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Christ Incarnate:
How Ancient Minds Conceived the Son of God

By

Grant Adamson

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ABSTRACT

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The idea of Jesus’ pre-existence was developed circa 30-50 CE, and it did not necessarily differentiate believers in him from other Jews. The idea of his virgin birth was developed circa 70-90 CE as a defense against reports of Mary’s early pregnancy. Parthenogenesis was itself novel within Second Temple and early Judaism, and its harmonization with the previously developed idea of Jesus’ pre-existence differentiated proto-orthodox Christians from Jews. It also differentiated them from other Christian groups. Historical-critical methods cannot get at the details of this harmonizing thought process.

Blending theory explains how the two separate ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth were harmonized and how the doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis emerged: blended spaces have emergent structure and meaning that are not reducible to input spaces. Incarnation through parthenogenesis is not reducible to the ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth, any more than it is reducible to Paul and John, Matthew and Luke, Jewish or pagan literature. It was a new idea that emerged from the blending of two separate ideas in the second
century and has since been taken for granted as it became proto-orthodox and then orthodox Christian doctrine.

Furthermore the cognitive theory of minimal counterintuitiveness suggests why the doctrine was historically successful: concepts that violate one or two expectations, such as the concept of a pre-existent Jesus who is incarnated through virgin birth, have mnemonic advantage over other concepts that violate no expectations or too many of them.
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Proto-orthodox Christians believed that Jesus pre-existed and was incarnated through virgin birth, as eventually stated in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. There were other Christians in the second century, however, who believed that Jesus didn’t pre-exist. And even among the rest of the various heterodox Christians who happened to agree with proto-orthodoxy in terms of Jesus’ pre-existence or else heavenly provenance, some believed that he pre-existed but was incarnated through birth, not virgin birth. Others believed that he was incarnated at baptism. While still others believed that he descended from heaven but was not incarnated at all: he made an appearance on earth as though in a body yet without being born. The only one of these second century christologies that isn’t found in any of the New Testament texts or in Jewish literature before that is the proto-orthodox doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis.

In the christological statement of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, as well as in all earlier examples of this doctrine, the two ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth are harmonized: “We believe ... in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God ... through whom all things came to be (δι’ ὅν τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο),” according to the Johannine prologue, “who for us humans and for our salvation descended from the heavens (κατελθόντα ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν) and was incarnated (σαρκωθέντα),” not incarnated by possession at baptism or just
incarnated through birth, but incarnated “from the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary (ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου καὶ Μαρίας τῆς παρθένου),” as if Matthew and Luke share the same christology with John.¹

Here the idea of Jesus’ pre-existence is harmonized with the idea of his virgin birth. The earliest examples of the doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis come from Ignatius, the Ascension of Isaiah, Aristides, Justin Martyr, and the Letter of the Apostles. Other second-century examples come from Melito, Tatian, Irenaeus, and the Sibylline Oracles.² The doctrine is a Christian product of the second and subsequent centuries. The two ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth are found in New Testament texts from the first century, to be sure. But they aren’t found there in the same text; they are found in different texts that were written by different authors at different times in different places for different reasons. Only later were the two ideas harmonized, as the gospels and other New Testament texts began to circulate en masse, being read, interpreted, copied, and rewritten together.³

Jesus doesn’t pre-exist in Matthew and Luke, which contain the only New Testament accounts of his virgin birth. There are brief accounts of Jesus’ pre-existence and incarnation in Paul and John, but neither of them describes incarnation through virgin birth. Paul describes

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¹ Text and translation: Tanner et al. 1990, 24. While I regularly modify them, translations of ancient texts are in the main those of the editions cited, unless it’s stated otherwise; when no edition is cited, translations of biblical texts are from the New Revised Standard Version or are my own. For the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed and debate over whether it was in place in 381, see Kelly 1950/1972, 296-331.
² Tatian was one of Irenaeus’ heretics, but he studied with Justin Martyr, and his Diatessaron may have done more than the writings of Irenaeus for the canonization of the New Testament gospels; it certainly did more for their harmonization.
³ There’ve been important studies in the reception of a given passage from New Testament texts, such as the Word becoming flesh in John 1.14 or the annunciation in Luke 1.26-38. See e.g. Fornberg 2002; Constan 2003, 273-313; Uhrig 2004; Clivaz 2011. My book is about something more complex – the reception of multiple passages at the same time and their harmonization.
incarnation of the pre-existent Jesus through birth not parthenogenesis, whereas John arguably describes incarnation by possession at baptism.⁴

For Ignatius, Aristides and Justin, for the authors of the *Ascension of Isaiah* and the *Letter of the Apostles*, the Incarnation wasn’t through birth, as described in Paul. It certainly wasn’t by possession at baptism, as described in John. All the more so, it wasn’t an appearance as though in a body but without being born, despite the fleshless appearances of God and angels in Jewish scripture and in New Testament texts themselves. For proto-orthodox Christians of the second century, the Incarnation had to be through virgin birth.

There would be no doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis without the two ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth. The first isn’t unique to belief about him. But the second is quite rare. And the harmonization of the two ideas is creatively Christian, unprecedented in the ancient Mediterranean world.

The idea of Jesus’ pre-existence was developed quickly, within a decade or two of his death at the most. Before that, there were already several divine mediator figures in Second Temple and early Judaism that could be said to pre-exist or else come from heaven. Many of these were believed to have descended to earth, though usually not for long periods of time. And few were believed to have been born in a human body. None were believed to have been incarnated through parthenogenesis.⁵

The idea of Jesus’ virgin birth may have been developed before the Matthean and Lukan infancy narratives were written in the 70s, 80s, or 90s CE. But belief in parthenogenesis is hard to find in Jewish literature, including Greek translation of Isaiah 7.14, and it’s hard to find even

⁵ On such mediator figures, see the entry by Hurtado (2010) with the titles listed there.
in pagan literature. Arguably in the case of Jesus, it was developed as a defense against reports of Mary’s early pregnancy, and the development was rather ad hoc. Paul knows that Jesus was born from the seed of David, and a patrilineal genealogy would be expected, meaning that Paul understands Jesus’ father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and so forth, to have been born from the seed of David too. Matthew and Luke continue to trace Jesus’ Davidic lineage through his father and father’s fathers, all the while denying that Joseph was his biological parent. If mere legal fatherhood was enough for Matthew and Luke, in the second century it wasn’t enough for proto-orthodox and other Christians who rerouted Jesus’ genealogy matrilineally as they placed Mary in the Davidic line.

