

Helpful Definitions of Words Used in the Reading

Christology(ies) (from Greek Χριστός *Christós* [Christ] and -λογία, -logia [study]) is the field of study within Christian theology which is primarily concerned with the ontology [the nature of being, existence and relationships] of the person of Jesus as recorded in the canonical Gospels and the epistles of the New Testament. (wiki)

Mariology is the theological study of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mariology aims to connect scripture, tradition and the teachings of the Church on Mary. It can be broadly defined as the study of devotion to and thinking about Mary throughout the history of Christianity. (wiki)

Romulus (and his twin brother, Remus,) was the legendary founder and first king of Rome. He had a miraculous birth story, in which they were raised by a she-wolf.

The **Shekhina** (Biblical Hebrew: שכינה) is the English transliteration of a Hebrew word meaning "dwelling" or "settling" and denotes the dwelling or settling of the divine presence of God.

§2 CHRIST'S BIRTH IN THE SPIRIT

In this section we shall not talk about Jesus' virgin birth, as dogmatic tradition has done. We shall talk about the birth of Jesus Christ from the Holy Spirit; for what we are dealing with here is not a question of gynaecology; it is a theme of Christian pneumatology.

In the New Testament, Christ's 'virgin birth' is related only by Luke and Matthew. It was unknown, or considered unimportant, in wide areas of early Christian belief (the Pauline and Johannine sectors, for example). But from the third century onwards it became a firm component of the Christian creeds and theological christologies.¹¹ There is no special theological teaching about Mary in the New Testament, and no acknowledgment of her as 'mother of the Christ'.

But when the christological conflicts began, mariology started to expand and to take on ever more elaborate forms in the ancient

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church. This mariology detached itself more and more from the New Testament testimony, and in certain Christian traditions was actually made the sustaining foundation of christology itself.¹² At no other point is the difference between the doctrine of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches and that of the New Testament as great as in the veneration of Mary, theological mariology, and the marian dogmas.¹³ As this gap widened, the distance between the church's theology and Christianity's Jewish tradition grew with it. What does the Madonna with the Child Jesus in her arms – 'the Goddess and her hero' – have to do with the Jewish mother Miriam and her independent, self-willed son Jesus, who dissociated himself from her? Are the roots of the church's veneration of Mary and its mariology to be sought, not in Jewish Bethlehem, but in Ephesus, with its Diana cult?¹⁴

The third-century Roman baptismal creed runs: '... born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary ...' In the Nicene creed the birth is linked with the incarnation: '... σαρκωθέντα ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου καὶ Μαρίας τῆς παρθένου ...' ('... incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary'; Latin: '... incarnatus est de spiritu sancto ex Maria virgine ...'). In the Apostles' creed we read: '... conceptus est de spiritu sancto, natus ex Maria virgine' ('... conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary ...'). Are these confessional statements in accordance with the New Testament witness? Can they be shown to be a theologically necessary component of christology? Does this credal formula still have anything to say to us today? Is what it says today the same as what it once said?

1. Christ's Birth in the Spirit from a Historical Perspective

The virgin birth is not one of the pillars that sustains the New Testament faith in Christ. The confession of faith in Jesus, the Son of God, the Lord, is independent of the virgin birth, and is not based on it.¹⁵ As we know, the faith of the New Testament has its foundation in the testimony to Christ's resurrection. It is only in Luke and Matthew that any link is forged with the nativity story. Moreover, we find the confession of faith in Christ in Christian traditions which know nothing of the virgin birth, or do not mention it. This indisputable fact alone allows us to draw the theological conclusion that the virgin birth does not provide the justification for confessing Christ. If there is a link at all, then the matter is reversed: the

mariology does not sustain the christology; the christology sustains the mariology. It is for Christ's sake that his mother Mary is remembered and venerated.

