

# BEAUTIFUL BLOOD

I'm not a fan of blood. Don't get me wrong: I understand its importance. But like most people, I prefer to keep it under my skin. I'm squeamish when a nurse pokes my arm, and I won't look at the needle. I learned early on that the medical profession wasn't for me.

Ella, our first child, was born on March 28, 2010. It was a difficult pregnancy for my wife, Sara. As nervous first-time parents, Sara and I went through all the preparations. We'd taken the classes, and we'd done the homework. We'd heard again and again that even pregnancies that result in healthy babies and healthy moms never turn out exactly as you expect or as you envision in your dreams. And we learned that is true.

For Sara, morning sickness turned out to be morning, afternoon, and evening sickness, and lasted through the entire term of her pregnancy. When the time finally came, Sara was more than ready for our baby to make her way into the world. When we arrived at the hospital, the nurse informed us that Sara was nine centimeters dilated. After commending Sara for waiting it out at home until just the right time, she predicted a quick labor. But that didn't happen.

Instead, Sara labored for over twelve hours, through the evening and into the early hours of the morning. When Ella finally made her entrance into the world, I felt an incredible sense of relief and happiness: relief for Sara that the hard pregnancy was over and happiness for the long-anticipated arrival of this precious bundle of energy with flapping arms.

I also remember the blood. It seems like there was blood everywhere. Blood on the bed, blood on the medical instruments, blood on the floor. Blood on the doctor, the nurses, my wife, our baby. But the weird thing was, everyone was smiling and happy. It's a strange sensation to see so much smiling and to feel so much joy, and for those smiles and that joy to be around so much blood. I recall a sudden flash of amazement that the blood didn't bother me at all.

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The blood symbolized new life. Birth makes blood beautiful.

The New Testament's two Gospel infancy narratives (Matthew and Luke) both testify to a virginal *conception*, though not explicitly to a virgin birth. Today, when most people refer to the virgin birth, they really mean the virginal conception—the Holy Spirit supernaturally conceived the zygote Jesus in Mary without the participation of a male human (namely, Joseph). But in the early church, the virgin birth took on another layer of meaning.

Most people haven't even heard of the antiquarian but spirited debates about whether Mary technically remained a virgin during—and after—the delivery of the infant Jesus. Some early theologians insisted that when the baby Jesus passed through Mary's birth canal, her hymen wasn't ruptured. In other words, there was no bloody, painful birth. She could have kept her legs crossed and the baby Jesus still would have appeared! The miraculous conception wasn't enough; they needed a miraculous delivery too.

They tried to sanitize Jesus's birth. Maybe they, too, were squeamish about blood and birth. These interpretations have informed many Christians' views of Mary ever since. They've also shaped the way Christians think about birth, sex, and blood.

But the insistence upon a virginal birth—a painless and bloodless delivery of baby Jesus—came at a heavy theological cost: it undermined the point of the incarnation.

## MARY'S PAINLESS PREGNANCY AND JESUS'S BLOODLESS BIRTH

Valentinus (100–160 CE) was the most famous Gnostic theologian in the early church. He founded his own school, imbuing his followers with secret knowledge (*gnosis*) through which they could escape the lowly confines of their bodies and ascend to the spiritual plane. He viewed the human body as a trap out of which the soul needs to escape. He devalued the physical world: Who needs matter when you can have spirit? Valentinus couldn't countenance the notion that God would be truly embodied in the person of Jesus Christ. For him, God only *appeared* to be a human in Jesus.

The Gnostic impulse to deny the physical world and elevate the spiritual or immaterial lies behind Docetism, an ancient theology that taught Jesus was not a true human being. Docetists said the Son of God took on the appearance of a man in the form of Jesus, but he was a phantasm, a ghost, a mirage. The human form of Jesus was illusory. (Think of Princess

Leia's hologram, but more realistic and life-sized.) Docetists argued that God, in the form of Jesus, didn't suffer and die on the cross; the crucifixion didn't really happen to a human body.

The early church denounced Docetism as heresy. For Christian theologians, the incarnation means that the Son of God truly became a human being. God "in-fleshes" in the person Jesus of Nazareth. For them, Mary had a crucial role in the incarnation. Along with offering her womb, she provided the Son of God the physical material (flesh) necessary to be born Jesus of Nazareth. The virgin birth meant that Jesus was a true human being, because he was born of a human mother (*born of a woman*).

