

# God's Way of Acting

by N.T. Wright

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Jesus' birth usually gets far more attention than its role in the New Testament warrants. Christmas looms large in our culture, outshining even Easter in the popular mind. Yet without Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2 we would know nothing about it. Paul's gospel includes Jesus' Davidic descent (Rom. 1:3), but apart from that could exist without mention of his birth. One can be justified by faith with no knowledge of it. Likewise, John's wonderful theological edifice has no need of it: God's glory is revealed not in the manger; but on the cross. If you try to express any New Testament theology without Jesus' death and resurrection, you will find it cannot be done. "Man shall live for evermore," says the song, "because of Christmas Day." No, replies the New Testament. Because of Calvary, Easter and Pentecost.

Nevertheless, the birth stories have become a test case in various controversies. If you believe in miracles, you believe in Jesus' miraculous birth; if you don't, you don't. Both sides turn the question into a shibboleth, not for its own sake but to find out who's in and who's out. Problem: "miracle," as used in these controversies, is not a biblical category. The God of the Bible is not a normally absent God who sometimes "intervenes." This God is always present and active, often surprisingly so.

Likewise, if you believe the Bible is "true," you will believe the birth stories; if you don't, you won't. Again, the birth stories are insignificant in themselves; they function as a test for beliefs about the Bible.

The birth stories have also functioned as a test case for views of sexuality. Some believers in the virginal conception align this with a low view of sexuality and a high view of perpetual virginity. They believe the story not because of what it says about Jesus, but because of what it says about sex—namely, that it's something God wouldn't want to get mixed up in. This, too, has its mirror image: those who cannot imagine anything good about abstinence insist that Mary must have been sexually active.

More significantly, the birth stories have played a role within different views of the incarnation. Those who have emphasized Jesus' divinity have sometimes made the virginal conception central. Those who have emphasized Jesus' humanity have often felt that the virginal conception would mark him off from the rest of us.

None of these arguments bears much relation to what either Matthew or Luke actually says. But before we turn to them, two more preliminary remarks.

First, we are of course speaking of the virginal conception of Jesus, not, strictly, of the "virgin birth." Even if I come to believe of the virginal conception of Jesus, not, strictly, of the "virgin birth." Even if I come to believe

in the former; the latter would remain a different sort of thing altogether. Neither, of course, should be confused with the "immaculate conception," a Roman Catholic dogma about the conception not of Jesus, but of Mary.

Second, some things must be put in a "suspense account," in Marcus Borg's happy phrase, while others are sorted out. The birth narratives have no impact on my reconstruction of Jesus' public agendas and his mind-set as he went to the cross. There might just be a case for saying that *if* his birth was as Matthew and Luke describe it, and *if* Mary had told him about it, my argument about Jesus' vocation to do and be what in scripture YHWH does and is might look slightly different. But as a historian I cannot use the birth stories within an argument about the rest of the gospel narratives.

I can, however, run the process the other way. Because I am convinced that the creator God raised Jesus bodily from the dead, and because I am convinced that Jesus was and is the embodiment of this God, Israel's God, my worldview is forced to reactivate various things in the suspense account, the birth narratives included. There are indeed more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in post-Enlightenment metaphysics. The "closed continuum" of cause and effect is a modernist myth. The God who does not "intervene" from outside but is always present and active within the world, sometimes shockingly, may well have been thus active on this occasion. It is all very well to get on one's high metaphysical horse and insist that God cannot behave like this, but we do not know that ahead of time. Nor will the high moral horse do any better insisting that God ought not to do things like this, because they send the wrong message about sexuality or because divine parentage gave Jesus an unfair start over the rest of us. Such positions produce a cartoon picture: the mouse draws itself up to its full height, puts its paws on its hips and gives the elephant a good dressing down.

The stories in question are complex and controversial. I simply highlight certain features.

Matthew's story, told from Joseph's point of view, reminds one of various biblical birth stories, such as that of Samson in Judges 13. Matthew's whole hook is about the scriptures being fulfilled in Jesus. The angel, the dream, the command not to be afraid, the righteous couple doing what they are told—all is familiar. Like Samson, the promised and provided child has a dangerous public future: here, the true king of the Jews is born under the nose of the wicked king, Herod. This is a major theme in Matthew's Gospel. His picture of Jesus' messiahship has both feet on the ground of first-century *realpolitik*.