The gospels mention Mary only in passing. She is not one of the group of disciples, women and men, who moved about with Jesus. Jesus' repudiation of his mother and his brothers and sisters (which was so scandalous and is therefore probably historically based: Mark 3. 31–35 par.), and Mary's absence, according to the synoptic passion narratives, from the group of women at the cross of her dead son, show how remote she was from Jesus and his message. It is only in the Jerusalem congregation after Easter (Acts 1.14) that we find Mary, and Jesus' brothers – but as believers, not relations. According to the gospels, Mary Magdalene played a central part in the group of women and men disciples, and for Jesus himself as well – not least as an eye witness of his death on the cross and his resurrection; in the middle ages she was therefore called 'the apostle of apostles'. But we look in vain to find a similar importance ascribed in the New Testament to Mary, the mother of Jesus.¹⁶ Only on the fringe, in the nativity stories, does she acquire a christological importance, and then with a gesture which points away from herself, as it were, to Christ alone: *'hât' – 'so be it'.* A biblically legitimated mariology can only be a christocentric one. This is what is meant by the statement which would otherwise be a truism: without Christ, no Mary.

Neither the nativity story in Matthew nor the (probably older) story in Luke are mariological in the church's sense. They are christocentric, for the concern of both is to proclaim the birth of the messianic child. According to Luke, the angel's announcement cites Isa. 7.14 and II Sam. 7.12f., but says nothing at all about a virgin birth. The messianic child is to be called 'Jesus'. He will be called 'Son of the Most High' and will become the Davidic messiah-king of Israel. It is only when Mary asks 'How?' that the interpretation follows, with its reference to her 'overshadowing' through the Holy Spirit, 'that power of the Most High', and its conclusion: 'Therefore the holy one to be born of you will be called the Son of God' (v. 35). The change of title between the announcement and the interpretation points to a Jewish-Christian congregation in a hellenistic environment. The Jews understood the messianic title, and it is lent familiarity and force through a prophetic proof. The title Son of God was understood even by Gentiles, and it is given a vindicatory explanation through the legend about the supernatural birth, which

they knew from other contexts. Marvellous divine beings also have a marvellous divine birth. The story of the birth of Romulus was told in just the same way.

In Matthew the human centre is Joseph, not Mary. It is to him that the angel speaks, not to Mary. The theme is Joseph's 'justice'. Matthew 1.18–25 too is talking about an announcement, not about the nativity story itself. Life in the Spirit of God and Jesus as the child of God are thought of as being so intimately connected – even in Jesus' very beginnings, in his mother's womb – that this suggested the notion that Mary was pregnant through the Holy Spirit. What this idea is saying is: 'that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit' (v. 20). According to v. 21 the divine child is given the name 'Jesus', which is said to mean that he is the Redeemer who saves his people from their sins. But according to v. 23 he is to be called 'Immanuel', 'God is with us'. This is in fact the impress which Matthew puts on the whole of his gospel, from its beginning to its end in 28.20: 'Lo, I am with you always, until the end of the world.' 'The presence of the exalted Lord among his people shows him to be the Immanuel, God with us.'¹⁷ In Luke, the link found in the ancient creed (Rom. 1.3f.) between the Easter enthronement and the title of Son is projected into the birth of Jesus. In Matthew, it is Jesus' resurrection and his exaltation to be the Immanuel which are projected into the nativity story. In both Luke and Matthew, the promise of Jesus' birth is intended to say that he is the messianic Son of God and the Lord of the messianic kingdom not only since his resurrection from the dead, and not merely since his baptism by John the Baptist in Jordan, but by his heavenly origin and from his earthly beginnings. It was not only Jesus' ministry which was *in* the power of the Holy Spirit. He springs from the very beginning *from* the power of the Most High, the Holy Spirit. There was no time and no period of his life when Jesus was not filled with the Holy Spirit. Neither in Luke nor in Matthew nor anywhere else in the New Testament is there any link between the story of the virgin birth and the idea of the incarnation or pre-existence of the eternal son of God. But this link was then forged throughout the christology of the ancient church.¹⁸