Yet not all orthodox theologians agreed on how the incarnation plays out with respect to the birth of Jesus. (Take note: Theological argument isn't a recent invention—it's been a popular hobby since the very beginning of Christianity!) Some theologians sounded downright gnostic when they discussed Mary and the virgin birth. Despite their insistence that Jesus was fully human, they couldn't quite overcome their suspicion of the human body. They couldn't countenance the fleshy, fluid-filled reality of human birth: a messy, bloody, painful, and beautiful endeavor. For them, Jesus's birth was nothing

like when my Ella was born, with beautiful blood everywhere.

## THE HOLY HYMEN

Consider, for example, the early church father Ambrose (337–397 CE) who links the “gate of the sanctuary” of the temple in Jerusalem (Ezekiel 44:1–2) to Mary’s hymen: “Holy Mary is the gate of which it is written: ‘The Lord will pass through it, and it will be shut,’ after birth, for as a virgin she conceived and gave birth.”<sup>1</sup> Ambrose elaborates that no man “shall pass through” that gate (Mary’s hymen) except for God. In another text, he insists that Jesus “preserved the fence of her chastity and the inviolate seal of her virginity.”<sup>2</sup>

Or his student Augustine (354–430 CE) who argues that because the resurrected Jesus could walk through walls, it’s no stretch (no pun intended) to believe that the baby Jesus could pass through the “closed doors” of Mary’s vagina without disturbing the hymen.<sup>3</sup> The laws of physics and of biology do not apply to the birth of the Son of God. Augustine ends this segment with a dramatic portrayal of the delivery of baby Jesus: “As an infant He came forth, a spouse from His bride-chamber, that is, from

the virginal womb, leaving His Mother's integrity inviolate."<sup>4</sup>

I must admit: I never read those passages in seminary!

They weren't the first theologians to insist that the birth of Jesus was a painless and bloodless one, leaving Mary's hymen intact. Irenaeus (130–202 CE) and Clement of Alexandria (150–215 CE) taught that there was no biological disruption in Mary's body nor was there any physical travail during the birth of Jesus.<sup>5</sup> As strange as this may sound to us, they had their theological reasons for preserving Mary's body throughout the delivery—and for protecting the baby Jesus from the physicality of birth.

The story of the "Fall" of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:16), their disobedience to God which resulted in devastating consequences, is told and retold in churches across the globe. The curse of Adam meant that men would forever work the land with difficulty and frustration; for women, the curse of Eve meant pain in childbirth. For Ambrose, the painless, bloodless virginal birth reversed this curse. Mary, the "new Eve," experienced no pain while birthing Jesus, and this illustrated that salvation had arrived. But the beauty in that *reverse the curse* theology pales in comparison to the problems that come with a sanitized, painless birth of Jesus.

The assumption that Mary's hymen was undisturbed by the birth of Jesus didn't originate with the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, both of which are sparse in delivery-room detail, but from texts dating to the middle of the first and early second centuries (CE). These texts are often called *apocryphal* texts. The name derives from a Greek word meaning "hidden," suggesting the texts should be hidden because they aren't worthy of being introduced to the public and used in Christian worship and teaching. More generally, the name implies they contain hidden or mysterious elements.<sup>6</sup>

Although these apocryphal books never rose to the level of New Testament canon, they nevertheless exerted a great deal of influence on early Christian theology and liturgy. Even today, Catholics include the main fifteen apocryphal texts in their Bibles. Many Protestants look askance at them. I recall the first time I discovered their existence when I flipped through the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* for a seminary class.<sup>7</sup> It was an odd experience seeing books like Sirach, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon in my Bible.

The apocryphal infancy narratives inspired a lot of Christian reflection on the virgin birth. They didn't make it into the big-league list of fifteen, but they shaped subsequent beliefs about Mary and the



virgin birth. The *Ascension of Isaiah* is an early Christian compilation of stories about the prophet Isaiah and about Jesus, and includes a brief narrative of his birth. This is the earliest known text that suggests the idea that Mary remained a virgin during the birth of Jesus (virginity *in partu*, or during the birth).<sup>8</sup> In that story, the baby Jesus magically appears outside the womb to Mary and Joseph, after only two months of pregnancy (I just mentioned this to Sara, my wife, and she said that sounds just fine to her).

