

# The Virginal Conception and Its Meanings

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## Abstract

In Jeffrey Archer's *The Gospel According to Judas*, Judas dismisses the virginal conception of Jesus as no more than another example of 'Greek myths that tell of gods in heaven who produce offspring following a union with women of this earth'. To attribute such a view to a first-century Jew like Judas seems strange, since the earliest evidence shows Jewish critics of the Christian movement rejecting the virginal conception as a case of illegitimacy. In any case such Greek myths do not provide plausible sources for the two Gospel accounts of the virginal conception. Yet such merely historical debate is insufficient. One should press on to illustrate the religious significance and theological importance of the virginal conception within the whole story of Jesus: for instance, the role of this conception in revealing the Trinity at work for human salvation.

## Keywords

Virginal conception, Greco-Roman myths, Jesus and the Trinity, Jesus' 'double' generation, Salvation history

In *The Gospel According to Judas* Jeffrey Archer, assisted by Francis J. Moloney, launched another attempt to rehabilitate Judas Iscariot.<sup>1</sup> As recounted by a fictitious son of Judas, Benjamin Iscariot, Judas wanted to rescue Jesus from a dangerous situation in Jerusalem and send him home safe to Galilee. But he was double-crossed by a sinister figure called 'the Scribe', who arrested Jesus and hurried him off to be tried before Caiaphas, handed over to the Romans, and sentenced to death on a cross. The Archer/Moloney imaginative exercise turns Judas into a tragic hero who could not undo the terrible thing that he had been tricked into doing.

An introductory note describes the joint project of a novelist and a biblical scholar as follows: 'Archer would write a story for twenty-first-century readers, while Moloney would ensure that the result

<sup>1</sup> London: Macmillan, 2007.

would be credible to a first-century Christian or Jew.’ But they take too many liberties with the given data to be in any way convincing.<sup>2</sup> One such ‘liberty’ concerns the virginal conception of Jesus.

### Judas Against the Virginal Conception

Judas is recalled by Archer/Moloney as flatly denying the virginal conception. According to Judas, Jesus was ‘the first born of the lawful wedlock between his father, Joseph, and his mother, Mary’. Judas added: ‘some of the stories about Jesus’ birth . . . were nothing more than Greek myths that tell of gods in heaven who produce offspring following a union with women of this earth’ (pp. 4–5). In the glossary, a note justifies this denial of the virginal conception by referring readers to Genesis 6: 1–4, a piece of Near Eastern (not Greek) mythology that tells of sexual unions between angels (‘the sons of God’) and women (‘the daughters of men’). This old myth about a lustful breaking of boundaries that separate ‘heaven’ and ‘earth’ seems to have been originally intended to account for the existence of the Nephilim, tall men who were famous warriors and credited with superhuman power (see Num. 13: 33; Deut. 2: 10–11). In the context of Genesis 6., this Near Eastern myth is cited to illustrate the increase of sin and violence that led up to the great flood (Gen. 6: 11).

Would or could ‘a first-century Jew’ like Judas have dismissed the virginal conception as ‘nothing more’ than a ‘Greek myth’? It seems doubtful that, in the time before AD 70 and the fall of Jerusalem, Jews in Palestine would have known of these myths, and so be in a position to dismiss the virginal conception of Jesus as just another version of such legends.<sup>3</sup> What is, however, clearly documented from the second century is that some Jews alleged that Mary committed adultery and had a child (Jesus) as a result of an affair with a soldier called Panthera. When writing around 177–80 his *True Discourse* (1.28, 32), the pagan author Celsus drew on Jewish sources to make this charge.<sup>4</sup> What is not clear, however, is whether this charge of illegitimacy circulated before Matthew and Luke wrote their Gospels in the late first century or whether it arose, polemically, in response to the Gospels.<sup>5</sup> All in all, it would have been more plausible (and less blatantly anachronistic) for Archer and Moloney to have represented Judas dismissing the virginal conception as a case of illegitimacy rather than doing so on the grounds of its being a mere ‘Greek myth’

<sup>2</sup> See my review of their book in *The Pastoral Review*, July/August 2007, pp. 83–85.

<sup>3</sup> See R. E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, new ed. 1993), pp. 522–23.

<sup>4</sup> See H. Chadwick, *Origen Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953, paperback ed. 1980), pp. 28, 31–32.

<sup>5</sup> See Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, pp. 534–37.

that had crept into the Gospel stories of Jesus about the origin of Jesus.