In the literary sense, the stories about the announcement of the virgin birth are legends.¹⁹ They are deliberately told in such a way that no mention is made of either witnesses or historical traditions. We are not told from whom the narrator heard the story. Neither Joseph nor Mary is named as guarantor. This distinguishes these

stories so sharply from the testimonies of the men and women who witnessed the Easter appearances of the risen Christ, that it is impossible to talk about comparable miracles at the beginning of Christ's life-history and at its end.²⁰ But it will be permissible for us to assume that the nativity stories are secondary, retroactive projections of the experiences of the Easter witnesses with the risen Christ who is present in the Spirit; for they transfer to the pre-natal beginnings of Christ precisely that which has become manifest in the risen One who is present in the Spirit. In this way the narrators follow the logic that future and origin must correspond. If Christ has ascended into heaven, then he must have come down from heaven; and if he is present in the Spirit of God, who is the giver of life (1 Cor. 15.45), then he must have come into life from this divine Spirit.

Because these narrators make no distinction between history and legend in the modern sense, but intend to relate a 'gospel', no objection can be made to the modern designation 'legend' for the stories about Christ's nativity. At that time the inherent truth of the nativity stories had to be expressed in the form of an aetiological myth. The truth is to be found precisely in this mythical story about Christ's origin, not in the biological facts. It is therefore factually inappropriate to call the virgin birth historical, let alone 'biological'; and modern positivist characterizations of this kind do anything but preserve the intention and truth of the story. In actual fact they destroy it. The narrators' aim is not to report a gynaecological miracle. Their aim is to confess Jesus as the messianic Son of God and to point at the very beginning of his life to the divine origin of his person.²¹

2. Christ's Birth in the Spirit from a Theological Perspective

In the history of the tradition there are evidently two different ideas about the way in which the origin of Jesus, as Son of God and Immanuel, can be told in mythical form.

The first idea suggests that God brought about the miracle of Mary's pregnancy through the Holy Spirit, that 'power of the Most High': 'Conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.' This is a way of saying that *God alone is the Father of Jesus Christ*, and that he is his Father not merely according to Jesus' God-consciousness, but in his whole personhood, from the very beginning. God is to be declared the Father of Jesus Christ in so 'exclusive a way that the

earthly fatherhood of Joseph has to be excluded. This corresponds in a very literal way to Jesus' saying: 'Call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven' (Matt. 23.9). The patriarchal succession of generations is broken off for the sake of the history of the promise. According to this idea, God is the Father of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit is the male seed, and Mary, who is in the human sense a virgin, is his mother.²²

The second idea sees behind the human motherhood of Mary *the motherhood of the Holy Spirit*. The ancient Roman baptismal creed therefore has the parallel formulation 'born from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary'. Believers experience the motherhood of the Holy Spirit in their own 'miraculous birth' from the Spirit of God. That is why the Gospel of John directly precedes its statement about the incarnation of the eternal Word by saying: 'But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of a man, but of God' (1.12, 13). If those who believe in Christ are 'born from the Spirit' to be God's children, as the metaphor says, then the Holy Spirit is the divine mother of believers – and of course the 'virgin mother'. The ancient Syrian and the more modern Moravian doctrine about 'the motherly office of the Holy Spirit' has its roots here, as well as in the function of the Paraclete, who comforts as a mother comforts.²³ The point of comparison for understanding the birth of Christ is not a human process of procreation and conception; it is the experience of the Spirit encountered by the men and women who are born again to become children of God. Because this experience of the Spirit is to be found in the community of Christ's people, through which Jesus Christ becomes 'the first-born among many brethren' (Rom. 8.29) and sisters, this first-born brother must himself be the archetype of the divine sonship and daughterhood in the Spirit. That is why the 'first-born brother' is called 'the only begotten Son of God'. The history of his primal and original birth from the Spirit of God merely brings out the difference that he is from the beginning and by nature that which believers become in his fellowship, through Word and Spirit: the messianic child of God. The Mary who in human and temporal terms is 'a virgin' must then be seen as a symbolic embodiment and as the human form of the Holy Spirit, who is the eternally virginal and divine mother of Christ. She should not be thought of as the human woman who becomes pregnant by the Holy Spirit, imagined in male