The notion continues in another early Christian collection, the *Odes of Solomon*, which indicates that Mary experienced no labor pain. But the idea of virginity *during the birth* is most fully developed in the *Gospel of James* (also known as the *Protoevangelium of James*), a text that has been influential on theologians' views of Mary, and on the entire field of Mariology.<sup>9</sup> It provided the basis for the idea of Mary's "perpetual virginity," the belief that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life.

UNLESS I THRUST IN MY FINGER,  
I WILL NOT BELIEVE!

The *Gospel of James* gives us a backstory of the birth of Jesus by narrating Mary's birth and early life. It introduces Mary's parents, Anna and Joachim, and

their devotion to the Lord. Anna prayed fervently to God to open her barren womb to give birth to a child. The story has obvious resonance with the Old Testament story of Hannah and her appeal to God to provide her with a child. Her prayer results in the birth of Samuel and of Hannah's dedication of him in the temple (1 Samuel 1–2:10). In a similar way, Anna and Joachim dedicate their daughter Mary to the temple at only three years of age, where she learns the path of holiness and religious devotion. Her youthful dedication to God prepares her for her unique blessing as the one who would give birth to Jesus.

The story goes on to say that when Mary reached marriageable age (approximately twelve years old), the priests hastened to find her a husband “lest perchance she defile the sanctuary of the Lord” through ritual uncleanness—in other words, menstruation. Suitors from the region were invited to compete for the bride, and the significantly older Joseph, a widower with children of his own, was chosen from among the candidates. A dove flew out of his rod and landed on his head, an ancient, biblical version of the sorting hat. Joseph reluctantly accepted the call to take the young Mary into his household. He had to leave home to travel on business, but promised to marry her upon his return.

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During his absence, Mary was informed by an angel that she would conceive. Her pregnancy caused a stir among the religious power brokers: the priests who learned of her apparent indiscretion and Joseph's illicit behavior were enraged at the betrothed couple's impropriety and disobedience. Both Mary and Joseph were proven innocent through a ritual resembling a witch-trial. When God apparently protected them from harm, the priests were finally convinced of their innocence.

Mary gave birth to Jesus in a cave underneath a "luminous cloud." A blinding light covered her. When it dissipated, the newly born Jesus was revealed and he immediately latched onto the breast of his mother. The midwife, who played no effective role in the delivery, proclaimed to another midwife, Salome: "I have a strange sight to relate to you: a virgin has brought forth—a thing which her nature admits not of." Then said Salome: "As the Lord my God lives, unless I thrust in my finger, and search the parts, I will not believe that a virgin has brought forth."

Salome, this story's version of a doubting Thomas, investigated Mary's vagina to prove that this miracle had really occurred; sure enough, Mary was still a virgin. Her doubts were met by a burning

sensation in her hand, as she exclaimed: “My hand is dropping off as if burned with fire.”

This story formed the basis of subsequent assumptions about Mary’s virginity; her sexual purity had been preserved and her feminine body protected through the miraculous, cloud-covered birth of Jesus. This influence was unfortunate, however, because it allowed docetic tendencies to creep in to the way theologians read the two Gospel accounts of Jesus’s birth. If we take the incarnation seriously, we should embrace the biological realities of birth, not deny them.

## COULD BABY JESUS HAVE SUFFERED FROM MECONIUM ASPIRATION SYNDROME?

We had a minor scare when our second child, Luke, was born. His first two weeks of life were challenging because during his exit from the birth canal, he inhaled some pretty nasty stuff—a combination of amniotic fluid and his own feces. He had a pretty bad case of Meconium Aspiration Syndrome, which, while not uncommon, can be dangerous. His delicate first two weeks of life were spent in the hospital hooked up to oxygen, learning to breathe and cleansing his system. We were about to take him

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home with oxygen supply when suddenly he took a turn for the better. We breathed a big sigh of relief, grateful to bring home a healthy, if not always happy, baby.