Matthew tells us that Jesus fulfills at least three biblical themes. He brings Israel into the promised land; "Jesus" is the Greek for "Joshua." As Immanuel, he embodies God's presence with his people (Isaiah 7:14, quoted in 1:23). As the new David, he is the Messiah born at Bethlehem (2:5, fulfilling Micah 5:1-3). In the genealogy, Jesus is the point toward which Israel's long covenant history has been leading, particularly its puzzling and tragic latter phase. Matthew agrees with his Jewish contemporaries that the exile was the last significant event before Jesus; when the angel says that Jesus will "save his people from their sins" (1:21), liberation from exile is in view. Jesus, David's true descendant, will fulfill the Abrahamic covenant by undoing the exile and all that it means.

Well-known problems abound. Why does the genealogy finish with Joseph if Matthew is going to say that he wasn't Jesus' father after all? This cannot have been a problem for Matthew or he would hardly have followed the genealogy so closely with the story of the virginal conception. It was enough that Jesus was born into the Davidic family; adoption brought legitimation. Further, anyone can say that Matthew made it all up to fulfill Isaiah 7:14 ("the virgin shall conceive"). Since Luke doesn't quote the same passage, though, the argument looks thin. Is Bethlehem mentioned only, perhaps, because of Micah 5:2-4? Again, Luke doesn't quote the same passage, but still gets Mary to Bethlehem for the birth. Some have questioned whether Herod would really have behaved in the way described in Matthew 2; the answer, from any reader of Josephus, would be a firm yes.

One can investigate, as many have, whether there really was a star. One can challenge the flight into Egypt as simply a back-projection from a fanciful reading of Hosea 11:1. These are the natural probing questions

of the historian. As with most ancient history, of course, we cannot verify independently that which is reported only in one source. If that gives grounds for ruling it out, however, most of ancient history goes with it. Let us by all means be suspicious, but let us not be paranoid. Just because I've had a nightmare doesn't mean that there aren't burglars in the house. Just because Matthew says that something fulfilled scripture doesn't mean it didn't happen.

What then about his central claim, the virginal conception itself, dropped almost casually into the narrative, with no flourish of trumpets? Some have argued, of course, that there is instead a flourish of strumpets: Matthew has taken care to draw our attention to the peculiarities (to put it no stronger) of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Batlisheba, presumably in order to warn us that something even stranger is coming; or perhaps to enable us, when the news is announced, to connect it with God's strange way of operating in the past. He is hardly likely on this occasion, however, to have made up the story of Mary's being with child by the Holy Spirit in order to "fulfill" this theme

What about Luke, who tells the story from Mary's point of view? His setting is just as Jewish as Matthew's, with verbal and narratival allusions to and echoes of the Septuagint. Like Matthew, he insists that with this story Israel's history is reaching its God-ordained climax. But his emphasis, unlike Matthew's, is on the very Jewish point that this birth is a direct challenge to the pagan power: in other words, to Caesar. This fits with Luke's whole emphasis: the (very Jewish) gospel is for the whole world, of which Jesus is now the Lord. Israel's god is the king of the world; now, Jesus is the king of the world.

Attention has focused on the census in Luke 2:2-whether it took place and could have involved people traveling to their ancestral homes. But Luke's point has been missed. The census was the time of the great revolt-the rebellion of Judas the Galilean, which Luke not only knows about but allows Gamaliel to compare with Jesus and his movement (Acts 5:37). Luke is deliberately aligning Jesus with the Jewish kingdom-movements, the revolutions which declared that there would be "no king but God."

The census is not, of course, the only query that people have raised about Luke's birth stories. Jesus' birth at Bethlehem seems to have been a puzzle to Luke, which he explains by the census, rather than something he invents for other reasons. The fact that Luke does not mention the wise men, nor Matthew the shepherds, is not a reason for doubting either; this sort of thing crops up in ancient historical sources all the time. Of course, legends surround the birth and childhood of many figures who afterwards become important. As historians we have no reason to say that this did not happen in the case of Jesus, and some reasons to say that it did. But by comparison with other legends about other figures, Matthew and Luke look, after all, quite restrained

Except, of course, in the matter where the real interest centers. Matthew and Luke declare unambiguously that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived. What are we to make of this? It will not do to say that we know the laws of nature and that Joseph, Mary, the early church and the evangelists did not. Mary and Joseph hadn't seen diagrams of Fallopian tubes, but that doesn't mean they didn't know where babies came from. Hence Mary's question to Gabriel (in Luke), and Joseph's determination to break the engagement (in Matthew).

