

The Historicity of the Virginal Conception. A Study in Argumentation

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SUMMARY

Using Raymond Brown's *The Birth of the Messiah* as a lead, I examine the arguments used in the debate on the historicity of the virginal conception. I shall adopt the lion's share of his arguments and results, yet place them within the wider scope of ontology, the history of biology

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and epistemology. In this endeavour, any further clarification of our theme will be closely related to a deepened interaction between ontology, historical epistemology (R. Chisholm, E. Mackay), logic and exegesis. Finally, the historicity of the virginal conception is ranked somewhere between *probable* and *beyond reasonable doubt*.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Unter Verwendung von Raymond Browns *The Birth of the Messiah* untersuche ich die Argumente, die in der Debatte um die Historizität der jungfräulichen Empfängnis benutzt werden. Ich werde den Löwenanteil seiner Argumente und Resultate benutzen, sie aber in den weiteren Horizont von Ontologie, der Geschichte der Biologie und

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Epistemologie stellen. In diesem Unterfangen werden alle weiteren Klärungen unseres Themas eng mit einer tieferen Interaktion zwischen Ontologie, historischer Epistemologie (R. Chisholm, E. Mackay), Logik und Exegese verbunden. Abschließend wird die Historizität der jungfräulichen Empfängnis irgendwo zwischen wahrscheinlich und jenseits vernünftigen Zweifels angesiedelt.

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RÉSUMÉ

En se fondant sur l'ouvrage de Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, l'auteur examine les arguments avancés dans le débat sur l'historicité de la conception virginale de Christ. Il suit l'essentiel des arguments et conclusions de Brown, mais en les replaçant dans un cadre plus large de réflexion ontologique et en prenant

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en compte l'histoire de la biologie et de l'épistémologie. Il tente ainsi de clarifier le débat à l'aide d'une approche pluridisciplinaire intégrant l'ontologie, l'histoire de l'épistémologie (R. Chisholm, E. Mackay), la logique et l'exégèse. En conclusion, il range l'historicité de la conception virginale dans la zone située entre le probable et ce qui est au-delà du doute raisonnable.

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1 Introduction

Both Matthew 1:18–25 and Luke 1:26–38 seem to affirm that Jesus was conceived without a human father. Whereas the conception of our Lord, then, seems to be virginal, the scholarly debate over this virginity surely isn't.¹ This contribution aims at carefully investigating the argumentation concerning the historicity of the virginal conception. Because of this goal, I will not enter into the

important question of the theological meaning of the virginal conception as a *signum*.

Why is historicity important? I agree with those who, like Duns Scotus and Schleiermacher, argue that the historicity of the virginal conception does not constitute a necessary precondition for the incarnation or the *impeccabilitas*. To be clear: I embrace both these doctrines wholeheartedly.² However, as regards the historicity, the following quotation from Schleiermacher deserves consid-

eration, precisely because of the greatness of God: 'whoever accepts the historicity, must accept it on the ground of the birth-narratives in the New Testament.'³ For why could the Almighty not take on a human life while using the ordinary way of conception? However, the other purely *historical* motif is in itself important enough: science requires esteem and love for reality and it just could be that the historicity is part of reality.

Obviously, in the background of this specific topic the relation between faith and history is at stake, a pressing issue since the Enlightenment and the historical revolution. By probing into the historicity of the virginal conception, this enquiry might offer an impulse to the ongoing scientific task of assimilating the historical revolution.

How I am going to advance this enquiry? Exegetically, Raymond Brown is my most important guide; I am thinking of his momentous *The Birth of the Messiah, a Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*.⁴ I shall adopt the lion's share of his arguments and results, yet place them within the wider scope of ontology, the history of biology and epistemology. In this endeavour, any further clarification of our theme will be closely related to a deepened interaction between philosophy, logic and exegesis.

As a criterion in selecting the manifold exegetical contributions, I examined whether authors took an *open stand* towards the question of historicity. This criterion is austere towards two opposing sides: both the *a priori* 'it must be truth because the Bible says so' and the *a priori* 'no historicity is involved for that is impossible' exclude serious exegetical investigation. For, knowing the results of their exegetical inquiry in advance, these advocates nullify the significance of historical research. In any case, open research into the nature of the genre is pivotal: Even if we are ready to accept that God could save somebody miraculously by commissioning an enormous whale, we are still posing the wrong question, for Jonah is the first *novella* in world literature.⁵

The overall structure of this contribution is as follows: first I will examine the openness of reality for miracles (2). Then, after handling some preliminary questions, I shall focus on some key issues from the exegetical debate (6). Finally, I shall present an epistemological evaluation (7).

2 Is a Virginal Conception Possible?

'Whatever marvel happens in this world, it is cer-

tainly less marvellous than this whole world itself – I mean the sky and the earth, and all that is in them – and these God certainly made.'⁶ In this passage, Augustine captures my basic perspective. This point of view was, however, eroded during the Enlightenment: the awareness of this world as God's creation faded away and, likewise, the openness for miracles declined radically. If, however, we know in advance that a virginal conception is impossible, historical research would be pointless. We would simply have to reconcile the bible with what we already know, by applying a suitable literary genre. Yet by moving forward like this, the literary genre would not be detected by *literary means* anymore, for the genre would not be supposed to encompass historicity to begin with.