Besides the problem of how it was that Jesus could be born from the seed of David without a father, the idea of his virgin birth introduced another: how did Mary conceive? This is the more immediate problem in Matthew and Luke. It remained a problem for Christians in the second century, whether they believed that Jesus pre-existed or not. For those who believed in his pre-existence, the problem was compounded because the pre-existent Jesus had to enter Mary’s womb somehow, and it couldn’t be vaginally. Imaginative reading of the annunciation in Luke allowed for a solution to the problem: Mary conceived aurally as she listened to Gabriel speak the word/Word of God to her. But such an imaginative reading might lead to a

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6 See e.g. Brown 1977/1993, 522-524, who writes of the Isaianic prophecy: “Many scholars, although they know that Isaiah did not speak of a virginal conception, think that his prophecy was thus interpreted by Greek-speaking Jews ... and that this explains why Hellenistic Jewish Christians phrased their ideas about the origins of God’s Son in terms of a virginal conception.” Brown, however, finds no evidence that “the LXX of Isa 7:14 either referred to a virginal conception or was so interpreted by Jews. It is Christian exegesis, witnessed in Matt 1:22-23, that reinterpretetd Isa 7:14 in light of existing Christian tradition of the virginal conception of Jesus.”

7 Romans 1.3; cf. 2 Timothy 2.8.

8 Matthew 1; Luke 1.26-38; 2.1-7; 3.23-38.

9 Matthew 1.20; Luke 1.34-35.
misunderstanding about angelic paternity. Hence some proto-orthodox Christians had the pre-existent Jesus descend from heaven and take the place of his own would-be father.

Solutions to these problems didn’t come ready-made. The problems were introduced by the development of the idea of Jesus’ virgin birth, and they were compounded by its harmonization with the earlier and separate idea of his pre-existence. The problems hadn’t been problems before in Judaism. Christians had to solve them on their own. Incarnation through parthenogenesis became proto-orthodox and then orthodox Christian doctrine, one of the features that differentiated Christianity from Judaism.

THE DIFFERENCE OF INCARNATION THROUGH VIRGIN BIRTH

Recent scholarship disputes Jewish and Christian borderlines. Daniel Boyarin writes that “Jews who didn’t accept Jesus of Nazareth shared many ideas with Jews who did, including ideas that today mark off any absolute difference between two religions, Judaism and Christianity. Some of these ideas were very close, if not identical, to ideas of the Father and Son and even the incarnation.”

To make his point, Boyarin discusses the book of Daniel, the Parables of Enoch, and 4 Ezra. No doubt Jesus was a Jew, and New Testament and Christian origins are in Judaism as part of the Greco-Roman world. The presence of a Logos theology or binitarianism in Second

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10 Boyarin 2012, 24; see also Boyarin 2013, especially 352: “The road to Nicaea had been well cleared and paved and neither Trinity nor Incarnation can be said to represent a departure from Israelite religion but rather an unfolding of it.”
Temple and early Judaism, however, is one thing. To find the idea of ‘the incarnation’ in these or other Jewish texts would be something else.\textsuperscript{11}

The proto-orthodox Christian doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis is an idea that combines two others, the idea of Jesus’ pre-existence on the one hand and his virgin birth on the other. These two ideas were only harmonized in the second century and thereafter.

Incarnation through parthenogenesis isn’t something that Judaism and Christianity shared in the first centuries of the Common Era or that Jews had believed in previously. It’s certainly possible to find an idea of incarnation in Jewish literature, such as in the case of the human spirit or soul that’s incarnated in the body, whether or not that spirit/soul pre-exists the body. Even incarnation of a divine, heavenly or pre-existent being through birth can be found. But not incarnation of a pre-existent being through parthenogenesis.

Again, while there were several divine mediator figures in Second Temple and early Judaism that could be said to pre-exist, and while many of these were believed to have

\textsuperscript{11} In his earlier and more academic book, Boyarin (2004, 104-105; my emphasis) had been reserved when it comes to incarnation of the second deity, e.g. the Logos in John 1.14: “God performed the extraordinary act of incarnating the Logos in flesh and blood .... Seen in this way, what marks the Fourth Gospel as a new departure in the history of Judaism is not its Logos theology, since that seems to be an inheritance from pre-Christian Judaisms and to be shared with non-Christian Judaisms, but the notion that the Logos is incarnated as Jesus, the Christ – a historical departure, or, rather, advent, that is iconically symbolized in the narrative itself. That is to say: When the text announces in verse 14 that the ‘Word became flesh,’ this advent of the Logos is an iconic representation of the moment that the Christian narrative begins to diverge from the Jewish Koine and form its own nascent Christian kerygma, proclamation.” And in reference to persistent Jewish binitarianism, Boyarin (2004, 124-125; parentheses original; emphasis mine) writes: “The incarnation of the Logos in Jesus’ flesh was much more of a ‘mutation’ than was worship of the Logos or Demiurge (although the Logos personifying the Messiah seems not to have been a mutation at all) .... The insinuation is that the Logos Asarkos is kosher for Jewish worship but not the Logos Ensarkos. This leads me to infer that Christianity and Judaism distinguished themselves in antiquity not via the doctrine of God, and not even via the question of worshipping a second God ...., but only in the specifics of the doctrine of this incarnation.” On the point of ‘mutation’ and worship, Boyarin is at odds with Hurtado 1988; see also Hurtado 2003; 2005.
descended from heaven to earth, it wasn’t usually for periods of time as long as the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Few were believed to have been born in a human body. And none were believed to have been incarnated through virgin birth. In Daniel 7, for instance, the one “like a son of man (שָׁאֲבָר, ὡς υἱὸς ἄνθρωπος)” is probably an angel. He’s said to “come with the clouds of heaven,” which likely refers to a heavenly descent, as he’s given a kingdom that seems to be on earth or at least extend to earth. But there’s no suggestion that he was incarnated, let alone that he was incarnated through birth much less virgin birth.

The book of Daniel contains other heavenly descents and angelophanies. In chapter 3, an angel appears in the fire with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, as though there were “four men (אַרְּבְּעָָ֗ה גֻּבְּרִין, ἄνδρας τέσσαρας)” to be seen. This angel is described as a walking human. But he undergoes no incarnation or birth in order to appear in the fire. In chapters 8-10, the angel Gabriel comes to Daniel. He’s described as one “like an appearance of a man (כְּמַרְּאֵה גַבְר) and is even called “the man Gabriel (גַבְר יאֵֵ֡ל, ὁ ἀνήρ Γαβριήλ).” But he isn’t incarnated or born. He engages in (cosmic) battle with the Persians, as does the angel Michael and one “like a similitude of a son of man (אָדָָ֖ם בְּנִֵ֣י כ דְּמוּת, ὡς ὁμοίωσις υἱοῦ ἄνθρωπος)” or one “like an appearance of a man (כְּמַרְּאֵה, ὡς ὄρασις ἄνθρωπος).” This one comes to

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Daniel also, touches him, strengthens him, and speaks to him. But he isn’t incarnated or born either.