When we examine Greek (and Roman) myths about Zeus and other deities coupling with women and producing remarkable offspring, these stories concern legendary heroes and, occasionally, remarkable human beings who actually existed. Thus Zeus was supposed to have come in a shower of gold to impregnate Danaë and beget Perseus, a mythical Greek hero who slew Medusa, saved Andromeda from a sea-monster, and became the king of Tiryns. When Zeus came in his true shape to another woman, Semele, she died but their offspring lived, to be known as Dionysus (or Bacchus), the god of wine. The god of wisdom, Phoebus Apollo, was sometimes credited with providing Amphictione, the mother of Plato, with superior, divine sperm for the conception of her brilliant offspring. All these Greco-Roman myths name some particular 'individual', generally a legendary hero, as the offspring of intercourse between a god and a woman. As far as I know, these myths *never* purported to 'explain' the origin of a group of people, such as the Nephilim, famous warriors of gigantic stature. It seems quite gratuitous to associate these myths with Genesis 6 and its reference to the origin of the Nephilim. Let us leave aside this strange reference that Archer and Moloney provide to back up their picture of Judas dismissing the virginal conception as nothing more than a Greek myth. What of the Greco-Roman myths themselves? Can they throw any light on the narratives of the virginal conception that we read in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke?

### Greco-Roman Myths

Some writers have claimed that early Christians fashioned the virginal conception stories (picked up later by Matthew and Luke) by borrowing from Greco-Roman legends about the extraordinary birth of mythical or actual heroes. Since they acknowledged the divine origin and status of Jesus, Christians supposedly took over and applied to him current legends about the conception and birth of such heroic figures as Heracles, Romulus and Remus, Plato and Alexander the Great.

Three groups of notable difficulties have rightly been raised against this hypothesis. First, is there any hard evidence that such legends were known to the earliest, Palestinian Christians in the years leading up to the composition of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke? Certainly in the second century, the writings of Christians like St Justin Martyr (d. around 165) and St Irenaeus (d. around 200) show that they were acquainted with Greco-Roman legendary accounts about the extraordinary conception and birth of mythical or actual heroes. But there is no such clear evidence that the eyewitnesses of

the life of Jesus, the associates of such eyewitnesses, and the communities on which Matthew and Luke drew when writing their Gospels knew such Greco-Roman myths.<sup>6</sup> Some authors have bravely alleged that Greco-Roman thought-forms and myths affected even the composition of Mark, which was the first Gospel to be written and on which Matthew and Luke drew. If Mark was influenced by Greco-Roman legends, one might suppose that the two Gospels that followed him might well do likewise. But the alleged 'evidence' for such Greco-Roman influence on Mark is concocted rather than detected.<sup>7</sup>

Second, would the Greco-Roman myths about Zeus and other gods impregnating women and producing remarkable offspring have proved acceptable models to be followed by early Christians, whether of Jewish or Gentile origin, when they recounted the conception and birth of Jesus? Two points should be made in response. (1) The New Testament evidence is overwhelmingly clear: the first Christians, whether of Jewish or Gentile origin, were immersed in the Old Testament scriptures and maintained the essence of Jewish faith in one God (even if they now acknowledged 'personal' distinctions between Father, Son and Holy Spirit within the divine life). This Jewish faith in YHWH which the first Christians inherited simply excluded any notion of God having a female consort, let alone indulging in promiscuous sexual behaviour. Nowhere do the Jewish scriptures attribute to YHWH the sexual activity and trickery ascribed to Zeus and other deities who were said to have fathered mythical heroes and exceptional human beings. There is not the slightest hint that the first Christians ever wavered in maintaining the Jewish image of God as being utterly beyond sexual activity. It seems unimaginable that early Christians, coming from a Jewish background and nourished by the Jewish scriptures, would have considered Greco-Roman legends about the sexual activity of gods appropriate sources for illuminating the human origins of Jesus. (2) In the second century we find Justin Martyr dismissing the promiscuous capers attributed to Zeus in Greek mythology as loathsome and worthy only of a deity 'overcome by the love of evil and shameful pleasures' (*First Apology*, 21).

Third, the thesis of borrowed legends crumbles dramatically, once we examine the alleged parallels. Over and over again one can spot startling differences between the Greco-Roman myths and the virginal conception accounts of Matthew and Luke. The Greco-Roman stories repeatedly tell of sexual intercourse between a god and a woman, who is sometimes tricked into having relations with a god

<sup>6</sup> For a valuable account of the composition of the four Gospels, see R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses. The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> For details see G. O'Collins, *Easter Faith* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003), pp. 48–49, 67–69, 112.

or is even raped by the deity in question. Unlike the Annunciation story, where Mary's conscious agreement features prominently and there is no question of any sexual intercourse (Luke 1: 26–38), the Greco-Roman legends generally turn mothers of mythical heroes, such as Danaë (who begets Perseus), into mere tools of divine passion and projects. The smutty tone of these legends, which often feature mythical figures, who (unlike Mary and Jesus) do not belong to human history, can verge on soft pornography. Let me cite only three examples.