Of course we often come upon this kind of *apriori* knowledge in a rather unso-phisticated fashion – people just seem to know that the historicity of the event is impossible. Meanwhile, from a scientific point of view, this issue has an ontological and a biological side to it. Biologically, the exact process has been known for one and a half century: we know exactly the function of the ovum and the sperm cell and, consequently, we can tell why a virginal conception will not happen in ordinary life. Whether they knew this in the first century as well constitutes the subject of our next section; at present, I answer this question affirmatively. Thus the ontological issue remains: could miracles, as unprecedented exceptions to a biological law, occur?

At present, numerous philosophers, including the non-religious, would answer this question affirmatively. Take, for instance, Stephen Mumford: 'A view of miracles as logically impossible is based on commitments that are both unnecessary and too strong.'⁷ I agree with this insight. In my *Freedom and Dispositions* I explored this subject extensively.⁸ Comprising a conceptual analysis of 'disposition', that book develops an open concept of disposition by means of possible world semantics. 'Open' connotes that physical and biological disposition concepts like *combustibility of fuel* or *adrenaline increase when stressed* do not refer to ontologically necessary facts. Therefore, exceptions are always possible, since we live in an open reality. In *Freedom and Dispositions* I prove that only with this 'open' concept of disposition are we able to make sense of physics and biology.⁹

Apart from its direct relevance for the philosophy of physics and biology, this open concept of disposition is important for the theory of miracles.

Due to the 'openness' of reality, God can intervene in a miraculous way. He does not need to 'break' or 'violate' a natural law of physics or biology, because creation is essentially supple and open. To be clear, there will be and can be¹⁰ exceptions even without God interfering. These exceptions occur for no reason. There will be many of them. Yet when God makes use of this inherent elbowroom in his creation, we are dealing with a miracle.¹¹

This means, however, that we consider a scientific stance that excludes the virginal conception on the ground of its ontological impossibility to be less reason-able than a view that recognises its possibility. This ontological possibility, however, does not lead to the conclusion that it actually happened. Here, the real space for historical research is opened up again: do the Gospels describe any such fact in a historical way, or do we just misunderstand the genre?

3 From the History of Conception Theories

Before we are able to investigate this, we must briefly examine some aspects of Greek and Hellenistic conception theories.¹² What thoughts *contemporaries* cherished about human conception could be of major significance to the topic of historicity.

Throughout Antiquity conception theory was multi-coloured and constantly in motion: theories were mixed and combined easily. To give an example of such a theory, I will put forth Aristotle's, mainly because it was this theory which, due to Galen's adoption of it, remained extremely influential well into the eighteenth century. Aristotle advocated the 'haematogenous' theory.¹³ Thus, according to him, germ cells originate from the blood. They are, so to say, blood in a certain 'state of aggregation'. The whole pathway, according to Aristotle, began with our food being converted (cooked, in fact!) by body heat into blood. In its turn, this blood is converted into all kind of tissues. However, in the male, the remainder will be 'cooked' into sperm. Yet women, while lacking the requested heat, transform their residue into menstrual blood. Therefore, Aristotle locates the difference between male and female in their variance in body heat: males are able to cook the blood until 'well-done'. Consequently, it has been said that according to Aristotle, the menstrual blood is 'underdone sperm'.¹⁴ So, although the menstrual blood does contribute to the embryo, 'this contribution is very subordinated, for it constitutes only

the *causa materialis*, whereas the sperm cell is *causa finalis*, *causa formalis*, and *causa efficiens*, to put it in terms of Aristotelian logic.¹⁵ The extremely influential physician Galen (second century CE) essentially took over this Aristotelian theory. According to him, the female role in conception is insignificant, although he does say that women have *sperm*, thus combining an older theory with Aristotle's. However, this sperm is very thin and much colder than that of the male; therefore, as far as effectiveness is concerned, it plays the subordinate role. This sketch must suffice here as a brief illustration of the theories of Antiquity and Hellenism.

As far as the present argument is concerned, the most salient fact is that all these theories seem to rule out any thought of a virginal conception. Even if the female component is not minimised straightforwardly, they all assign first importance to the male sperm. Obviously, all these theories are pre-scientific to a high degree; there was no cell concept, for instance. Concepts like '*causa finalis*' stem from Aristotelian philosophy and there was a long way to go before concepts like *heredity*, *genetic material* and *development* could appear. These modern concepts are far more empirical in content than their heavily metaphysical counterparts like the 'ousia' and 'genesis' of Antiquity.

To summarise: it is clear that Antiquity did not know about the 'how' of the interaction of ovum and sperm cell – they did not even have the concept of 'cell'. Undoubtedly, they *thought* they knew a great deal about the 'how' of human conception, but most of what they thought they knew was simply wrong. However, this does not mean that they were wrong in their conviction that the male sperm is a necessary precondition for conception.¹⁶ And this, obviously, is the main point for the present inquiry: throughout the ages man has acknowledged that the male sperm is a necessary precondition for conception, albeit that the theories used to express that necessity were hardly empirical and largely false.

4 What Tipped the Scale?

Let us now try to detect what kind of arguments regarding the historicity tipped the scale. Christianity has professed the virginal conception of Christ from time immemorial, anchored as it is in the Apostolic Creed. This changed during the Enlightenment; D.F. Strauss' famous *Das Leben Jesu* (1835) could be marked as a watershed.¹⁷ Without probing at length into the history of the

debate on the historicity of the virginal conception, we need to survey the arguments that weighed most in this gradual turning of the tide. We can discern four major candidates: a) the results of the historical-critical method; b) the conviction that a virginal conception is ontologically impossible; c) improved empirical science; d) arguments from systematic theology. Which of these arguments tipped the scale?