If the one like a son of man in Daniel 7 is an angel, presumably he would descend from heaven to earth in the same way as these other angels, none of which were incarnated or born at all. The description of him suggests anthropomorphic features, as with other angels in Daniel. It doesn’t suggest humanity, incarnation, or birth.

In the Parables of Enoch, the Son of Man is also known as the Chosen One, Righteous One, and Anointed One or Messiah. His rank is angelic or above. It seems clear enough that he pre-exists or else has a heavenly provenance. He appears and dwells among the righteous in the new heaven and on the new earth, which likely refers to a heavenly descent. The righteous are even said to eat with him. There may or may not be any suggestion in these chapters that he was incarnated. Angels had seemed to eat and drink with their earthly hosts before, though not undergoing birth or incarnation in a human body. If the Son of Man is an angel here as in Daniel, his other titles, however, may have reference to a chosen and righteous person who is anointed with God’s Spirit. Perhaps the Son of Man as angel is understood to inspire or possess this

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15 There’s some question as to whether the angel Gabriel is understood to descend physically, since Daniel sees him in a vision (9.21; cf. 10.7).

16 Excursus in Nickelsburg & VanderKam 2012, 113-123; see also 44-45. Written in Aramaic or Hebrew, the parables survive in an Ethiopic version only.


person. But as his birth and death aren’t mentioned, it could be that the Chosen One, Righteous One, and Anointed One or Messiah isn’t a human being.

Near the end of the parables, Noah abruptly becomes the protagonist for a few chapters. He invokes his great-grandfather Enoch, who appears to him in the manner of an angel, as though Enoch has already been taken by God, in keeping with the scant information about the antediluvian hero in the book of Genesis. The final chapters of the parables feature Enoch as the protagonist once more and actually relate his ascent to heaven where perhaps he’s identified with the Son of Man.

If he is so identified, at most this suggests a rereading of the prior chapters as follows. The pre-existent Son of Man was incarnated and born as the Enoch of Genesis 5. Enoch then had visions and made predictions about himself, the Son of Man, before being taken up into heaven. These visions and predictions will be realized when Enoch returns, appears as the Son of Man, and dwells among the righteous. But such a return of Enoch wouldn’t involve (re)incarnation. Any incarnation of the pre-existent Son of Man would have been at the moment of Enoch’s birth, not Enoch’s return. Furthermore it wouldn’t have been incarnation through parthenogenesis, as there’s nothing about the virginity of Enoch’s mother in the parables, in the earlier Enochic literature, or in the Hebrew Bible. On this reading, his return as the Son of Man would be the return of a pre-existent divine mediator figure that was incarnated and born and after a long life taken up into heaven instead of experiencing death.

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21 *1 Enoch* 70-71. Translation and commentary in Nickelsburg & VanderKam 2012, 320-332. Elsewhere, in *1 Enoch* 60.10, he’s referred to as an earthly son of man, i.e., a human being and not pre-existent. See Nickelsburg & VanderKam 2012, 233, 242.
Not only is this maximalist rereading of the parables far from the proto-orthodox Christian doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis, it is itself a stretch. Apotheosis of a hero at death or in place of death, such as any apotheosis of Enoch, needn’t retroactively imply the hero’s pre-existence and incarnation as a pre-existent being. There’s little if anything in the parables to imply as much. A more likely reading of them would be that Enoch didn’t pre-exist before his birth, visions, and predictions, but he was divinized at the end of his life when he was identified with the central divine mediator figure of those visions and predictions. Enoch will return as the Son of Man, but Enoch’s birth in the past wasn’t the incarnation of a pre-existent being at all because Enoch didn’t pre-exist, having not yet been identified with the Son of Man. He wasn’t identified with the pre-existent Son of Man until the end of his life, if even then. And because his flesh melted when he was taken up into heaven according to the text, it’s difficult to see how he could return as the Son of Man incarnate.

Akin to the Son of Man and Messiah in the Parables of Enoch, the Messiah in 4 Ezra pre-exists. But whereas there may not be any incarnation of the Messiah in the former, in the latter it’s at least implicit. Still the Messiah isn’t incarnated through parthenogenesis in this text. He’s incarnated through birth. Ezra learns that the Messiah “will be revealed” and then “will die” after

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22 Ditto: Jesus. A further issue is that if Enoch were born as the pre-existent or heavenly Son of Man, it would make Methuselah, Lamech and Noah along with the rest of Enoch’s children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren the offspring of a divine father and human mother. But Enochic tradition is opposed to such unions in the case of the watchers. As it happens, there’s the legend of Noah’s birth and his suspected angelic paternity. But the suspicion there isn’t that his human father was an angel; instead Lamech suspects that the child was fathered by someone else, an angel. And anyhow, the suspicion isn’t confirmed; it’s denied.

23 Other divine mediator figures in the parables are Wisdom (1 Enoch 42) and various angels.

24 In his edition of the text, Isaac (1983, 50) understands 1 Enoch 71.14 to be a reference to Enoch as son of man, distinct from the Son of Man. Cf. 1 Enoch 60.10.

25 1 Enoch 71.11. Translation and commentary in Nickelsburg & VanderKam 2012, 320, 327.

26 See the excursus in Stone 1990, 207-213. Written in Hebrew, the text survives in Syriac and Latin versions, among others.
four hundred years. Ezra also learns that the Messiah “will arise from the seed of David (ܡܢܙܪܥܗ ܕܕܘܕ),” having a father, therefore, in the Davidic line. The Messiah’s pre-existence and birth suggest the heavenly descent and incarnation of a pre-existent being, although the text has no account of it.

Beyond his basic lineage, the Messiah’s genesis is an enigma. Ezra sees it in vision not as a descent but rather as an ascent “from the heart of the sea” because, God explains, “[j]ust as no one can explore or know (ܡܡܐܦܐ, scrutinare vel scire) what is in the depths of the sea, so no one on earth can see (ܡܡܐܡܐ, videre) my servant or those who are with him, except in the time of his day.” The Messiah is hidden with his companions, but when he’s revealed he will be born or will have been born to a father in the Davidic line and to a mother, of course, even if she goes unmentioned.

The Messiah’s companions are “the men who were taken up, who from their birth have not tasted death,” such as Enoch and Elijah and, by the close of the text, Ezra as well. God tells Ezra: “for you shall be taken up from among men, and henceforth you shall be with my servant and with those who are like you, until the times are ended.” Thus in conjunction with the birth and revelation of the Messiah, Ezra will return alongside other mortals who temporarily avoided death. They and the Messiah will then die as will the rest of humanity, leading to the resurrection and final judgment.

