

INTRODUCTION: “DON’T MESS WITH MY MANGER SCENE!”

A package arrived from Aunt Jenny. My mom sat by the kitchen table and carefully tore back the brown, crumpled paper. It was a crèche from the Dominican Republic, where my Aunt had recently moved. Out popped Jesus and Mary, a few shepherds, and the three wise men (the Bible doesn’t specify there were three, but no matter). Digging further into the package led to a gruesome but bloodless discovery: Joseph had been decapitated in transit.

Mom collected manger scenes from all over the world. My parents traveled a lot over the years, due to my dad’s role on an international mission board and then as a pastor for nearly a decade in Europe. Wherever they traveled, she acquired a locally hand-crafted manger scene. Her collection continued to expand as other friends and family members, including Aunt Jenny, got in on the action.

Mom liked to remember the distinct local cultures, and she loved what the manger scene signifies. The birth of Jesus marks the entrance of the eternal Son of God into our beautiful, messy, and multicultural world. Every Thanksgiving, she pulled out those manger scenes and placed them around the house. More unfortunate accidents and the occasional mystery occurred: one year, baby Jesus just up and disappeared from the Kenyan set. We prayed to the Good Lord and hoped to high heaven that Phoebe, our cranky Lhasa Apso, hadn't swallowed the Son of God. Mom's infectious love for Christmas was channeled through the crèches.

In the summer of 2015, my mom died from the complications of Alzheimer's. Those manger scenes preserve our memory of her interest in global cultures and, even more, of her love for the meaning of Jesus's birth.

Each December offers new opportunities to read, hear, and enact the Christmas story. We remember the stories of Jesus's birth in song, sermons, drama, and manger scenes. Christians all over the world gaze upon images of Mary with the swaddled child. For throngs of the faithful, it rings true and warms the soul—the birth of the Son of God in the most mundane of places; not much fanfare; a small and undignified band of onlookers. The night and the

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birth that changed the world. While the cross and empty tomb are the lifeblood of Easter, the manger scene is the heart of Christmas. Like the cross and the tomb, it's a universal and sacred Christian symbol.

Conflicts of all sorts, whether political, religious, or ideological, involve disagreements about what counts as sacred.¹ Arguments about politics and religion, big government or small government, free will or divine sovereignty. Disputes about rights and freedoms, policy battles, and heated theological arguments. The sacred appears in symbols, images, pictures, and stories that lie just beyond the reach of critical examination. Dive deep into sacred territory and you'll understand the complicated and intense nature of our political and theological battles. There you'll find the source of vibrancy and conviction, but also of conflict and even war. For so many Christians, the manger scene—and what it signifies—is sacred.

THE ARGUMENT OF THE MONTH CLUB

In 2010 I found myself in the musty basement of a timeworn Catholic church in St. Paul, Minnesota. I'd been invited to debate the doctrine of Scripture's

authority. Over 300 old-school Catholics crammed into that sweaty basement, and I was clearly the visiting team. They call themselves the “Argument of the Month Club.” Playing the Protestant role, I argued for the doctrine of “Sola Scriptura,” the Bible as primary authority for the Christian life and doctrine. I was fully aware that many Catholics think Protestants underemphasize and even belittle the significance of Mary, and that’s not untrue. At one point during the debate, I made an impassioned plea that I, too, respect Mary as an important figure in the story of salvation and in the life of the church. That simple point bought me a good bit of traction with the crowd; they let out a collective sigh of appreciation.

Jesus was their savior, but Mary was their mother, and you don’t mess with Mom. Other than Jesus, no other person in the Christian canon occupies as important a place in the spiritual and religious lives of believers.

From the early days of Christianity, the virgin birth has been held as a sacred doctrine. Theologians Irenaeus and Tertullian both mentioned the virgin birth within their summaries of the main tenets of Christianity, which they called a “Rule of Faith.” Statements like these laid the foundation for the later creeds, summaries of theological beliefs

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deemed central to orthodoxy. From 381 CE onward, the main ecumenical creeds all include a reference to the virgin birth. And the Apostles' Creed (date unknown), recited in countless churches over the ages, declares that Jesus was “born of the Virgin Mary.”

Belief in the virgin birth was a main theme in the controversy between conservative and liberal Protestants in the early 1900s. The self-proclaimed “fundamentalists” made it the first point in their two-volume series of essays defending orthodox Christianity against the encroachment of liberal heresy. Today, search the statement of faith of any evangelical or conservative Christian denomination, college, seminary, or parachurch organization, and you will likely find an affirmation of the virgin birth.

I should know. I was born and bred in the evangelical church.