Within the scope of this contribution, I can only make some general remarks. I am convinced that (c) must be discarded. With regard to (c): the rationalistic criticism of the historicity emerged at the end of the eighteenth century,¹⁸ and therefore clearly predated the eventual identification of the ovum and sperm cell in the second part of the nineteenth century. This naturalistic rationalising can itself be properly explained by the conclusion of our preceding paragraph: a virginal conception had always been 'empirically' impossible. It contradicted both theory and experience, also prior to the Enlightenment. Therefore, it is not the progress in biological theory that was decisive in tipping the scale, but the *difference in interpretation* of biological theory. The sperm had always constituted a necessary condition, but, under the influence of a more mechanistic worldview, this fact assumed a new kind of weight. The necessary condition was increasingly seen as *absolutely necessary*: something that always happens must happen *necessarily*. But that, quite clearly, is a *philosophical change* and not a scientific one: it concerns metaphysics rather than improvements in empirical science. At stake is the issue that I have delineated in paragraph 2: what exactly is a biological law?

Regarding (d): the virginal conception soon became a cornerstone in the edifice of systematic theology, being closely connected with incarnation, the *impeccabilitas* and ecclesiology. During the Enlightenment, this scholastic edifice was dismantled and to various theologians the significance of the virginal conception diminished, at least as far as its purported historicity is concerned. However, this is far from a systematic argument *against* historicity, and we look in vain for any such argument among the systematic theologians.¹⁹ They adapted to developments rather than actually helping to shape them.

Therefore, I conclude that, from a historical perspective, (a) and (b) are pivotal: historical-critical arguments and the conviction that a virginal conception is ontologically impossible. As far as (a) is concerned, we must think of arguments like the

silence of the rest of the New Testament on this score and the historical-religious parallels – in paragraph 6 we shall deal with this subject.

The arguments (a) and (b) are often difficult to disentangle. Often, when an argument is presented as historical-critical in nature, it in fact contains a veiled ontological postulate. Take for instance Wilhelm Bousset, figurehead of the history of religion school before the First World War. He classifies the virginity as a 'gross offence' ('grobe Anstoss'). Of course, Bousset maintains, a truly scientific age must be freed from such thoughts.²⁰ Reading Bousset, one senses that to him any doubt is far beyond the threshold of enlightened reasoning: Bousset is *absolutely sure* that there can be no historicity involved. In the Gospel, the *virginitas* plays but a marginal role, he argues, something that only changes with the coming of Ignatius. Then he proceeds: 'This thought is based on popular fantasy, facilitated by the concept of the "Son of God"'.²¹ He dubs it 'Vulgärtheologie des jungen Christentums' (popular theology of early Christianity) with influences from the Hellenistic surroundings.²² What I am critical of, is not the comparison with the 'Hellenistic surroundings', but the total lack of doubt: the awareness of a historical problem has vanished. Bousset does not pose the question whether this literary genre might by chance *include* historicity. Instead, he seems to be on the run from what he sees as a 'gross offence' against enlightened reason. Because Bousset seems to know all the pertinent answers, we do not come upon any open historical research here.²³

To summarise, we see two principal factors operative in tipping the scale. Firstly, there is what is called 'the mechanising of the worldview' or the fading away of the Augustinian ontological perspective (2). Secondly, legitimate scientific arguments of a historical-critical nature are involved, for instance the argument from silence and the issue of the literary genre. Each historical individual should be investigated carefully as to which argument prevails in his or her thought, the ontological one or the historical-critical one. However, such a historical inquiry is beyond the scope of the present investigation.

5 Fallacies

Before we enter the actual exegetical controversies, we have to discuss some prevalent fallacies. Usually, various forms of *argumentum ad hominem* are at stake. We could think of the pious indignation

during many ages: 'discarding the virginal conception is heretical!' This may well be so, but as an *exegetical* argument it is invalid. Another common fallacy is the so-called 'circumstantial', also a kind of *argumentum ad hominem*. In this case, one relates the circumstances of the adversary to the content of his stance. For instance, one could point to the *Roman Catholicism* of the defender of the virginal conception, or the fact that a church father emphasised the virginal conception because of the importance of the incarnation in his thought. Yet another variant of *argumentum ad hominem* is called 'poisoning the well'. We found it already with Bousset: 'Vulgärtheologie des jungen Christentums'.

A final fallacy is the *argumentum ad populum*. Authors sometimes call upon the discrepancy between 'a suffocating dogmatic armour' and 'the free, critical air of unprejudiced, open-minded exegetical inquiry'. This, surely, is just a mixture of *argumentum ad populum* and *argumentum ad hominem*: adversaries are qualified as 'prejudiced' and 'dogmatic'. Illustrations of all these fallacies can be multiplied with ease.

6 Some Exegetical Foci

Of course, we cannot do justice to the full historical-critical debate pertaining to Matthew 1:18-25 and Luke 1:26-38 (and Luke 3:23). Therefore, I select some critical key-issues: a) the argument from the silence of the remainder of the New Testament; b) the lack of understanding in Jesus' family concerning his identity; c) the question of the literary genre and d) the evidence for the alternative view of non-historicity.