terms. Looked at in this other light, the Holy Spirit would rather be the great virginal, life-engendering mother of all the living, and as such the divine archetype of Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ.²⁴ When we remember the feminine symbolism about the nature and activity of the Spirit which we find in Jewish, Syrian and Christian traditions, this idea is not wrong or inappropriate. In the Gospel of Thomas, Christ talks about the Holy Spirit as his 'mother'.²⁵

Let us now try to discover the theological intention behind the two ideas about the virgin birth of Christ, and Mary's significance for salvation.

First of all, these nativity stories are trying to say that God is bound up with Jesus of Nazareth not fortuitously but essentially. From the very beginning, God is 'the Father of Jesus Christ'. His fatherhood does not merely extend to Christ's consciousness and his ministry. It embraces his whole person and his very existence. Consequently, the messiah Jesus is *essentially* God's Son. He does not become so at some point in history, from a particular moment in his life. He is from the very beginning the messianic Son, and his beginning is to be found in his birth from the Holy Spirit. Not only his consciousness but his physical being too bears the imprint of his divine sonship. This distinguishes the incarnation *from* or *out* of the Spirit from the indwelling of the Spirit *in* human beings. *Incarnation* has no presuppositions. *Inhabitation* presupposes human existence. If incarnation is identified with inhabitation, christology is dissolved in anthropology.

For the theologians of the patristic church, Christ's virgin birth was a sign, not so much of his divinity, as of his true humanity. It was gnostic theologians who, for the sake of Christ's divinity, allowed him only to 'appear' in the body, without really being there: the eternal Logos merely clothed himself in human form, in order to spiritualize human beings. Against this, the orthodox theologians of the ancient church stressed the reality of the incarnation of the Son of God by way of the virgin birth from Mary, just as they inserted 'the resurrection of the body' into the Apostles' creed; for 'what is not assumed cannot be redeemed either'. Consequently the eternal Logos assumed full and whole humanity and 'became flesh' through the Holy Spirit.²⁶

If we wished to bring out this intention of the nativity story today, we should have to stress the *non-virginal* character of Christ's birth,²⁷ so as to 'draw Christ as deep as possible into the flesh', as

Luther said. He was a human being like us, and the addition 'without sin' in the Epistle to the Hebrews (4.15) does not refer to sexual reproduction. We find this unbiblical identification for the first time in Augustine's doctrine of original sin. In this context a different aspect should be stressed today: if the Son of God became wholly and entirely human, and if he assumed full humanity, then this does not merely take in human personhood; it includes human nature as well. It does not embrace adult humanity alone; it comprehends humanity diachronically, in all its phases of development – that is, it includes the being of the child, the being of the foetus and the embryo. The whole of humanity in all its natural forms is assumed by God in order that it may be healed. So it is 'human' and 'holy' in all its natural forms, and is prenatally by no means merely 'human material', or just the preliminary stage to humanity. That is why theologically the true and real birth of Christ has to be stressed. According to today's understanding of things, talk about Christ's 'virgin birth' through Mary dangerously narrows down his humanity, if the virgin birth is taken to mean that a supernatural-human process takes the place of a human-natural one. 'We [cannot] see any longer why Jesus as Son of God should come into the world in a different way from anyone else.'²⁸ If according to John 1.12 the point of comparison with the birth of the Son of God is to be found in the rebirth of believers from the Spirit into divine sonship and daughterness, then, and then especially, we do not have to assume any supernatural intervention. We should rather view the whole process of the human begetting, conception and birth of Jesus Christ as the work of the Holy Spirit. Christ's birth from the Spirit is a statement about Christ's relationship to God, or God's relationship to Christ. It does not have to be linked with a genealogical assertion.