If we accept the logic of some early theologians, the infant Jesus was immune to Meconium Aspiration Syndrome. Jesus's birth was, for them, supernaturally sanitized and protected from the messiness of normal, human birth. A miraculous conception wasn't enough: he needed to be miraculously delivered, too—unsullied by the biological fluids and substances endemic to human birth.

This sanitized version of the birth of Jesus creates a nasty theological mess.

While I can't say that the infant Jesus *did* experience anything like Meconium Aspiration Syndrome, I insist on the possibility. From his birth to his death, the fully human Jesus would have experienced illness, disease, and tragedy of one sort or other. To be human is to be exposed to the elements of nature and of biology. Bodily fluid, blood, feces, urine, saliva, semen, milk; as undignified and disgusting as these elements of human nature appear to us at times, they are essential aspects of *us*. They signal life, vitality, and struggle.

Thankfully, some theologians disagreed with this sterilized notion of Mary's virginity *during the*

*birth*. While they affirmed a miraculous, supernatural conception, they argued that the theology of incarnation calls for a normal biological delivery. Jesus was truly and fully human, so his birth must have been fully human, too. To sanitize and spiritualize Jesus's entrance into the world undermines the goodness of creation and of human life.

The North African theologian Tertullian (160–220 CE) viewed the birth of Jesus as a fulfillment of Exodus 13:2, which reads, “Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine.” He saw in this verse a reference to the physical opening of Mary's womb—and therefore to a natural, physical delivery of the baby Jesus.<sup>10</sup>

An obscure theologian, Helvidius (exact dates unknown), had argued against the notion that Mary's hymen remained intact during the birth of Jesus. For Helvidius, affirmation of the virginity of Mary *during the birth* and *after the birth* of Jesus constitutes a rejection of the theology of incarnation and reveals an insufficient appreciation for the goodness of creation.<sup>11</sup> We're aware of his arguments only because of more prominent theologians like Jerome (347–420 CE), who wrote an essay arguing against Helvidius. In that essay, Jerome extolled the merits

of lifelong chastity, based on the example of Mary's preserved virginity.

Jovinian (exact dates unknown), a fourth-century monk, also opposed the idea of a sanitized and spiritualized virginal delivery. Like everyone else, he affirmed the virginal conception. But he argued that a true theology of the incarnation necessitated that the birth of Jesus be a normal, biological event. Otherwise, you're left with a phantom Jesus. And how can a phantom save us?

We're far from arriving at an answer to our main question, *whether Jesus was really born of a virgin?* But at this early stage in our journey, let's affirm this: Jesus wasn't a disembodied spirit. He was a real, flesh, bone, blood, and brain human being. And his birth reflected his genuine humanity. In other words, Jesus could have suffered from Meconium Aspiration Syndrome.

## THE ICKY, STICKY, STINKY BODY OF THE DIVINE SON OF GOD

The gnostic Valentinus suggested that Jesus "ate and drank in a special way, without evacuating food. So great was his power of continence that the food was not corrupted in him."<sup>12</sup> Now that just seems crazy. But for Valentinus and other gnostic thinkers, Jesus

never needed a bathroom break because he didn't poop. How could he, if he was God? Valentinus's aversion to a defecating Son of God amounts to a non-incarnational theology.

The embodied life of Jesus affirms the icky, sticky, stinky stuff of the human body. The Son of God really experienced a bodily, human life.

Human beings inherit and learn the impulse of disgust. We instinctively avoid some things and are socialized to avoid other things. When natural elements of the body are part of us, they are clean. When they are separated from us they become external or "other," rendered unclean and repulsive.

A famous psychology experiment provides insight into the "disgust impulse."<sup>13</sup> People have no problem swallowing their saliva so long as it remains inside their mouths. We can feel it with our tongues, even swish it about, and gulp it down. We do it unconsciously most of the time. But our saliva becomes "spit" once it's expelled from our bodies. Spit into a Dixie cup, then drink it: you've got the idea. When it's inside our bodies, it's clean; when it's outside our bodies, it's disgusting. Our disgust impulse creates psychological boundaries between what is clean and unclean, appealing and appalling.