6.1 The Argument From Silence

Ever since exegetical worries about the virginal conception began to emerge, scholars have been advancing the argument of the silence of the rest of the New Testament. Yet, also in the case of non-historicity, the silence would, at first glance, still remain a puzzle. If clarification in the latter case is just as difficult, the silence would turn out to be a neutral consideration. So, in order to have any force, the silence-argument must be refined tradition-historically. This is done by Wilckens, who states with clarity: 'If this narrative were to include historicity, than the sayings of the Spirit-caused birth of Jesus would have been tradition-historically old. However, this is not the case.'²⁴

Brown, however, questions this point. Starting from the premise of the independence of the two

passages in Matthew and Luke, he says: 'the agreement of Matthew and Luke on the angelic annunciation of birth as the vehicle of the idea of the virginal conception establishes rather firmly in my judgement that a complex of three items antedated the two Gospels: (1) the literary form of an angelic annunciation of birth; (2) the theological message in the annunciation which placed side by side the Davidic descent of the Messiah and the begetting of God's Son through the power of the Holy Spirit; (3) the setting of the annunciation whereby it involved a young girl who was betrothed but still a virgin.'²⁵ Thus, Brown casts doubts on the idea that 'the Spirit-caused birth of Jesus' is only to be found in later redactions. So what do we conclude regarding the silence?

In my judgement, we cannot reconstruct the true significance of this historical phenomenon: we are looking through a keyhole; this is simply outside our field of vision. In fact, it could be anything: we do not know whether the other biblical authors had heard of the virginal conception. Suppose they had, then we can only guess at the reasons for not mentioning it. Apparently, christological considerations did not play a role: both John and Paul could have used the theme given their commitment to pre-existence Christology. Maybe moral scruples played their part, arising from the discreteness of the matter? Or perhaps John's scroll was just too short and Mark judged that infancy narratives would fall beyond his scope – or maybe he shrank from the use of this literary genre, because of the resemblances to Hellenistic mythology? All we can see is this fog. This, however, is the same for the advocates of non-historicity: if this myth really was a suitable way of expression, why did John not use it? Or why is he not acquainted with it? One could advance the argument of the region here – the *virginitas* is only found in material associated with the region of Syria²⁶ – think of Ignatius of Antioch – but again, I cannot see why this argument could serve to clarify the silence in case of a myth, but not in the case of historicity.

I therefore conclude that we just do not know enough to appraise whether the silence weighs against historicity or not. I agree with Brown, however, that the silence does have this significance: 'the silence ...does call into question the theory that the memory of the virginal conception was handed down by the family of Jesus to the apostolic preachers...'²⁷ This is an important observation, to which we will return (7).

6.2 The Family Shows Lack of Understanding for Jesus' Identity

We cannot discuss here all the material about the 'son of Joseph' or the genealogies. All these texts, according to Brown and many others, do not compel us to reject the historicity of the virginal conception.²⁸ The most compelling argument, though, according to Brown, is the lack of understanding on the part of Jesus' own family members, see Mark 3:21.²⁹ In short: 'Did not the virginal conception carry for Mary some implication as to who Jesus was?'³⁰ If the virginal conception was a historical fact, information about it must have been handed down by the family, even if this material only served as a catalyst, as the last piece of a jigsaw of other historical facts (think of the public knowledge of the early birth of Jesus). But why, then, did some members of the family show such an inadequate understanding of Jesus' identity?

I propose the following explanation. Possibly, Mary was not among the 'friends' who thought that He was beside himself (Mark 3:21). At any rate, it is only after Easter that acquaintance with the virginal conception would gradually lead to a better understanding of Christ's identity. Therefore, until well after the resurrection, the family's comprehension remained limited and the fact that they misjudged him, thinking he was 'beside himself', fits into this picture. This accords well with the Gospels' portrayal of all the disciples constantly groping after Jesus' true identity. From this, the family was not spared – not even Mary. A miraculous birth experience would not completely alter this. Nor would a miraculous birth report, if told to the other family members. Moreover, if it had been told, then it would certainly have been told differently than in the form handed down to us – think of its insertion into the annunciation narrative.

6.3 The Literary Genre

Let us proceed with examining the hypothesis that the evangelists used a language of faith that did not imply historicity. In order to be brief, I tacitly assess the following variant at the same time: is it plausible that in the early layers of the tradition historicity was not implied, but that, somewhere in their redaction, the evangelists misinterpreted the accounts of the miraculous birth by explaining them historically? I adopt the rather vague 'language of faith', since a more precise classification, e.g. 'myth' or 'midrash', tends to bias the issue pre-

maturely. These particular narratives transcend the ordinary literary categories; I shall limit myself, then, to describing as accurately as possible all the literary techniques used in these narratives. We shall discern three substantially different 'techniques': firstly, *typological* aspects occur, for instance the use of the annunciation model, the Old Testament typology of birth reports and the Moses Haggada. Secondly, I will discuss the occurrence of *legendary* motifs and, finally, I will enter into the purported resemblance with *Hellenistic mythology*.

Whether the evangelists used 'language of faith' is no point of discussion. The point is whether this language implies historicity in this particular case. We all agree, that their 'historical accounts are motivated essentially by the *kerygma*'.³¹ The authors are not interested in describing a biological marvel. At stake is only the following: is historicity for the evangelists A) conceivable and B) also an intended aspect of their message? Which arguments could one propose to deny A and B?