Diodorus Siculus, a first-century BC writer, recounted the legend of the conception, birth and subsequent 'labours' of Heracles. Supposedly herself the great-granddaughter of Zeus, Alkmene 'was taken by Zeus through a deceit, and she gave birth to Heracles. Thus this hero, according to his mythical family tree, was both the son and the great-great-grandson of Zeus, 'the greatest of the gods'. Diodorus described the episode as follows: 'When Zeus lay with Alkmene, he tripled the length of the night, and, in the increased length of time spent in begetting the child, he foreshadowed the exceptional power of the child who was to be begotten.' Since Zeus 'could never hope to seduce her because of her self-control', he 'chose deceit. By this means he tricked Alkmene; he became like Amphitryon [her husband] in every way.' The wife of Zeus, Hera, was naturally jealous and furious at what had happened. She succeeded in stopping for a time the labour pains of Alkmene. After Heracles was eventually born, Hera even sent 'two snakes to destroy the baby, but the child did not panic. He grabbed the neck of each snake in his two hands and strangled them' (*Universal History*, 4.9.1–10). It is bizarre to imagine that this legend of Heracles' conception and birth served as a workable model for the accounts provided by Matthew and Luke about the virginal conception and birth of Jesus.

Livy (d. AD 12 or 17) tells briefly the story of the conception and birth of the legendary founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus. Their mother, Rhea Silvia, had been forced by her wicked uncle who had usurped the throne of Alba Longa, to become a vestal virgin. Then she 'was violated and gave birth to twins. She named Mars as their father, either because she really believed that, or because the fault might appear less heinous if a deity were the cause of it.' The cruel king threw her into prison and had the babies left in a cradle on the banks of the Tiber. They were suckled by a kindly she-wolf, and grew up to found the city of Rome (*The History of Rome*, 1.4). A Greek writer, Dionysius of Halicarnassus (d. early in the first century AD), gives three versions of how Rhea Silvia was violated in the course of her duties as a vestal virgin. The three versions ascribe the rape, respectively, to one of her suitors, to her evil uncle (Amulius), or to the god Mars (*Roman Antiquities*, 1.76–7). Once again we would require a wild leap of the historical imagination to

think that these stories about Romulus and Remus furnished a source for early Christians bent on creating a 'fitting' account of Jesus' conception and birth.

What of Greco-Roman legends about the origin of such genuinely historical figures as Plato and Alexander the Great? The god of wisdom, Phoebus Apollo, was sometimes credited with providing Amphictione, the mother of Plato, with superior, divine sperm for the conception of her brilliant offspring. To bring about the desired effect from this sperm, her human husband was prevented from having sexual intercourse with her.<sup>8</sup>

Even during his lifetime some credulous people were led to believe that the mother of Alexander the Great, Olympias, had conceived him through intercourse with Zeus. The god appeared in the form of 'a great snake' (a classic penis symbol) and wound himself around her body while Olympias was asleep (Plutarch, 'Alexander', *Parallel Lives*, 2.1–3.2). Suetonius (born about AD 69), drawing on an earlier Greek source, tells a similar story about the origin of Augustus Caesar. The god Apollo assumed the form of a snake and came in the middle of the night, when she was asleep, to impregnate Atia, the mother of the future Emperor Augustus (*Lives of the Caesars*, 2.94.4). These stories about what happened during the night to the sleeping Olympias and Atia stand in striking contrast with the Annunciation story in Luke's Gospel. Mary is fully awake, accepts the divine invitation to collaborate in the incarnation, and does so without any sexual intercourse taking place. Whatever the historical status of some particular details in Luke's text, it stands worlds apart from the stories told by Plutarch and Suetonius about Olympias and Atia, respectively.