Richard Beck suggests that the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, is an ingenious liturgical practice



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precisely because it involves very basic bodily functions: eating and drinking.<sup>14</sup> We ingest with our mouths, we drink wine or juice (swallowing our saliva right along), we eat bread that will be digested and in part eventually expelled from our bodies. We do this eating and drinking in community. We may even share a common cup, our lips touching where other lips have been. The very practice that Jesus initiated in the upper room with his disciples before his impending death involves the embrace of the very stuff of life that fuels our bodies and that animates our spirits. To be fully alive is to be fully in the body—with all the beautiful and “disgusting” elements that involves.

Putting the psychology of disgust into the context of theological reflection on the birth of Jesus crystalizes an important insight: The squeamishness about biological realities was not only due to patriarchy with its male stigmatizing of female biology (though that was clearly a factor, too). The psychology of disgust likely shaped these theologians’ aversion to a bloody and painful birth. But theologians should know that blood, saliva, or even meconium are innate to the human experience. A genuine theology of incarnation implies the birth of Jesus included these bodily elements.

The disgust impulse surely contributed to the spiritualizing and sanitizing of physical birth and of female biology. But much of this sanitizing can be chalked up to the consequences of living in a different time and place. From the perspective of our modern age, we can look back and criticize the reluctance or even derogation with which many of these theologians viewed the biological realities of childbirth. And we would be right to point out the obvious fact that these theologians were men and, as far as I can tell, they didn't consult women.

By understanding the important role Mary played, along with Jesus, in the story of salvation, we can gain empathy for these theologians. Mary was the “second Eve,” a parallel to Jesus in the story of salvation: Just as Jesus set straight the sins of Adam, thereby making salvation from sin possible, so Mary rectified the sins of Eve, making it possible for humanity to follow in the way of holiness and purity in the life of the church. Both Mary and Jesus subverted the powers of sin and experienced its brokenness to provide a pathway for humanity to salvation—each in their own ways: Jesus as the savior and Mary as the blessed mother of Christ. But unfortunately, those profound insights were eclipsed by the gnostic and docetic instinct to cover over the icky, sticky, stinky body of Jesus.

## THE BODY AND THE BLOOD

*Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." (Luke 22:19)*

My body. Broken for you.

My blood. Poured out for you.

I've loved those words for a long time, ever since I began to understand what the Lord's Supper, or *Eucharist*, means—that the Son of God entered history and became flesh and blood. He suffered and died so that we might have life. The image of Jesus Christ distributing the bread and passing the wine to his disciples on the night he was betrayed, before undergoing a brutal death on the cross, both haunts me and gives me hope. His blood was shed, and somehow in the shedding of that blood and in the breaking of that body, new life springs forth.

In the Bible, there's power in blood. But that power was often misunderstood, and even feared. In the ancient Hebrew purity (Levitical) codes, female menstruation was considered unclean: "When a woman has a discharge of blood that is her regular

discharge from her body, she shall be in her impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening” (Leviticus 15:19). The code goes on to clarify that even what she touches, or sits on, or wears, during her menstruation period is unclean; those who touch her suffer the same fate. After seven days following the end of her menstrual period, she is clean again. But if her menstruation is unusually long or if an emission of blood occurs at an irregular time, a ritual sacrifice by the priest was required for her purification. The priestly code offered pathways for purification in tandem with the cycles of female biology. Cleansing the impurities caused by blood required the expulsion of yet more blood—of animals.

The Old Testament isn’t just concerned with female bodily impurities. Male bodily functions were sources of uncleanness and impurity, too. In the Levitical code, a “discharge from his member” would result in the declaration that he was ritually unclean (Leviticus 15:2–15). The text is unclear as to what a discharge is, but it was likely infection in the penis that led to an emission of blood or pus (possibly gonorrhoea). Just like the ritually impure woman, anything the unclean man touched, sat upon, or wore (or anyone who touched him) required washing with water for purification and required a

priestly sacrifice of pigeons or turtledoves for purification (Leviticus 15:14). Semen from ejaculation was also considered a source of ritual uncleanness that required purification (Leviticus 15:16–18). The discharge, whether in masturbation or sexual union, required bathing and washing of affected clothes. Sexuality, blood, and the emissions of the body were mysterious realities to be carefully monitored and attended to within the life of a community. Furthermore, sex was confined to the privacy of the home, rather than openly practiced—as was common in pagan temple worship. Much of the concern about bodily functions was based in a fundamental, though unmistakably primitive concern, not just for spiritual purity but also for health and well-being.