One could think of the contention that people in the first century 'did not think historically'. Thus it is argued that historicity is just not a separately conceivable fact; and, consequently, since we have to reject A, the same naturally goes for B. This argument, however, is confused. It is true that the historical awareness that gradually developed since the Enlightenment was not theirs: these are people from before the 'historical revolution'. However, being able to conceive of a truly historical virginal conception has nothing to do with the historical revolution. The argument hinges on a much too vague understanding of what comprises the historical revolution. Let me sum up a few key-features of the modern phenomenon of historical consciousness. It comprises, apart from its important social aspects of institutionalisation and professionalisation, the following essential characteristics: cautious treatment of sources, awareness of the distinctness of the past – the past is fundamentally different from the present – and awareness that 'every comprehension of the past is of a historical nature itself'.³² This, however, is something completely different from not being able to conceive of the *historicity* of certain facts. Whether Caesar was really murdered by Brutus for example, was certainly conceivable for people in the first century. Likewise, the question whether language of a virginal conception includes historicity was conceivable for them. Lack of historical consciousness, which they indeed suffered from, simply does not affect this. In conclusion, then, we have to admit

that A was possible. How about B: was historicity also *intended* in this literary genre?

The detection of the literary genre is a very complex matter. It asks for accuracy, because vague associations induced by ill-defined genres only result in clouding the issue. So, what literary techniques can be observed? Firstly, by way of introduction, a brief resumé of some of the proposed solutions. Martin Dibelius argues that Luke's story is a legend. Fortunately, he furnishes us with an exact definition of 'legend': A legend aims at edification ('Erbaulichkeit') through the example of the piety and holiness of the hero ('Frömmigkeit und Heiligkeit des Helden'). This definition, clearly, does not exclude historicity.³³ However, according to Dibelius's own definition, Luke 1:26-38 is not a typical legend, for it was evidently not written in order to edify.³⁴ Thus, we must look for a more cautious approach, as proposed by Schürmann: 'maybe, a more accurate way of expression is to speak of narrative styled on the Jewish Haggada, ... which aimed at bringing to light history's profound and concealed meaning.'³⁵ This appraisal is even more open to historicity than legend.

Now when we turn to Matthew's pericope: this story, according to Dibelius, is not a legend. Moreover, Luz calls it a 'christological Midrash'.³⁶ He does so, however, with considerable reservations: classifying this pericope as 'Midrash' would extend the concept decisively, for the actual genre of Midrash does not occur here. It is true that both Matthew and Luke incorporate the genre of annunciation,³⁷ but calling this 'Midrash' only leads to a non-specific use of the term. In addition, the typology of Joseph and Moses occurs, particularly the Moses of the Haggada. Thus far, my short inventory of the narration techniques used.

The acknowledgement of all these typological and salvation-historical narration techniques must make us aware of the possibility that authors fashioned their accounts on Old Testament stories. Take, for instance, the OT story of Joseph: Jesus was modelled as the new Joseph going down to Egypt in order to save his people, a creative narrative without historical background. However, in biblical literature, the use of typology is generally a means of interpreting historical *facts*. When Isaiah fashions the return from the Babylonian exile on the model of the exodus, this does not mean that the return was not historical. Generally speaking, typology is a literary tool for the interpretation of *history*: in using it, historical facts are taken up into the biblical hermeneutics of salvation. On the

other hand, I grant that, within this overall hermeneutical principle, there must be room for *creative modelling* of facts. The genre, therefore, comprises both *interpreting* as well as *modelling*, but these two are ordered hierarchically. The interpretation of history is the primary aim. In my judgement, therefore, the character of the genre is mistaken, when we understand it primarily from the angle of *creative modelling*. So with respect to the genre, the question of whether the flight to Egypt is modelled on the OT story of Joseph without involving any historical facts is pertinent; at the same time, however, this genre requires careful scholarly consideration of the possibility of historicity. When conflicting evidence makes historicity improbable, we have to conclude that the flight to Egypt is probably the result of creative modelling. As regards the virginal conception, the same sequence of steps is required.

This results in the following provisional conclusion: 1) Legendary aspects, if any (Luke), do not discard historicity (Dibelius). And 2) this conglomerate of typological and salvation-historical motifs does not yield any *literary* clues for the assertion that historicity is not involved. We are dealing with a genre basically inclined to imply historicity, although it certainly leaves elbowroom for *creative modelling*.³⁸ Thus, the genre deviates strongly from the apocryphal birth-narratives, e.g. the *Protoevangelium of James*.³⁹

Finally, we have to assess the possibility of Hellenistic myth, the genre of the miraculous birth of a divine man. Hellenistic myth provides us with countless examples of miraculous birth stories through divine intervention. Numerous scholars have maintained that early Christians sought to express their faith by using this pagan symbolic language. Brown, however, summarises some difficulties with this view:⁴⁰ 'As for the figures of world religions, there are internal problems about the dating of the traditions of their conceptions.' Secondly, we note that there is actually no parallel of a virginal conception in pagan religion, the only parallel being a begetting without a human father (or mother, Aeneas). For we must note a decisive difference from the pagan legends: they all involve accounts of sexual intercourse with the deity (a 'hieros gamos').⁴¹ We should ask, therefore, whether Christians really would have felt any affinity with these stories, rather than a strong aversion. Is there really a 'parallel' between a child begotten through the creative power of the Holy Spirit and the pagan 'hieros gamos', stories burdened as they

are with amoral sexual conduct of the male deities? This leads up to the third argument: although we certainly notice a free use of Hellenistic thought (compare Philo), the polytheistic setting together with the often amoral, sexual implications of Hellenistic myth could well have prevented early Christians from fashioning their salvation message on the model of these myths.