The dismissal of the virginal conception of Jesus attributed to Judas in *The Gospel According to Judas* belongs in a long line that goes back to the second century. This latest denial seems no more persuasive than the earlier ones. Yet it leaves us with a challenge. All who agree with Raymond Brown in arguing that 'both Matthew and Luke regarded the virginal conception as historical'<sup>9</sup> and in maintaining the traditional faith of Christians about the virginal conception hold, in effect, that the conception of Jesus took place not through normal sexual intercourse but through a special intervention of the Holy Spirit. In holding this belief, Christians claim a special divine action that has happened only once in human history and that differs, for instance, from the miraculous activity of Jesus' ministry, which finds some parallels in the Old Testament, in the Acts of the Apostles, and in the ongoing story of Christianity. In the case of the virginal conception, however, we deal with a special divine action that is the only

<sup>8</sup> See Chadwick, *Origen Contra Celsum*, p. 321, n. 12.

<sup>9</sup> *The Birth of the Messiah*, p. 517.

one of its kind. The challenge is to show the religious significance of this unique conception. It is not enough merely to uphold the fact of the virginal conception. One must also show how it is religiously illuminating, a truth that has deep bearing on the history of our salvation. St Luke can point us in the right direction here and can lead us towards four conclusions.

### The Virginal Conception in its Religious Significance

First of all, Luke places his account of the virginal conception within an Old Testament background. He looks back to various extraordinary conceptions in Jewish history and to great persons born from the barren wombs of older women. His genealogy of Jesus (Luke 3: 34) evokes the story of Isaac and Jacob, who were born to previously barren mothers. Even more clearly by echoing in the Magnificat (Luke 1: 46–55) the prayer of Hannah (1 Samuel 2: 1–10), a barren woman who late in life conceived and gave birth to Samuel, a remarkable prophetic and priestly figure, Luke suggests how such births prefigured the virginal conception of Jesus.

The evangelist does not take up Isaiah 7: 14, which – unlike the Old Testament texts about such older, barren women as Sarah (the mother of Isaac), Rebecca (the mother of Jacob) and Hannah – speaks of a young woman of marriageable age who is presumably fertile. Nor does Luke find any texts in the Old Testament which speak of someone being conceived and born through the power of the Holy Spirit. The messianic king to come from the house of David will enjoy six gifts from the divine Spirit (Isaiah 11:1–2), but it is never said that he would be conceived by the Spirit. What Luke recalls are some older women who were barren but then gave birth to a son who played a remarkable role in salvation history.

The climactic example of a barren woman giving birth to some extraordinary son is reached with the promise of John the Baptist's conception (Luke 1: 5–17). Clearly Luke sees nothing impure about married love and the normal way of conception; great joy follows the sexual union of the aged Zechariah and Elizabeth and the birth of their son (Luke 1: 58). But Luke acknowledges a kind of quantum leap when the divinely caused conception of Jesus brings a new, unexpected life from a young virgin. The story of salvation history shows here discontinuity as well as continuity – something startlingly new standing within but also dramatically changing a long-standing divine pattern.

In two books, his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, Luke reports various miracles worked not only by Jesus but also by his followers – in particular, by Peter and Paul. Like Jesus the apostles heal cripples, drive out demons, and even bring the dead back to life (e.g. Acts 3:

1–10; 5: 14–16; 8: 4–8; 9: 32–43; 14: 8–10). But Luke never claims that any of Jesus' followers ever brought about, through the power of the Holy Spirit, a virginal conception. Jesus' virginal conception stands apart, a unique action of God that may not be repeated, as are the characteristic miracles worked by Jesus in his ministry (see Luke 7: 22–23). Like his glorious resurrection from the dead, his virginal conception towers above the 'normal' miracles attributed to Jesus and his followers. The virginal conception of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead (with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit) mark the beginning and the end of the central climax of salvation history: the coming of the Son of God.

We can express this imaginatively by linking the womb of Mary in which the Son of God was conceived with the tomb in which he was buried. That hollowed out 'vessel' received his body after the crucifixion and like a womb held it for three days until he rose, newly and gloriously alive. Thus a womb at the beginning and the tomb at the end mark the beginning and the end of the first coming of the Son of God.

A second theme that emerges naturally from Luke's account of the Annunciation was the *double generation* of the Son. As the Council of Chalcedon put matters through its definition of 451, in his divinity the Son was born of the Father 'before all ages' and in his humanity was born of the Virgin Mary 'in the last days'.<sup>10</sup> The theme of the double, eternal/temporal generation flowered early with Irenaeus and was developed by such fathers of the Church as St Cyril of Jerusalem, St Cyril of Alexandria and Leo the Great before this language passed into the definition of Chalcedon.<sup>11</sup>

As one might expect, St Augustine of Hippo articulated the double generation with brilliant concision and did so in a way that brought out the redemptive truth of the virginal conception. In a Christmas sermon preached some time after 411/12, he declared: 'Christ was born both from a father and a mother, both without a father and without a mother. From the Father he was born God, from the mother he was born a man; without a mother he was born God, without a father he was born a man (natus est Christus et de patre et de matre; et sine patre et sine matre: de patre Deus, de matre homo; sine matre Deus, sine patre homo' (Sermo 184. 2; see 190. 2; 195. 1).