27 4 Ezra 7.28. Translation: Stone 1990, 202, with commentary (215-216). The Latin text has been Christianized here and refers to the Messiah as Jesus.
Even though Ezra sees the Messiah symbolically ascending from the unfathomable water, it’s a heavenly descent after the fashion of Daniel 7. As Ezra relates the vision, “the wind made one like the similitude of a man (אܝܟ ܕܡܘܬܐ ܕܒܪܢܫܐ) come up out of the heart of the sea,” and “that man (ܗܿܘ ܒܪܢܫܐ, ipse homo) flew with the clouds of heaven.” The motion of the Messiah’s companions reinforces that it’s a heavenly descent, despite the visionary imagery of oceanic ascent. Ezra and others are taken up into heaven and so will come back down with the Messiah when he’s revealed. In Daniel 7 it’s an anthropomorphic angel that descends, but undergoing no incarnation. Here in 4 Ezra it’s a pre-existent and soon to be mortal Messiah from the seed of David. He descends and is implicitly incarnated through birth. This is closer to the Christian doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis. It’s by no means identical, however.

In all three of these Jewish texts, the book of Daniel, the Parables of Enoch, and 4 Ezra, there’s a divine mediator figure that’s pre-existent or else comes from heaven. In Daniel, written during the second century BCE, he descends from heaven but isn’t incarnated at all. In the Parables of Enoch, written sometime after, he may be incarnated implicitly in a righteous, chosen, and anointed person, or perhaps as the antediluvian hero himself, but may be not the former and arguably not the latter either. In 4 Ezra, written during the first centuries of the Common Era, he’s implicitly incarnated as the Davidic Messiah.

For incarnation of a pre-existent being to be more than implied in 4 Ezra, there would need to be an account of it, however brief, such as there is in the Prayer of Joseph, where the archangel Israel says “I descended to earth (κατέβην ἐπὶ τῆν γῆν) and tabernacled among humans

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(κατεσκήνωσα ἐν ἀνθρώποις)” as the patriarch Jacob. Assuming that the Prayer of Joseph is a Jewish text from the first century CE, it would be a non-Christian example of incarnation through miraculous birth, but still not an example of incarnation through parthenogenesis. 

Jacob’s mother Rebekah was barren, according to Jewish scripture, and her conception of him and Esau is presented as a divine favor. Nevertheless she wasn’t believed to be a virgin when she conceived, as was Mary; neither was Isaac’s paternity of Jacob denied, as was Joseph’s paternity of Jesus.

The Jewish authors and readers of these texts shared with Christians the idea that a pre-existent or else heavenly mediator figure might descend to earth. Some also shared the idea that the figure might be incarnated, such as by being born in a human body in the case of the Davidic Messiah in 4 Ezra or the patriarch Jacob in the Prayer of Joseph. But incarnation through parthenogenesis isn’t something that Jews shared with Christians. Neither is it something that Jews believed in before the idea of Jesus’ virgin birth was developed.

So I only concur with Boyarin to a degree. In Second Temple and early Judaism, there was nothing identical or very close to the Christian idea of the incarnation if that’s understood to be the proto-orthodox doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis. I think Alan Segal puts it better when he writes that “[t]he doctrine of the incarnation is certainly one of the biggest differences between Judaism and Christianity,” and that “[a]ny full-scale study of the concept yields both an appreciation for the traditions that fed into Christianity and an equally strong

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33 The text is unattested before Origen, but Smith (1983, 700) writes: “The various parallels to both hellenistic and Aramaic materials would suggest a first-century date.”

34 Genesis 25.21.
appreciation for the uniqueness and inventiveness of the Christian response to the historical circumstances that formed it.” In short, Incarnation through virgin birth is different.

Because there’s no parthenogenesis in 4 Ezra or the Prayer of Joseph, these Jewish authors didn’t have to solve the problems that Christians did, problems that were introduced by the development of the idea of Jesus’ virgin birth and compounded by its harmonization with the earlier and separate idea of his pre-existence. How the Davidic Messiah could still be born from the seed of David without a father in the Davidic line isn’t a problem in 4 Ezra. How a pre-existent divine being descends from heaven and enters a virgin’s womb isn’t a problem in the Prayer of Joseph either. Christians had to solve these sorts of problems, not Jews. Incarnation through virgin birth became proto-orthodox and then orthodox Christian doctrine, one of the features that distinguished Christianity from Judaism.

It’s also one of the features that differentiated Christian orthodoxy from heterodoxy as well as from the texts of the New Testament. Of course all examples of the harmonization of the two ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth are themselves different at the microscopic level. In some, the pre-existent Jesus descends from heaven and is incarnated through parthenogenesis alone. In others, he’s incarnated through aural conception, entering the virgin Mary’s ear. In yet others, he’s incarnated through auto-parthenogenesis too, taking the place of his own would-be father. But as different as one is from the next – Ignatius of Antioch from the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed – most all examples of the doctrine of Incarnation through virgin birth come from proto-orthodox and orthodox Christian literature. At the macroscopic

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35 Segal 2002, 136, 139.
level, they differ far more from understandings of Jesus in New Testament texts and heterodox Christian literature than they do from each other.\textsuperscript{36}

Incarnation of the pre-existent Jesus through parthenogenesis became proto-orthodox and finally orthodox Christian doctrine, yet the New Testament authors weren’t proto-orthodox Christians nor were many of their early readers. The authors of the various texts that came to be circulated en masse and in the end canonized as the New Testament, being read, interpreted, copied, and rewritten together, originally set out in different christological directions. This isn’t surprising, given that the New Testament texts were written at different times in different places for different reasons and by different people. Rather it would be surprising if their authors didn’t have different beliefs about Jesus. These different beliefs made widespread controversy possible.

During the christological controversies of the second century, Christians debated whether Jesus was incarnated as a pre-existent being, and if so, when and how he was incarnated, be it through birth, virgin birth or by possession at baptism. There were other controversies between proto-orthodox Christians and so-called heretics. And their doctrine of Incarnation through virgin was not the only thing that differentiated them from the various Christian groups in antiquity, as well as from ancient Judaism. It was certainly a major one, though. And yet the proto-orthodox doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis hasn’t been adequately treated in scholarship, I would argue – not in scholarship on heavenly journeys in ancient Mediterranean literature as a whole, and not even in scholarship on the development of early Christology.

\textsuperscript{36} Sethians and Valentinians also believed in Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth, but in their complex christologies they emphasized incarnation at baptism, whereas proto-orthodox Christians didn’t.
Older scholarship of the German school of the history of religions still maintains a presence in current scholarship on heavenly journeys and on early christology. Among the those associated with this ‘school,’ either because they were influential on it, representatives of it, or influenced by it, are, from oldest to youngest, Richard Reitzenstein (b.1861, d.1931), Wilhelm Bousset (b.1865, d.1920), Albrecht Dieterich (b.1866, d.1908), Rudolf Bultmann (b.1884, d.1976), and Josef Kroll (b.1889, d.1980).  