However, recent scholarship argues that Hellenisation was more profound than was accepted previously.⁴² It is claimed that first century doctrinal borders were permeable. On these grounds, one could maintain that early Christians made use of this mythic material in order to express their faith. Moreover, at this point one could attract Martin Dibelius' notion of *biographical analogy*. According to Dibelius, stories of saints will be enriched along general mythopoeic laws; direct dependence is not required for such an increase in legendary material.⁴³ Thus, the biographies of great and pious heroes will show a considerable degree of analogy: divine signs accompany the birth of these heroes. However, whether one proposes an affinity in this sense of 'biographical analogy' or in a more robust sense, accepting real dependence, I think that this is not the main point. The main point is rather that neither view leads to the conclusion of non-historicity, for, as I have argued, the literary genre in Matthew and Luke, is different: in contrast to the mythical literature of Hellenism, this highly typological genre with its intrinsic Jewish stamp implies historicity, at least in principle.⁴⁴ Even if some form of affinity is admitted, in whatever sense, the literary genre is transposed into another key, the key of the redeeming fulfilment of OT prophecies. Therefore, I conclude that the literary genre, as far as the virginal conception is concerned, more probably than not implies historicity. Whether it ultimately does, depends on the results of section 6.4.

Let us venture into the theological interpretation of such kinds of literary affinity. One could think of myth as a dream and the present Gospel account of the miraculous birth as its fulfilment, an affinity between prefiguration and fulfilment. This brings us to C.S. Lewis. Decisive for Lewis' conversion was his giving up of the traditional conviction that there could be no continuity whatsoever between the numinous world of pagan mythical religion and Christian belief. To him, it was a kind of disclosure experience finally to realise that 'Christianity is myth that really happened'.⁴⁵

6.4 The Evidence for Non-historicity

Finally, we have to address the plausibility of the non-historical alternative. Could the virginal setting be seen as a legendary veil for the admission of adultery? Historically, this meets with serious difficulty, for this requires an opposing view of the accusation of adultery. If, however, the suspicion of adultery was commonly known, we may expect at least some independent historical traces. Why do we not find any such traces early in the first century? The first Jewish evidence dates only from the second century.⁴⁶ Therefore, the hypothesis of the birth legend as a pious camouflage of an admission of adultery is a solution that is itself historically problematic: it generates a new enigma of silence.

Even more troublesome for the non-historical solution is this: for the flight to Egypt, the massacre at Bethlehem and the story of the star, and the star there are proper model stories. Joseph's flight, Exodus 1 and the story of Balaam, saw a star rising from Jacob' (Nu. 24:17). For the virginal conception, however, there is no such model story.⁴⁷ In fact, it is quite non-Jewish, though the apparent association with the Hellenistic parallels'. A Jewish mind would accept a model story, only if it presented itself to him as a model, not *invent* or *model* it, simply because he would not *model*. The non-historical solution, therefore, faces some major difficulties of its own.

Let me briefly sum up the results of this section. Firstly, the literary genre, crammed with typology, includes historicity (as we saw, historicity is just as conceivable in the first century as it is now). Secondly, other explanations of the anomalies of Matthew and Luke are, on historical and literary grounds, less probable (for instance the use of a Hellenistic genre or the pious camouflage of adultery or modelling on an OT story). Thirdly, there are no persuasive historical arguments (for instance the silence in the remainder of the Gospel or the lack of understanding on the part of Jesus' family) that would force us to interpret the genre according to its more subordinate, non-historical meaning.

7 An Epistemological Assessment

Finally, we have to assess all these results epistemologically. Contemporary epistemology, among other things, carefully studies the different degrees of certainty of assertions, including historical assertions. The meticulous defining of different degrees of certainty of historical assertions is particularly thus,

we are able to avoid a black and white epistemology of all-or-nothing as far as certainty of historical proof is concerned. I hope to show the importance of this in the present section.

Elaborating on the work of Roderick Chisholm and Antoon Vos, the Dutch historian and philosopher of history Ewald Mackay recently developed such a historical epistemology.⁴⁸ He distinguishes between the different degrees of certainty of belief and knowledge. Central to his epistemology is Chisholm's important comparative notion of *more reasonable than*. Let us arrange a global survey of these degrees of epistemic appraisal in mounting order: believing *p* is *counterbalanced*, or it is *probable*. In addition to these different gradations of belief, we have degrees of knowledge: *beyond reasonable doubt*, *evident* and *certain*. Knowledge, therefore, is not *eo ipso* certain. Here, I will supply only the definitions of those evaluative terms which are crucial to the present argument: *p* is *probable* for *S* if *S* is more justified in believing *p* than in believing the negation of *p*. And *p* is *beyond reasonable doubt* if *S* is more justified in believing *p* than in withholding judgement on *p*.⁴⁹ Moreover, each epistemological risk in historical inquiry makes an assertion descend on the scale, while each risk successfully surmounted makes it rise again on our epistemic ladder. Take for example 'Jesus Christ was crucified'. We have the accounts of direct witnesses and there is no contradicting evidence – or we are able to explain such evidence. Moreover, the sources are reliable. We therefore rank this assertion on the highest possible rung: this historical knowledge is certain.