Nor can we say that if we believe this story we should believe all the other similar ones in the ancient world as well. Of course, the argument "miracles are possible therefore virginal conception is possible, therefore Jesus' virginal conception may well be true," also commits one to saying, "therefore Augustus's virginal conception may well be true." But that is not my argument.

My argument, rather, works in three stages.

First, the position I have reached about the resurrection and incarnation of Jesus opens the door to reconsidering what we would otherwise probably dismiss. "Miracle," in the sense of divine intervention "from outside," is not in question. What matters is the powerful, mysterious presence of the God of Israel, the creator God, bringing Israel's story to its climax by doing a new thing, bringing the story of creation to

its height by a new creation from the womb of the old. Whether or not it happened, this is what it would mean if it did.

Second, there is no pre-Christian Jewish tradition suggesting that the messiah would be born of a virgin. No one used Isaiah 7:14 this way before Matthew did. Even assuming that Matthew or Luke regularly invented material to fit Jesus into earlier templates, why would they have invented something like this? The only conceivable parallels are pagan ones, and these fiercely Jewish stories have certainly not been modeled on them. Luke at least must have known that telling this story ran the risk of making Jesus out to be a pagan demigod. Why, for the sake of an exalted metaphor, would they take this risk-unless they at least believed the stories to be literally true?

Third, if the evangelists believed them to be true, when and by whom were they invented, if by the time of Matthew and Luke two such different, yet so compatible, stories were in circulation? Did whoever started this hare running mean it in a nonliteral sense, using virginal conception as a metaphor for something else? What was that "something else"? An embroidered border, presumably, around the belief that Jesus was divine. But that belief was a *Jewish* belief expressed in classic Jewish God-language; while the only models for virginal conception are the nakedly pagan stories of Alexander, Augustus and others. We would have to suppose that, within the first 50 years of Christianity a double move took place: from an early, very Jewish, high Christology, to a sudden paganization, and back to a very Jewish storytelling again. The evangelists would then have thoroughly deconstructed their own deep intentions, suggesting that the climax of YHWH's purpose for Israel took place through a pagan-style miraculous birth.

To put it another way. What would have to have happened, granted the skeptic's position, for the story to have taken the shape it did? To answer this, I must indulge in some speculative tradition-history. Bear with me in a little foolishness. Are they tradition critics? So am I. Are they scholars of ancient history? So am I. Are they reconstructors of early communities? So am I. Are they determined to think the argument through to the end? I speak as a fool-I am more so.

This is how it would look: Christians came to believe that Jesus was in some sense divine. Someone who shared this faith broke thoroughly with Jewish precedents and invented the story of a pagan-style virginal conception. Some Christians failed to realize that this was historicized metaphor, and retold it as though it were historical. Matthew and Luke, assuming historicity; drew independently upon this astonishing fabrication, set it (though in quite different ways) within a thoroughly Jewish context, and wove it in quite different ways into their respective narratives.

And all this happened within, more or less, 50 years. Possible? Yes, of course. Most things are possible in history. Likely? No.

Smoke without fire does, of course, happen quite often in the real world. But *this* smoke, in *that* world, without fire? This theory asks us to believe in *intellectual* parthenogenesis: the birth of an idea without visible parentage. Difficult. Unless, of course, you believe in miracles, which most people who disbelieve the virginal conception don't.

Maybe, after all, it is the theory of the contemporary skeptic that is metaphor historicized. The modernist belief that history is a closed continuum of cause and effect is projected onto the screen of the early church, producing a myth (specifically, a tradition-historical reconstruction which sustains and legitimates the original belief so strongly that its proponents come to believe it actually happened.

This foolishness is, of course, a way of saying that no "proof" is possible either way. No one can prove, historically, that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived. No one can prove, historically, that she wasn't. Science studies the repeatable; history bumps its nose against the unrepeatable. If the first two chapters of Matthew and the first two of Luke had never existed, I do not suppose that my own Christian faith, or that of the church to which I belong, would have been very different. But since they do, and since for quite other reasons I have come to believe that the God of Israel, the world's creator, was personally and

fully revealed in and as Jesus of Nazareth, I hold open my historical judgment and say: If that's what God deemed appropriate, who am I to object?