The fortune and fate of the German school have been related before, and several critiques have been made. In brief, as far as descent from heaven in early christology goes, it can be said that this history-of-religions approach tended to overlook Judaism and emphasize the pagan east, Iran in particular, in the amassing of parallels for motif history and the genealogical search for Christian origins. Charges of orientalism and colonialism, even some anti-Semitism, have been leveled at scholars associated with the school. Yet in its day it was quite forward-looking if also neoromantic.

When the twentieth century began, no less an authority than Adolf von Harnack (b.1851, d.1930) could state of Christianity, “He who does not know this religion, knows none, and he who knows all of its history, knows all [religions].” This triumphalist quip was in reference to Max Müller (b.1823, d.1900), the father of comparative religion as an academic discipline, and

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37 A number of other scholars associated with the school could be named whose work would easily give a different impression of it. In my selection, I have chosen to name those whose work deals with heavenly/otherworldly journeys, the gnostic redeemer myth, or both.  
his often repeated statement about the study of religion: He who knows one, knows none. In opposition to their senior colleagues like von Harnack, representatives of the German school of the history of religions and their associates sided with Müller. They compared Christianity to other ancient Mediterranean religions. Theirs was an interdisciplinary enterprise, joining together the fields of biblical theology, classics, and ‘oriental’ studies, but with Judaism often conspicuously overlooked.

The school is perhaps most well-known, even infamous, for its gnostic myth/s of a descending and ascending redeemed redeemer or Primal Man redeemer, the *erlöste Erlöser* or *Urmensch-Erlöser*, though it’s also well known for its formula *Himmelsreise der Seele*, and the two aren’t always separable. Understood to be pre-Christian, originally from the pagan east, this gnostic myth was invoked to explain the portrayal of Jesus as a descending-ascending redeemer figure and heavenly Man (Son of Man), especially in Paul and John.\(^{40}\)

Criticism has been that the myth is an assemblage of disparate components, the invention of modern scholars; that the sources for reconstructing the myth, Manichaean and Mandaean sources primarily, are late and not pre-Christian; that the identity or consubstantiality between the redeemer and redeemed is questionable; that Iranian and gnostic dualism aren’t the same; that the terms gnostic and gnosticism are difficult to define, and more importantly they are entangled in the discourse of orthodoxy and heresy; that, anyhow, evidence of non-Jewish or non-Christian gnosticism isn’t easy to come by; and that Jewish and Christian authors like Philo, Paul, and

\(^{40}\) Actually, representatives of the school, like Bousset (1913/1970, 271-281), referred to gnostic redeemer myths, in the plural.
John may just as well account for the development of gnostic myth as vise-versa, with an earlier Jewish mythology (e.g. of Wisdom) underlying the whole.\textsuperscript{41}

Much of current scholarship on heavenly journeys and on early christology has been done in reaction to older scholarship of German the school of the history of religions, one way or another, given its gnostic redeemer myth/s and its formula \textit{Himmelsreise der Seele}. Insofar as current scholarship on heavenly journeys and on early christology can be split up, reactions to the German school in current scholarship on heavenly journeys have been assorted. They range from dismissing it as entirely outmoded and outdated, to engaging in criticism of it, attempting to salvage it in recognition of what its seems to have gotten right, diplomatically reconciling it with conflicting agendas, and even defending some of its more generally abandoned hypotheses such as eastern origins.

Whereas in current scholarship on early christology, reactions to the German school have been more polarized. One negative reaction has been simply to reverse the direction of influence extending from any pagan gnostic myth/s to belief about Jesus, so that the former become derivative of the latter. Another has been to substitute Judaism for gnosticism and/or paganism in the search for Christian origins. On the more positive side, there has been talk of a new \textit{religionsgeschichtliche Schule} since the late 1980s, while some scholars have also carried on with a comparative history-of-religions approach that’s nonetheless critical of the German school. Reactions to the older scholarship here tend to allow for influence running in multiple directions. None of this has meant a rehabilitation of the school’s gnostic redeemer myth/s, nor

should it de facto. What’s regrettable, however, is that most scholarship has yet to encompass parabiblical literature like the Nag Hammadi codices published in the 1970s, despite calls to do so some thirty years passed.42

My own reaction to the older scholarship of the German school of the history of religions isn’t to ignore or dismiss it but also not to accept it uncritically either. A distinction has to be made between specific errors in the older scholarship on the one hand and the vital enterprise of a comparative approach to ancient Mediterranean religions on the other. But this distinction has not always been made. Criticism of the German school’s hypotheses, such as Iranian origins and its pre-Christian gnostic myth/s of a descending and ascending redeemed redeemer, is liable to be construed as reason to avoid non-Jewish, non-Christian, non-canonical literature.

In his review of Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation by James Dunn, I think Carl Holladay has it right when he states: “Any genuinely historical investigation into the origin(s) of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation must first conceive the world of late antiquity in some broad, unified sense,” though origins aren’t necessarily what I’m after. “Whatever the principle of selectivity that is adopted in

42 The survival of the Nag Hammadi texts in relatively late Coptic translation isn’t an excuse. As Hutado (1984, 16-17) writes: “the careful comparison of them with New Testament materials should illuminate both sets of documents and both earlier and later varieties of christological developments. The fact that none of the major treatments of New Testament christology,” from Wilhelm Bousset to Reginald Fuller, “were able to make use of this data is itself an indication that new work must be done.” See also Hurtado 1988, 9-11, 22-39; 2003, 5-26; and similar calls by Segal 1984 and Fossum 1991. The situation in current scholarship on early christology has not changed substantially since those calls were issued, while it has been somewhat more common practice to include the Nag Hammadi codices in current scholarship on heavenly journeys. Notable exceptions are Hurtado 2003, 523-548; Robinson 2007, 27-63; Roukema 2010; and of course many historical Jesus studies that consider the Gospel of Thomas. See also Van Voorst 2000, 179-217, who groups the Nag Hammadi codices among “Christian Writings after the New Testament” and evaluates them in terms of the historical Jesus rather than the development of early christology; and Franzmann 1996, who treats them entirely on their own.
examining certain traditions, concepts, or ideas, there must be the underlying assumption that all materials, theoretically at least, belong to the same pool, and that once they are isolated and collected, they will be examined with the same set of investigative procedures, and with equal rigor,” Holladay continues. “Whether this was always achieved by the History-of-Religions school may certainly be questioned, but this was its intention, at least among its best practitioners, and as a result it marked a significant advance beyond the research methods of the nineteenth century.” Notwithstanding its flawed hypotheses, then, the German school’s comparative approach to ancient Mediterranean religions was an improvement, and I take a comparative approach in this book.