The other theological motif which led to the idea about Christ's virgin birth must be seen in the close link between the divine Spirit and the divine Sonship. According to Jewish expectation, the messianic son of God is the human being who is filled with the Spirit of God. In a reverse movement, in the messianic era the messianic human being brings about the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on all flesh. He comes in the Spirit of the Lord and brings the Spirit of the Lord, so that it fills the whole earth. If we now wished to say that Jesus was from the very beginning (and hence in his whole existence) the messianic child of God, we should also have to say that from the very beginning he was filled with the Spirit of God, and that his

whole being is the warp and weft of the Spirit. He comes into existence from the Spirit, as the Nicene creed says. The descent of the Spirit of God and its indwelling in Mary must even precede the expectation of the messianic Son of God. Otherwise we should not be able to say that he came 'from the Spirit'. The Spirit does not 'create'; it 'engenders' and 'brings forth', as the birth metaphor says. If the messiah is called the Son of God, then to be consistent we have to talk about the Spirit as his divine 'mother'. He therefore comes into the world from the Father and from the Spirit, and with his coming God's Spirit takes up its dwelling in the world; first of all in the messianic Son, through his birth - then in the fellowship of the children of God, through their rebirth (John 3.6; I Peter 1.3, 23) - then through the rebirth of the whole cosmos (Matt. 19.28). The birth of the messianic Son of God 'from the Spirit' is the beginning and the sign of hope for the rebirth of human beings and the cosmos through God's Shekinah. That is why the indwelling of the Holy Spirit has to be told at the same time as the birth of Christ.

If we take the birth of Christ from the Spirit seriously, then much that the church has ascribed to 'the Virgin Mary' is transposed to God the Holy Spirit himself, and Mary can once again be that which she was and is: the Jewish mother of Jesus. The Holy Spirit, not Mary, is the source of life, the mother of believers, the divine Wisdom and the indwelling of the divine essence in creation, from which the face of the earth will be renewed. Mary is a witness, and in the form of the myth of Christ's origin she also embodies the indwelling of the life-giving Spirit. The so-called 'feminine' side of God, and the 'motherly mystery' of the Trinity, is to be sought for, not in Mary but in the Spirit. It is only after that, in a second stage, that it can be discovered in the story told about Mary. If the 'virgin birth' reflects the life-giving and engendering mystery of the Holy Spirit, then any possible mariology has to be part of pneumatology. If in the history of Christ Mary has this ministering function, a function that points away from herself, then and then especially she will arrive at her full significance in the history of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit, not Mary herself, who is co-worker with the messianic Son of God, and who together with him will redeem the world. The history of Christ is a trinitarian history of the reciprocal relationships and mutual workings of the Father, the Spirit and the Son. Wide sectors of the church's later mariology must be viewed as a pneumatology narrowed down to the church. If we

Is there was perfect unity in the company?

Mary w/ P.R. am?

stop talking about Christ's virgin birth, and talk instead about his birth from the Spirit, we can then say: without the Holy Spirit there is no Mary, and without pneumatology there is no mariology which is sufficiently related to Christ.²⁹

Questions for Reflection & Wondering

1. How do you fathom and wonder about the nature (*ontology*) of Jesus of Nazareth? How is he - was he - divine and human? How do you explain that? - to yourself, to others?
2. How does that mystery (what we call in Theology the *Incarnation*) shape the meaning, purpose and proclamation of Christmas?
3. How is the radical aspect of who Jesus is (from before his birth, back to his divine origin and up through his resurrection) reflected or pointed to in our modern celebrations of Christmas.... both in the church, and outside of it in our culture and economy?
4. As you wonder about the Christmas Story - which part (or parts) of it speak the most to you? Why? How do you they give you hope?; nourish your faith?