COME, JOURNEY WITH ME

I was a PK (Preacher's Kid). My dad was a Southern Baptist pastor. So was my grandfather. Church was in my blood—Christianity was in my DNA. At nine years of age, I “accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior” and my father baptized me in short order.

We went to church on Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening. We even sprinkled in the occasional Monday-night door-to-door evangelism or prayer gathering. Then came youth group and all the camps, Bible studies, and sexual purity talks (more about those later).

I attended a Southern Baptist seminary and then an evangelical divinity school for my doctorate in theology. When I graduated with my PhD in 2006, I was a bona fide evangelical theologian and I had the paper to prove it! But over the past decade I've slowly and steadily shifted away from my conservative roots, toward a more liberal theology. My vocation as a theologian challenged me in ways I couldn't have anticipated.

As I prepared lectures and engaged diverse and curious students, my theology expanded and grew. I read more broadly, engaging perspectives outside of the evangelical mainstream. I imbibed theologies of liberation and social justice; I became attuned to the ways that dominant Euro-American (i.e., white male) theologies contribute to the oppression of marginalized and vulnerable people. I had long ago ceased believing in a literal six-day, twenty-four-hour creation. But through my work as a professor and scholar, I started taking science even more seriously in my interpretation of the Bible. I accepted

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evolution as the way in which God created the world and human life. I left behind the evangelical doctrine of the Bible’s “inerrancy” (complete truthfulness in every matter), though still affirming the Bible’s authority for faith and discipleship. I embraced a more nuanced view of Christ’s atoning death on the cross. I understood salvation as relating much more to this present life and more connected to our planet—and less about acquiring a passport to heaven after death. I began to sense that God’s grace might be far more expansive than I ever realized. I adopted an inclusive view of sexuality in the church and a more ecumenical understanding of Christianity. I became less concerned with converting people to my way of Christianity and more passionate about living like Jesus in the world.

But while my theology shifted leftward, many of my core beliefs remain planted in my heart and mind. I still profess that God is Trinity. I still believe that Jesus was and is both fully divine and fully human. I still affirm the resurrection of Jesus and I hope in the promise of resurrection for the redemption of the world and for the entire cosmos.

And for me, the manger scene still matters.

That’s why I’ve written this book.

I’m a progressive, Protestant Christian, but I still bear marks of my evangelical upbringing. I’m

comfortable with phrases like *mere orthodoxy* and *big tent Christianity*. But I'm certainly no radical; I respect the weight of tradition and the emotional issues involved with questioning core beliefs. The question of the virgin birth is far more than a theological curiosity; it's an emotional and spiritual issue. The virgin birth matters for how people relate to God, for what they believe about Jesus and Mary, and for how they understand their own humanity. It has vast implications for how they understand the very nature of Christianity itself—and for how they practice it.

I know that for many of you, the manger scene is sacred, too. As I speak on this topic to church groups and in other contexts, I can often sense a palpable anxiety rising—sometimes in my audience, sometimes within me. I can imagine my mother, lovingly but firmly whispering in my ear, “Son, don't mess with my manger scene!”

I don't relish the thought of messing with anyone's manger scene, but I want to follow truth where it leads. The question of the virgin birth embarks us on a spiritual and theological journey. The port of departure is a simple question: *Was Jesus really born of a virgin?* And, if not, what does that mean for my faith? For yours?

I invite you to journey with me as we dig deep

into the manger scene and discover whether Jesus was really born of a virgin—and why that matters.

THE VIRGIN BIRTH IN A COFFEE SHOP

Not long ago, I plopped down in my favorite coffee shop to work on this book. I overheard two college students discussing religion. The young man laid out a series of popular skeptical arguments against Christianity and against religion in general. Religion is an opiate for the masses! Christianity is mythology, like every other religion! The Bible is an ancient, sexist, and severely flawed book! And so on. The young woman employed her basic apologetic training, listening patiently to his skeptical arguments and defending his charges with bits and pieces of arguments she'd learned in youth group or in sermons.

My ears perked up when they got to the topic of the virgin birth.

The skeptic explained that he had just seen a daytime talk show in which a twenty-something woman claimed to be the recipient of a miracle. She was pregnant—but she claimed to be a virgin. A modern Mary!

“Look,” he said. “This woman was obviously

blaming God for something she did. Isn't this what's really going on with the virgin birth story? An elaborate cover-up for an indiscretion? You know, so Mary wouldn't get stoned for her crime."

He went on, as if he had her on the ropes.

"And what about all those other famous dudes in history that supposedly had miraculous births? Caesar Augustus, Plato, Alexander the Great! Why should we believe the Jesus version? And look at all the contradictions in the Gospel stories: you'd think they'd get their story straight. Why didn't they check with each other before writing this stuff down?"