PATTERNS EMPLOYED IN CURRENT SCHOLARSHIP

Rephrasing Holladay’s words some, I understand descent and incarnation of the pre-existent Jesus to belong to the same literary pool as any other heavenly journey featured in ancient Mediterranean texts, which isn’t to say that any heavenly journey will be identical to another, of course. There’s no single means to isolate and collect this material for examination. To classify and categorize is to make an argument, however tacit. For starters, though, any heavenly journey will be up, down, or some combination of the two: up-down, up-down-up ...; down-up, down-up-down ... Here are some overarching classifications and categorizations from three scholars.

The young Jonathan Smith employs a pattern that he refers to as “the fundamental pattern of hellenistic Mediterranean religions – an astrological mystery involving the descent-ascent of a

43 Holladay 1984, 77.
heavenly figure,” so down-up, “the Himmelsreise der Seele of the believer through the astral-angelic spheres,” so ultimately up if not also first down, “and magical-theurgical practices.”

Alan Segal employs two patterns that he refers to as the katabasis and anabasis patterns having to do with mediation. God is in heaven. Humans are on earth. They communicate via mediators that journey down or up. In the case of descent, “we normally expect divine mediators such as the logos, an angel, word, son, wisdom, etc.” In the case of ascent, “we normally expect that mediator to be a man or men, the soul, psyche or figures of that kind.”

Ioan Culianu employs three classes. He refers to class one as “otherworldly revelatory journeys,” which is where he arranges the genre apocalypse, noting that the formula of the German school Himmelsreise der Seele does not pertain, especially the word Seele because this journey occurs “sometimes in corpore, sometime in spiritu, sometimes in an unmentioned way.” Class two is “descensus and ascensus of a supermundane entity,” such as the figure of the so-called redeemed redeemer or Primal Man redeemer from the German school’s gnostic

44 Smith 1968, 288-289; original emphasis. Though influence of the German school of the history of religions is evident here, when Smith (1978, ix-x; parentheses original) reprinted this essay he marked off his early style of comparativism: “Common to each of these essays in a comparative enterprise within closely adjacent historical, cultural or linguistic units which insists (in conscious distinction from the ‘parallelomania’ that sometimes overwhelmed practitioners of the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule) that the comparison be between a total ensemble rather than between isolated motifs.” And it should be noted that even still he described this essay as “insufficiently historical.” Tabor (1986, 80) alters Smith’s pattern, observing that “the descending-ascending figure could well be only an ‘ascending’ one,” as in the case of a resurrected and exalted Jesus who for certain early Christians didn’t pre-exist.
45 Segal 1980, 1340.
46 Culianu 1983, 5.
myth. And class three is “descent of the individual soul from, and ascension to, the sky,” or in a word the unidirectional neologism “psychanody,” so especially up.

These patterns and classes employed by Smith, Segal, and Culianu overlap. For instance, the section of Smith’s pattern that involves “the descent-ascent of a heavenly figure” overlaps with Segal’s katabasis pattern and its divine mediators as well as with the “descensus and ascensus of a supermundane entity” in Culianu’s second class. This is where the descent and incarnation of the pre-existent Jesus would fit. To some extent, it would also fit in Culianu’s third class: “descent of the individual soul from, and ascension to, the sky;” for most Christians who believed in Jesus’ pre-existence, however, his descent was more than the descent of any individual soul. Whether pre-existing first or not, Jesus was also believed to ascend during the episode on the mount of transfiguration, for one, and to ascend after his death in particular. But I’m interested in descent and incarnation, not ascent.

Segal and Culianu, along with the rest of current scholarship on heavenly journeys, have been concerned with ascent more than descent. Perhaps there are simply more ascent texts to be studied. At any rate, some particular studies of descent have been made, such as of the descent of the human soul according to philosophical Hermetica and among individual Middle and Neo-Platonists, all of which would fall directly under Culianu’s third class. My specific treatment of descent and incarnation of the pre-existent Jesus should further help to balance out current scholarship on heavenly journeys. But the main contribution that I want to make is to the study

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47 Culianu 1983, 8.
48 Culianu 1983, 10.
of early christology, which has had its own patterns, rubrics, types, paradigms and models. I will summarize those of Raymond Brown, Bart Ehrman, April DeConick, and Charles Talbert at the conclusion of some succinct prolegomena.

It’s worth repeating that there would be no doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis without the two ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth. Scholarship is divided as to when belief in Jesus’ pre-existence developed and as to the extent of its attestation in New Testament texts. At one end of the spectrum is James Dunn who sees it developing later, only attested in John, but not explicitly in Paul, much less the synoptic gospels, though Matthew does identify Jesus as Wisdom. At the other end of the spectrum is Dunn’s student Simon Gathercole who sees it developing earlier, widely attested in Paul, in Hebrews, Jude, even the synoptics at least implicitly, and of course afterwards in John. Between these two, majority opinion is that belief in Jesus’ pre-existence did develop soon and is explicitly attested in passages in Paul as well as John, but only scarcely in other New Testament texts. The larger point of contention in scholarship is what cultural models and biblical figures Christians used to develop and express their belief in Jesus; or with added nuance, what modern scholarly devices should be employed today to talk about and analyze early christology. At issue here too are definitions of Jewish monotheism and how to make sense of the worship of Jesus as divine. Furthermore, Judaism means different things to different scholars, from normative, Palestinian, sectarian, Hellenistic, and diaspora Judaism, to Jewish mysticism.51

51 Dunn and Gathercole each provide their own overview of scholarship: Dunn 1980/1996, 2-5, also xi-xxxix; 1994; Gathercole 2006, 2-17. Though neglecting Gathercole, Chester (2011) also provides a good overview of scholarship on so-called high christology. But the term is vague, as Chester (2011, 33) himself points out, and he seems to be caught between ‘high’ and ‘divine.’ Neither term requires a pre-existent Jesus per se. So I don’t employ the term ‘high’ at all in
Raymond Brown employs a rubric consisting of what he refers to as several "christological moments," from Jesus’ second coming and resurrection, backwards to moments in Jesus’ public ministry like the baptism, then to Jesus’ youth and boyhood, birth and conception, and finally to pre-existence christologies that place Jesus in the time of Moses, Abraham, Adam, and even before creation. Brown isn’t of the opinion that this backwards development means invention void of reality. And he warns that “no one should attempt to fit into a smooth chronological development the actual christological outlook of 1st-century Christians in various parts of the world.” Rather he’s recommending “a logical (not a chronological) way of understanding the pattern of christological thought” in New Testament texts above all.