The three synoptic Gospels each includes a story about Jesus healing a woman from an unceasing “flow of blood” (Matthew 9:20–22; Mark 5:24–34; Luke 8:43–48). The texts are somewhat ambiguous about what the flow or “issue” of blood is, but it likely refers to a continued, uncontrollable menstruation, as referenced in the Levitical code. Whatever the precise diagnosis, the woman was considered ritually unclean by Jewish law and, while she may not have experienced isolation because of her condition, she was forbidden from going to the temple because of her impurity.<sup>15</sup>

In healing her, Jesus brings to her a greater salvation than the temple could offer. Jesus, a faithful Jew and a rabbi to boot, didn't show contempt for Hebraic ceremonial codes or make light of them. But his acts of healing, which often involved physically touching the ritually unclean, impure, and even diseased, revealed his compassion in the context of the messy, icky, sticky, stinky human experience. He traversed boundaries of disgust to touch and heal bodies.

The Bible includes more than concerns about bodily functions and their impurities. Elsewhere in the Bible, bodily fluids represent healing and symbolize new life. Animal blood was necessary for ritual purification. Jesus's death on the cross, with water and blood spilling out of his side, represents the ultimate picture of life coming through death—through the broken, opened elements of the body. And prior to Jesus's death, the meal of anticipation, remembrance, and fellowship with his disciples included wine that represented "my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 14:24).

The blood of Jesus. The body of Jesus. The birth of Jesus through the body of Mary, with all the blood that comes with real and beautiful human birth.

The eternal, divine Son of God fully entered our

human experience. The humanity of Jesus means there wasn't a painless, completely silent night. If the Son of God assumed true humanity by being born of Mary, his birth was a physical and bloody one. And Mary no doubt felt it.

But a challenge confronts us. Why should the logic of the incarnation apply to the birth (the delivery) of Jesus, but not to his conception in the womb of Mary? A question we must consider in the next step of our journey is whether the *in-carnation* implies a fully human procreative process. Which is to say, intercourse.

This question didn't occur to early theologians because their assumptions about biology differed from ours. In their understanding, the sexual organs and menstrual blood of the mother contained all the substance needed for the procreation of a child. The father, by injecting his semen (which back then they considered a form of blood) into the body of the mother, provided the "heat," the generative principle, necessary for the creation of a life. The male semen activated generation of new life upon contact with the female menstrual blood. But everything needed materially for life was there, inside the woman's body.<sup>16</sup> Crucially, the mother also provided the womb, a space for incubation, for that life to develop.

Within the ancient biological framework of the virgin birth, the Holy Spirit provided the spark necessary to activate the human construction material already present in Mary, giving rise to the virginally conceived embryo, Jesus Christ. While it was still considered a miracle, because God rather than a human male provided the generative heat necessary for procreation, the idea of a virginal conception raised no biological contradictions in those days.<sup>17</sup> Miracle? Yes. Biological contradiction? No.

In the early church, theologians accepted the virginal conception as the mechanism for the incarnation. In their eyes, this miracle gave proof that God really became a human being in and through Mary's body. They saw no biological or theological inconsistencies with a virginal conception. It wouldn't have occurred to them—or to the authors of Matthew and Luke—that the logic of incarnation might call for something different: a conception through sexual intercourse between a woman and a man.

But let's fast-forward to today. Seen through the lens of a contemporary biological understanding of procreation, the notion of a virginal conception appears to conflict with its original intention—which was to affirm the reality of the incarnation. Let's state the problem directly: The incarnation



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means that the Son of God became a true human being. But can a true human being come from a virginal conception?

Most of us will readily affirm that Jesus was birthed in a fully human way: a beautiful and bloody birth. But now we must consider whether to take that one step further—not just a normal human birth, but a fully human conception as the beginning of the incarnation of the divine Son of God.

Before answering that question, we have further to go on our journey. We need to talk about sex.

## NOTES

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