by increased retrojection is also prominent in the ecumenical and collaborative volume, Raymond E. Brown, Karl P. Domfried, Joseph A. Fitmyer, and John Reumann, *Mary in the New Testament*, Fortress/Paulist, 1978. It has been a popular theory in biblical criticism since at least the mid-twentieth century.

[28] Brown, *Birth*, 710-711.

Now we can move to an answer to the question of the origin of the idea of Mary's virgin conception. The source that fed Matthew and Luke with the bare outlines of that part of the infancy narrative came from a person or community in the churches reflecting on the identity of Jesus in relation to his conception and birth. The idea of a miraculous birth must have presented itself, being usual for highly influential people in both the Jewish and Graeco-Roman cultures, as we have seen. The angelic annunciation motif is traditional in the Hebrew Scriptures. But the time-honoured Jewish story of a late birth to a barren mother was not available. Jesus was known to have been the first born, while his mother was remembered to have had other children and also to have been still active in the Church after his death (Acts 1:14).[29] So the idea of a miraculous birth to a very young woman came to the fore instead, one which, like the late births, signified the design, action, and blessing of God, but in an even more dramatic way. This theory does not require a memory of an illegitimate pregnancy, as some have argued.[30] A miracle that was a virgin conception did, however, raise the possibility of scandal, and Matthew and Luke did their best to reassure the reader that the conception was solely due to the Holy Spirit (and, in Matthew, that Joseph was satisfied on the matter), although this did not prevent claims of illegitimacy arising amongst opponents of Christianity.

The originators of the idea of the virgin conception must have been struck by the brilliance of the concept, given the wealth of symbolic association that it generated, both then and for centuries to come. Jesus was God's son, and not the son of a human father. The virgin was a recurring image of faithful Israel, and had also become a way of describing the nascent Church, while the Book of Revelation shows us, whether the text was known to the evangelists and their sources or not, that the symbolism of the Church giving birth to Christ was extant in the first century. Christ's mother was represented in various ways in extra-biblical literature, too.[31]

It is not fanciful to think that the creators of the virgin conception tradition considered it to have been inspired by the Holy Spirit rather than simply arising from their imagination, and that this might have meant, therefore, that they had discovered something which was actually true to history rather than being mere symbol or metaphor.[32] It was, literally, a work of genius.

[29] It stands to reason that an article arguing against the historicity of the virgin conception will also refute any claim to the historicity of the perpetual virginity of Mary!

[30] Most famously, by Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987.

[31] The Virgin Mary experiences a painless birth in the *Odes of Solomon* and *The Ascension of Isaiah*; the mother of Christ is identified with the Holy Spirit in *The Gospel of the Hebrews*; and Mary is described as an incarnation of the archangel Michael in *The Gospel of Philip*. Of these, the first three are thought to have been written by the late second century at the latest, and the last in the third century.

[32] And see again the quote by M. Eugene Boring on the way that history was written (note 1). At one time, I might have said that the infancy narratives were not intended as history. But now I would acknowledge that they were, but not in the way that the modern world might understand it.

Conclusion

When I have said that I don't believe in the virgin conception as a literal historical fact, I sometimes get the response that it must have happened because it is so powerful theologically and symbolically. This is akin to a *potuit, decuit, ergo fecit* argument of medieval scholasticism: 'God could do it, it was fitting that he should do it, therefore he did it.' This results in a conclusion that the beautiful symbolism of the virgin conception means that it must have happened. But the opposite argument also works. The powerful symbolism might also indicate that the story was created by extraordinarily gifted exegetes who knew the Hebrew Scriptures extremely well, and who crafted a beautiful, theologically rich narrative, which has thus inspired Christians and theologians over the centuries. They succeeded in presenting to the reader a compelling metaphorical interpretation of the Jewish tradition in relation to the coming of Christ and the evolution of the Church from the faithful *anawim* of Israel.

Contrary to the concerns of the Roman Catholic Church as expressed in *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, the conclusion that the virgin conception of Jesus was not historical does not threaten or diminish any of the theological development that proceeds from the virgin conception. As a powerful metaphor of the origins of the Church, the story presents truth by way of a creative and imaginative rewriting of history. The narratives may be human construction, but they are inspired by the Holy Spirit and reveal the dynamics of the relationship between God and the world. Mary really did say 'let it be with me according to your Word' (Luke 1:38), whether these words are literal history or not. She expressed them in the way that she lived her life and cultivated the ministry of her son, and there are other clues to that in the New Testament.[33] Her faith was unconquered and unconquerable, and for that reason, the description 'virgin' is perfectly apt arising as it did in a first century Mediterranean context. And her life, like Christ's, was a pattern for others, not in the unrepeatable impossibility of her being a virgin mother, but in the repeatable possibility of her opening the way for the coming of the kingdom of God. Indeed, that is how she has been understood as a role model for Christians, both female and male, through the centuries. The virgin conception has always been understood as a metaphor for Christian living, the life that it represents always an attainable if challenging invitation for the believer.

[33] The main theme of my *Mary, Founder of Christianity* (see note 4).