Bart Ehrman employs four ideal types that he refers to as proto-orthodox, adoptionist, docetic, and separationist christologies of the second century and beyond. For proto-orthodoxy, their Jesus was “both human and divine.” So they “opposed anyone who claimed that Christ was a man but not God,” namely adoptionists like most Ebionites, “and anyone who claimed that he was God but not a man,” namely docetists like Marcion, “and anyone who claimed that he was two distinct beings, one divine and one human,” namely separationists like Cerinthus and other so-called gnostics. Ehrman recognizes that adoptionist and separationist christologies can be hard to differentiate this way, given that they both emphasized Jesus’ baptism – though separationists understood God to have taken up short-term residence inside Jesus and not just

reference to christology, and I’m careful to stipulate whether pre-existence is included whenever I employ the term divine.

54 Ehrman 1993/2011; quoted at 15. See also his more recent textbooks and trade books, e.g., Ehrman 2000/2012, 3-7; Ehrman 2003b, 91-157, 221-227.
adopted him. Ehrman also allows for what he calls ‘hybrid’ christologies, such as separationist and docetic combinations found in accounts of Valentinian belief.⁵⁵

April DeConick employs three paradigms and their attendant soteriologies geographically based in Jerusalem, Antioch, and Alexandria (or Syria) at the beginning of christological development. First, within the “Jerusalem paradigm” and what she calls its “possession christology,” Jesus is born the son of Mary and Joseph, is then possessed by God’s Spirit or Wisdom at his baptism, and later is exalted as God’s angel following the resurrection. Second, within the “Antiochean paradigm” and what DeConick calls its “embodiment christology,” exaltation of the resurrected Jesus as God’s angel leads to hermeneutical questions about the appearance of this angel in Jewish scripture from the book of Genesis and so on. Belief in the pre-existence of Jesus develops here, as expressed in the Philippians hymn, which Paul would have learned in Antioch. Jesus is still the son of Mary, but he’s possessed already in her womb, and it’s God’s angel that possesses his embryonic body and soul. The virgin birth stories represent small shifts in this paradigm, where the Spirit possesses Jesus in the womb, as according to Luke, or else the Spirit plays an active role in the divine parentage of Jesus, as according to Matthew. Third, within the “Alexandrian paradigm” and what DeConick calls its “ensoulment christology,” questions about the appearance of God’s angel continue, and “Jesus’ identification with the Angel of Yahweh is pushed back pretemporally, from preexistence to precosmogonic.” Jewish angel traditions are also combined with Hellenistic thought, “particularly the origin of the rational aspect of the human being.” Thus in the Johannine prologue, “God’s Reason is ensouled in Jesus,” who has no human soul. Instead of post-Nicene categories anachronistically applied to New Testament and other early Christian texts, DeConick

proposes that these paradigms be employed “as a device to examine later christological developments and understand the conflicts involved.”

Taking another tack, Charles Talbert employs four models to understand the development of early christology in the first century and soon thereafter. He refers to these models as variations of two broader patterns of thought in the Greco-Roman world, the one of ascent from earth by a human being who doesn’t pre-exist, the other of descent from heaven and ascent back again by a pre-existent being. In the case of the first pattern, the variations involve the subsequent roles of the ascended (divinized) human. These roles are played either in the future or the here and now. “One variation,” i.e., model 1, “has the individual taken up in order to come as the End-time judge, savior, or helper,” Talbert explains. “The other variation,” i.e., model 2, “has that one taken up in order to exercise some type of sovereignty in the present.” Again in neither of these models would Jesus pre-exist. In the case of the second pattern, the pattern of descent and ascent by a pre-existent being, the variations involve the manner of descent and incarnation or appearance thereof, as well as the grade of pre-existent being that descends. “One variation,” i.e., model 3, “regards the descent as an epiphany of a true deity,” Talbert explains. “The other,” i.e., model 4, “sees the descent as analogous to the inspiration/possession/indwelling of a human by a divine being.” These four models are adaptable and may be combined. They aren’t necessarily exclusive to any social group or author, Christian or otherwise. Talbert finds multiple models together in New Testament texts and among the apostolic fathers on the way to christological synthesis, with experience and soteriology as the driving factors from the start.

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56 DeConick 2007; quoted at 18-19, 21.
57 Talbert 2011, 3-42; quoted at 7. The third and fourth models of epiphany and inspiration/possession/indwelling have been employed more extensively by Talbert’s student Kinlaw (2005) in her study of the Johannine writings.
THE QUESTIONS EMPLOYED IN THIS BOOK

Each of the patterns, classes, rubrics, types, paradigms and models employed in current scholarship on heavenly journeys and early christology has its advantages and disadvantages. In this book, carefully chosen questions are employed to interrogate early Christian literature: Was Jesus incarnated? And if so, when and how? Did he first pre-exist?

Without drawing attention to what I was doing then, above as I argued for the difference of Christ incarnate through parthenogenesis, I employed basically the same questions to interrogate the book of Daniel, the Parables of Enoch, 4 Ezra, and the Prayer of Joseph. Is there a pre-existent or else heavenly figure in the text? (Yes in all four.) And if so, is this figure incarnated? (Not in Daniel, may be not in the Parables of Enoch either, but yes in 4 Ezra and the Prayer of Joseph.) And if so, when and how? (It’s incarnation through birth, not virgin birth, in each of the two.) The same questions could be employed to interrogate any text from the ancient Mediterranean world, whether canonical or non-canonical, Jewish, Christian or pagan.

Some scholars may think that my interrogation process reinforces artificial borderlines between Judaism, Christianity and paganism, between Christian orthodoxy and heresy, borderlines that didn’t exist in the first and second centuries. I wouldn’t want to pretend that this does not happen in scholarship. But I claim to be otherwise occupied. I don’t see myself as a border patrol officer or customs inspector. I’m like a census or survey worker asking questions that will provide me with the views and ideally the self-identification of those I interrogate as I go from place to place and even one century to another – within the Greco-Roman world of the first and second centuries CE at least. The answers that I ge(nera)t(e) will be conditioned by the questions that I ask of this, that, or the other text. And I readily concede the possibility that its

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58 For the analogy of international borders, see Boyarin 2004, especially 1-33.
author may have never entertained my questions much less set out to answer them. Such is research in biblical and related studies. Sometimes in the absence of texts written by certain early Christian groups, including Ebionites, information from their ‘neighbors’ must be relied on. Once more I admit that the proto-orthodox heresiologists weren’t amicable. So I approach information from them with caution.

The results of this survey, as it were, will be presented in the CHAPTERS of PART ONE. My presentation is loosely organized in terms of logic not chronology, though up front are Jewish incarnational models, and under each heading and subheading after that the early Christian literature in question is presented according to approximate date. But a thoroughgoing chronological arrangement would have been too messy, given the number of texts and groups to be treated. It also would have obscured the similarities and differences that I want to highlight between texts and groups, both inside and outside the New Testament canon as well as along the Jewish, Christian and pagan divides.