As regards the virginal conception, however, things are different. Here we must face the fact that we simply do not know how the witnesses obtained their information (6.1, 6.2!). Although we can suggest all kinds of sources here, this would remain pure guesswork. The claim that it was Mary herself who provided the information cannot be verified. For this reason we cannot rank the virginal conception on the highest rung of the epistemological scale. In spite of this, we concluded that it was more reasonable to accept the historicity than to reject it. Consequently, the virginal conception is at least *probable*. Is it also *beyond reasonable doubt*? In that case, it must be more reasonable to accept it than to withhold judgement. Here a great deal of variance in opinion should be expected, due to the enormous complexity of the exegetical argumentation and the individual appraisal of the manifold exegetical issues. In the end, it will hover between

the requirement of caution on the one hand and, on the other, the necessity of explaining the apparent NT facts, something which is done more easily with the assumption of historicity. In other words: *he who never shoots, never misses, but he never hits either*. Therefore, I would choose a range of acceptable options: I would rank the historicity of the virginal conception somewhere between *probable* and *beyond reasonable doubt*.

Now we can demonstrate the importance of this careful epistemological method by giving an example from Brown's groundbreaking inquiry. For it is very remarkable that Brown arrives at the following statements: firstly, 'On purely exegetical grounds I came to the conclusion that the scientifically controllable biblical evidence leaves the question of the historicity of the virginal conception unresolved.'⁵⁰ At the same time, however, he affirms that the NT evidence is easier to explain 'by positing historical basis than by positing theological creation.'⁵¹ These two utterances show a remarkable tension and this, I think, might have to do with implicit historical epistemology. We must be cautious about lingering remnants of what we called 'black and white epistemology', for Brown's first utterance could be propelled by a conception of the nature of historical proof as 'all or nothing'. He says that the following is missing: 'The type of evidence constituted by tradition from identifiable witnesses of the events involved, when that tradition is traceably preserved and not found in conflict with other traditions'. I agree that the epistemological difficulty resides precisely at this point. But a careful epistemic analysis cannot stop at this point. In the light of Brown's second utterance, we are allowed to affirm that believing the historicity is more reasonable than not believing it. In that case, the historicity of the virginal conception is *probable*. If, however, we add that it is our duty to *explain* the NT evidence, and when this is done more appropriately by assuming a historical basis, then it is more reasonable to belief the historicity than to refrain from accepting it. Put like this, we have to appraise the historicity as *beyond reasonable doubt*. If we, therefore, rank Brown's results on the epistemic scale, it emerges that according to Brown too, the historicity of the virginal conception is somewhere between *probable* and *beyond reasonable doubt*. Although Brown is very accurate in his epistemic evaluations, we must conclude that in this particular case still more refinement is required. In this critical phase of the epistemic evaluation, the lack of 'scientifically controllable biblical evidence'

seems to put other less certain forms of historical proof in the shadow. Thus, I hope to have demonstrated the importance of the 'Chisholmian' method of careful epistemic evaluation.

Gotthold Lessing worried about the 'breiten garstigen Graben' (broad, ugly ditch) between contingent historical facts and the necessary truths of reason. However, if we systematically exclude all weaker degrees of belief, due to our preoccupations with irrefutable knowledge, this will result in a small island of 'irrefutable historical facts' floating in an ocean of scepticism. This is harmful: he who never shoots, never wins! In history, we have to take risks, and refusing to do so because we want to be absolutely sure, amounts to nothing more than not shooting. This eventually leads to a severe impoverishment of the historical anchors of our culture. The widespread disentanglement of faith and historical science is only a provisional solution highlighting this very same crisis.

Notes

- 1 The concept of virginal birth is too broad, I confine myself in this contribution to the virginal conception, except in note 39.
- 2 See N.W. den Bok en G.H. Labooy (ed.), *Wat God bewoog, mens te worden*, Zoetermeer 2003.
- 3 My free translation, *Der Christliche Glaube*, Berlin 1960, §97. Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus*, Oxford 1999, 133.
- 4 Raymond E. Brown, S.S., new updated edition, New York 1993.
- 5 H.W. Wolff, *Obadja und Jona*, BKAT XIV/3, Neukirchen 1977, 58-64.
- 6 Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, X.12.
- 7 In: 'Miracles: metaphysics and modality', *Religious Studies*, 37 (2001) 191-202.
- 8 Frankfurt/New York 2002.
- 9 See my 'Open Dispositions', *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, 64/2 (2002). And Ch.4, *Freedom and Dispositions*.
- 10 Can be synchronically; this is specified by possible world semantics.
- 11 See Ch.8, *Freedom and Dispositions*, with an extensive link to the contemporary debate.
- 12 My principal guide is E. Lesky, *Die Zeugungs- und Vererbungslehren der Antike und ihr Nachwirken*, Mainz 1950. And P.W. van der Horst, 'Het Zaad van Sara', *Studies over het Jodendom in de oudheid*, Kampen 1992.
- 13 To name a few others: encephalo-myelogenous (out of brain- and spinal cord tissue), the pangenesis-theory (out of all tissues), Right-left theories, warmth-theories, see Lesky, *op. cit.*
- 14 Van der Horst, *op. cit.*, 35.
- 15 Van der Horst, *ibid.* The male principle relates to

the female as *causa formalis* to matter, huij. Lesky, *op. cit.*, 137.