Through the words of Gabriel to Mary, Luke states the double generation: 'you will conceive in your womb and bear a son' and 'he will be called the Son of the Most High' (Luke 1: 31–32). Thus the virginal conception expresses the human and divine origin of Jesus.

<sup>10</sup> H. Denzinger and P. Huenermann, eds., *Enchiridion Symbolorum, Definitionum et Declarationum* etc., 37th ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1991), no. 301.

<sup>11</sup> For details see G. O'Collins, *Christology. A Biblical, Historical and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, rev. edn. 2004), pp. 166–67.



The fact that he is born of a woman points to his humanity. The fact that he is conceived and born of a virgin points to his divinity and his eternal, personal origin as the Son of God. Jesus has a human mother but no (biological) human father – a startling sign of his divine generation by God the Father within the eternal life of God.

Third, Luke's presentation of the virginal conception also yields meaning about *Jesus' relationship with the Spirit*. Gabriel says to Mary: 'the Holy Spirit will come upon you.' Christians experienced the outpouring of the Spirit in the aftermath of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. They came to appreciate how the Spirit, sent to them by the risen Christ or in his name, had been actively present in the whole of Christ's life – not only at his baptism and through his subsequent ministry but also right back at his conception. In other words, the risen Christ blessed his followers with the Holy Spirit. But in his entire earthly existence he had been blessed by the Spirit – right from his very conception when he came into the world through the Spirit's creative power.

Thus the virginal conception plays its part in revealing and clarifying that central truth: from the beginning to the end of Jesus' story, the Trinity is manifested. His total history discloses the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In other words, we would miss something essential about the virginal conception, if we were to ignore its 'trinitarian face'. Christian artists have led the way here. Master Bertram of Minden (d. about 1415), Hubert and Jan van Eyck (in their 1432 altarpiece in the St Bavo Cathedral, Ghent) and Fra Filippo Lippi introduce the Holy Spirit and God the Father into their representations of the Annunciation.

A fourth theological reflection on the virginal conception takes up the prior initiative of God embodied in the presence and promise conveyed by Gabriel. The Annunciation says something deeply significant about human salvation. By opening the climactic phase of redemption or new creation, the conception of Christ shows that salvation from sin and all manner of evil comes as divine gift. Human beings cannot inaugurate and carry through their own redemption. Like the original creation of the universe, the new creation is a divine work and pure grace – to be received on the human side, just as Mary received the new life in her womb.

This new creation more than reverses the harm caused by human sin. Once again great artists were alert to the redemptive role of the virginal conception. In a famous altarpiece, Bertram of Minden set in parallel the creation and fall of our first parents with scenes of the Annunciation and the Nativity. Beato Angelico, in one version he painted of the Annunciation (now in Cortona), introduced on the upper left the tiny figures of Adam and Eve. Their fall in sin produced and symbolized the human need for redemption, which God began to meet decisively by sending Gabriel to the Virgin Mary.

In another painting of the Annunciation (now in the Prado), Beato Angelico pictured Adam and Eve being driven out of the garden of paradise.

One can cite many other works of art that show real sensitivity to the place of the virginal conception in the whole divine plan to destroy sin and evil and bring the new life of grace. Examples of such art are not lacking today. The church of Saint Lawrence in Huntington, Connecticut, displays a large, vividly beautiful, stained glass window of the Annunciation. On the lower left, below the figures of Gabriel and Mary, there is a small, red-coloured representation of a snake. It recalls the serpent that tempted Eve in the Garden of Paradise, the serpent whose head would be crushed by the New Eve (Genesis 3: 15). At the Annunciation Mary was called by God to play her part in undoing the harm caused by the first Eve.

To conclude. The Archer/Moloney *The Gospel According to Judas* is certainly not the first attempt to rehabilitate Judas religiously. It seems, however, to be the first time that Judas has been pressed into service to dismiss the virginal conception of Jesus. But this denial of the virginal conception is no more convincing than earlier ones. I do not want to credit this book with more importance than it deserves. Yet it can have its use by encouraging us to reflect on the rich theological importance of the unique way in which Jesus was conceived and entered our human scene. The more we appreciate the meaningfulness of the virginal conception in the overall pattern of God's plan of salvation, the more credible this unique conception will appear to be.

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