The Christian countered as best she could: "But those stories are fundamentally different from the birth of Jesus. And the virgin birth is in the Bible. The Bible is God's perfect revelation. We need to accept and believe this miracle came from God. There may be some minor difficulties or even *apparent* contradictions, but that just means we have to—no, we *get to*—exercise faith."

At the next lull in their theology debate, I made my way over to the couple and invited myself into their conversation. I asked the skeptical atheist, "Would you find Christianity more compelling if you didn't need to believe in a literal virgin birth to be a Christian?"

"No," he quickly answered. "It wouldn't change

anything. There's all that crazy Old Testament stuff, too . . ."

Then I turned to the Christian apologist: "Do you think people need to believe in the virgin birth to consider themselves faithful Christians?"

"Absolutely," she said. "The virgin birth is essential to our understanding of Jesus Christ. If we don't accept *everything* that's true about him, then we lose everything."

These two evangelists—one for Christianity and the other for atheism—represent ends of a spectrum, drastically opposite answers to a very complicated question. They illustrate the tensions many people feel when they encounter the manger scene and the question of the virgin birth. But they also illustrate why it matters. It matters for our faith, for our understanding of God, and for how we practice Christianity in the world today.

Who is right? The skeptic or the believer? Or neither?

During a recent Christmas season, my questions about the virgin birth turned from being two-dimensional, at the level of speculative concepts, to a vivid three-dimensional experience. I sat in church week after week, singing songs that referenced the virgin Mary and the virgin birth, and I recited the Apostles' Creed. The questions behind this book

hovered over me, forcing me to consider whether those songs and those creeds match my own beliefs.

Was Jesus really born of a virgin? Does it matter?

The answer to that question leads us to another place, at once deeper and broader: it leads us to a theology of the incarnation. And that's what this book has become: a journey through a complicated but foundational assertion about who Jesus really was—and is. Throughout this journey, we'll discover anew the significance of the coming of God in the flesh. The presence of God in human history. From its emergence in the Gospels, the virgin birth pronounces that Jesus came from God and that he was a true, real, human being, like you and me. But what does the story of the virgin birth mean for us today? And should we still believe it?

THE BARE-BONES VIRGIN BIRTH IN THE BIBLICAL GOSPELS

Until the Enlightenment, most Christian theologians took the historicity of the virgin birth of Jesus for granted. They assumed Jesus was miraculously conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary, who was a virgin at the time of the conception. This assumption is mainly based on the two Gospels that tell us about Jesus's birth: Matthew and Luke.

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Matthew provides little detail about the miraculous conception, telling us matter-of-factly that Mary was “engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18). An angel responds to Joseph’s alarm with an assurance that “the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:20) and is Jesus, the one who will save the people from their sins. Connecting Jesus’s birth to Israel’s expectation of a Messiah, the story includes a reference to Isaiah 7:14: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us” (Matthew 1:23). But few details are provided about the nature of the conception itself. Matthew indicates that Mary’s pregnancy was a miraculous work of God. The main point of Matthew’s infancy narrative is that God had broken into the world in a new way to bring long-awaited salvation for Israel: Jesus is God’s presence with us; he is Emmanuel.

Luke is more explicit about Mary’s virginity. He also gives the name of the angel, Gabriel, who appears to Mary. Luke describes Mary as a virgin engaged to be married (Luke 1:27). In this story, the angel delivers the news to Mary *prior* to the pregnancy. She’s told that she will conceive a child who will be “Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:31). When

Mary questions the angel's proclamation, pointing out the obvious problem (that she is a virgin, for goodness sake!), the angel explains that the "Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Luke 1:35). She will bear a child—and that child will be the Messiah and savior.

That's about it. There are more details about the before and the after of the birth, but we aren't given much information, either about Mary's miraculous pregnancy or about the birth itself. In Luke, after the couple travels to Bethlehem for the census, we're told that "she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). The birth itself appears unremarkable. Matthew is even more subtle, telling us that after Joseph heard the news from the angel, he "took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus" (Matthew 1:24–25).

The two Gospels do not provide many details about the virginity of Mary, the conception by the Holy Spirit, or the nature of the birth itself. But that hasn't prevented theologians from speculating about those topics and what they might mean for us.

And speculate they did.

NOTES

- i. For a discussion of how sacredness factors into political and religious debates in the U.S., see Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage, 2013). Also see Bill Moyers's interview with Haidt at <http://billmoyers.com/segment/jonathan-haidt-explains-our-contentious-culture/>.