- 16 A single theory states that the one who begets is, as formative principle, more important than his seed (Aristotle even thinks that at some biological levels the seed is unnecessary). This, clearly, leaves more room for a virginal conception but, to my mind, such theoretical developments played a marginal role in Antiquity, Lesky, *op. cit.*, 137.
- 17 From about 1775 onwards, the concept of myth is increasingly applied to the birth-narratives, see J.G. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, Michigan 19322, 211.
- 18 See J.G. Machen, *op. cit.*, who cites Bahrde, 1782.
- 19 W. Pannenberg forms an exception. He argues that the virginal conception does not fit the thought of incarnation of the pre-existent Son. See *Grundzüge der Christologie*, Gütersloh 1964, 142. However, this argument is a real latecomer (1964).
- 20 W. Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, Göttingen 1913, 330.
- 21 See *op. cit.*, 332, my translation.
- 22 See *op. cit.*, 332.
- 23 Troeltsch's analogy-requirement for historical knowledge is of momentous influence here too, see E. Mackay, *Geschiedenis bij de bron*, Sliedrecht 1997, 170-180, esp. 175.
- 24 U. Wilckens, 'Empfangen vom Heiligen Geist, geboren aus der Jungfrau Maria, Lk.1:26-38', R. Pesch (Hrsg.), *Zur Theologie der Kindheitsgeschichten, der heutige Stand der Exegese*, Zürich 1981, 62, my translation.
- 25 Brown, *op. cit.*, 522. Idem P. Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 1, Göttingen 1997-1999, 189. Regarding the independence of Matthew and Luke a broad consensus is found, see Brown, *op. cit.*
- 26 Presuming that the Gospel of John does not originate from Syria.
- 27 See *op. cit.*, 521.
- 28 See Brown, *op. cit.* and Craig S. Keener, *A commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, Grand Rapids 1999.
- 29 This is the single truly relevant text, although Mark 3:31-35 and 6:1-6 are sometimes put forward in this context.
- 30 Brown, *op. cit.*, 526.
- 31 Schürmann, *op. cit.*, 201.
- 32 E. Mackay, *op. cit.*, 56. Due to this last criterion of 'historical consciousness', one who discards the historicity of miracles a priori turns out to be non-scientific: he does not acknowledge that his own point of view is historically determined.
- 33 For the entire definition *Formgeschichte des Evangeliums*, Tübingen 1966, 105-106.
- 34 Schürmann, *op. cit.*, 202, judges likewise.
- 35 '.... erzählerisch tiefere Sinngehalte des Geschehens ins Wort zu heben...' Schürmann, *op. cit.*, 202.
- 36 Dibelius, *op. cit.*, 125. L. Goppelt, *op. cit.*, 73, argues that both stories are 'im Stil der Legende',

- but that remains rather vague. U. Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, EKK I/1, not taking Matthew to be a legend, says positively: '... Mittel des Glaubenszeugnisses und hat keinen direkten geschichtlichen Hintergrund'. 99 f.f.
- 37 See D. Zeller's careful analysis of the genre, 'Die Ankündigung der Geburt – Wandlungen einer Gattung', R. Pesch, *op.cit.*
- 38 Schürmann, *op. cit.*, 204, judges likewise: he opts for the term 'Spiel-Raum' in this context.
- 39 'Apocryphal Gospels', C.A. Evans, S.T. Porter, *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, Downers Grove 2000, 76. See R. Wilson, 'Apokryphen II', *TRE*, 3, Berlin 1978, 316-362, who stresses the sobriety of the Gospels in contrast with the apocryphal Gospels, a fundamental difference as to literary genre. In these apocryphal Gospels there is much a-historic legendary material. If the basis of the '*durante en post partum*' is exclusively apocryphal too, then the historicity of these stories is highly improbable.
- 40 See *op.cit.*, 522-23. I question only one of his arguments, namely, his critical remark as to whether there was any familiarity with Hellenistic mythological expressions. I accept the more recent view that 'the available historical information, taken as a whole, testifies to a wide-ranging and fluid exchange between Hellenism and Judaism ...', see W.T. Wilson, 'Hellenistic Judaism', C.A. Evans, S.T. Porter, *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, Downers Grove 2000, 478.
- 41 The deity, coming as a male, impregnates the woman, see also Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus*, New York 1973. See Giulia Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, London 1990, I. Brown underscores rightly that any parallel should be proved historically. See Justin Martyr (second century, apologetic context!), who both compares and contrasts pagan myth and the virgin birth, Machen, *op. cit.* 327.
- 42 A crucial figure in this reassessment is M. Hengel, see G.R. Stanton, 'Hellenism', in C.A. Evans, S.T. Porter, *op.cit.*
- 43 This controverts Brown's first argument!
- 44 U. Luz, *op.cit.*, for instance, jumps to conclusions when asking rhetorically who would accept the historical nature of the birth of Plato. Examining the account of Diogenes Laertius, however, we observe that this story is called a 'logos' (here in the sense of a legend, see Lidell & Scott, 'logos'). Therefore, there exists a sharp contrast with the genre in Matthew. Luz, however, does not consider this possibility. See Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, R.D. Hicks, III/2, London 1959.
- 45 See Walter Hooper, C.S. Lewis, *A Companion and Guide*, London 1996, 582-586.
- 46 See Brown, *op.cit.*, 705-708, and 534-542.
- 47 Judaism is not acquainted with a virginal conception, ad Isaiah 7:14 and Philo see a.o. Brown, *op.cit.*, 524.
- 48 A. Vos, *Kennis en Noodzakelijkheid*, Kampen 1981; R.M. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, Englewood Cliffs, 19893; Mackay, see note 23.
- 49 Not all the evaluative terms coincide in the various studies, so this demands further clarification. Mackay *op.cit.*, 289-308.
- 50 See *op.cit.*, 698. Brown assumes that one kind of assertion is higher on the scale: 'Jesus died on the cross', note 302, 698.
- 51 Brown, *op.cit.*, 527, 698, again on 705.

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