Hardly does this book depart entirely from the patterns, classes, rubrics, types, paradigms and models employed in current scholarship on heavenly journeys and early christology, but I prefer to employ my carefully chosen questions because they allow me to do comparative work that adoptionism, docetism and separationism, for instance, would not. Those terms have a lengthy pedigree in Christian polemics, and so besides being potentially prejudicial in the study of early Christian literature, they aren’t appropriate for non-Christian texts (e.g. Jewish or pagan ‘docetism’). Furthermore even when they are restricted to Christianity, the terms are difficult to
define. While without labels as succinct as adoptionist, docetic and separationist I’m left with somewhat verbose descriptions, the pluses outweigh the minuses in my opinion.\(^{59}\)

These questions are also to be preferred before others like: Was Jesus divine, human, or both? The question of one or two natures is relevant of course, increasingly so in the third century and thereafter, as is the question of whether Christ incarnate had a human soul.\(^{60}\) Those binary questions don’t speak to the range of early Christian thought about Jesus and incarnation, however, since they don’t ask when or how he was incarnated – assuming that he was incarnated at all and that he pre-existed. I ask binary questions myself: Was he incarnated? Did he first pre-exist? But in the case of incarnation I continue with when and how, giving me more than yes or no answers.

\(^{59}\) I do, however, employ the terms proto-orthodox and proto-orthodoxy, which have been popularized by Ehrman. The terms are in no way impervious to criticism, as he himself recognizes. Clivaz (2011, 162) suggests that “what early Christian studies need now is a real change of vocabulary and mapping system; in particular, they need to go beyond the over-restrictive notions of ‘proto-orthodox’, ‘orthodox’ or ‘unorthodox’ texts.” I don’t see many alternatives to proto-orthodoxy or some comparable category, however, unless early Christian studies are going to be focused at the microscopic level from now on.

PART ONE

CONCEPTIONS OF JESUS
Having introduced my study and situated it with respect to older and current scholarship, I now provide a historical-critical overview of the various conceptions of Jesus in the first and second centuries CE, the proto-orthodox doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis, among others.

Early christology was developed first by Jews. Jesus was Jewish, in his lifetime most all of his disciples and followers were Jewish, and at least for a generation or two after his death so was the majority of those who believed in him. They were part of the Greco-Roman world, of course, participating in Hellenistic culture to one degree or another, sometimes influencing or being influence by it, at other times resisting. Nevertheless on the whole they were Jews, not Greeks or Romans. And even when gentile believers in Jesus came to outnumber them, christology would forever depend in some way or another on Judaism and its scriptures.

But in the process of christological development during the third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh generations after the death of Jesus, believers in him became Christians. This had less to do with the conversion of gentiles per se than it did with christology, though belief in Jesus surely changed under increasing Greco-Roman influence in the 100s, 200s, and so on. The idea of his pre-existence was developed already in the first generation after his death, circa 30-50 CE, and it didn’t necessarily differentiate believers in him from other Jews. The idea of his virgin birth was developed later in the third generation after his death, circa 70-90 CE, or perhaps earlier. This idea of parthenogenesis was itself something of a novelty, and the harmonization of it with the previously developed idea of Jesus’ pre-existence is one of the features that differentiated Christianity from Judaism as well as certain groups of Christians from each other. Still the development of early christology begins within Judaism.
Jewish Incarnational Models

In the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple and early Jewish literature, there are two primary models of what could be called incarnation: first, incarnation of the human spirit or soul; and second, incarnation of a divine, heavenly or pre-existent being.

*Incarnation of the Human Spirit or Soul.* The human spirit or soul often doesn’t pre-exist here, not like the Platonic soul for instance. It may simply be a vivifying force on loan from God and created as each child is to be born. Regardless the human spirit or soul is placed in a body, and that could be called an incarnation.

Belief in human pre-existence seems to have been rather uncommon among Jews at the time of Jesus. That continued to be the case among several groups of early Christians. For most all of those who believed in Jesus’ pre-existence, even if they weren’t proto-orthodox Christians, their Jesus pre-existed as more than a human spirit or soul. And for proto-orthodoxy, Jesus was the only human being to have pre-existed. Justin Martyr himself, a former pagan with philosophical training, as avid a proponent of Logos theology as he was, didn’t believe in the pre-existence of the human spirit or soul. He abandoned his former Platonic belief that the soul was immortal for what he took to be the anthropology of Jewish, and by appropriation Christian, scripture: a mortal human body and mortal human soul vivified and kept alive by God’s spirit for as long as God wants them to live.¹

*Incarnation of Divine or Pre-Existent Beings.* While pre-existence of the human spirit or soul seems to have been a rather uncommon Jewish belief, there were several divine mediator figures in Second Temple and early Judaism that could be said to pre-exist or else come from heaven. A few of these figures were believed to be born as humans, like the Son of Man

¹ *Dialogus cum Tryphone* 5-7.
implicitly incarnated as the mortal and Davidic Messiah in 4 Ezra or the archangel Israel explicitly incarnated as the patriarch Jacob in the *Prayer of Joseph*, which I discussed in the INTRODUCTION. Both texts, written after the time of Jesus in fact, feature incarnation of a pre-existent being through birth, even miraculous birth. But neither of them features incarnation through virgin birth, which is conceptually very different from incarnation through birth, despite what may appear to be the minor addition of a single word.

At any rate incarnation through birth wasn’t the standard for these divine, heavenly or pre-existent beings. Generally it was incarnation by inspiration or possession of a human body, if it was incarnation at all. So in Jewish literature, God’s Spirit or Wisdom might inspire or possess someone, and that could be called an incarnation, be it transitory or more permanent. They descend from heaven and are incarnated in a human body that has already been born with a human spirit or soul inside it, but these figures don’t undergo birth as humans themselves in order to be incarnated. Instead of undergoing birth themselves, they inspire or possess some body that has already been born. In the Parables of Enoch, for example, besides the figure of the Son of Man and perhaps being his alter ego of sorts, God’s Wisdom descends too. She doesn’t “find a dwelling,” however. That is, she doesn’t find a suitable person or people to inspire or possess, and so she returns to heaven and takes her seat “in the midst of the angels.”

If Wisdom had found a human dwelling, though, it wouldn’t immediately follow that the people she inspired or possessed were themselves pre-existent thereafter, much less before the inspiration or possession occurred. They might be understood to have a pre-existent or else heavenly being inside their body, and they might even speak as that being. But without some

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2 *1 Enoch* 42.1-2. Translation: Nickelsburg & VanderKam 2012, 138, with commentary (138-140). For association between wisdom/Wisdom and the Son of Man or Chosen One, see *1 Enoch* 48.1-7; 49.1-4; 51.1-3. Translation and commentary in Nickelsburg & VanderKam 2012, 166-174, 177-179, 180, 185-185; see also 44, 118.
identification between the figure doing the possessing and the person possessed, such people aren’t pre-existent beings by virtue of the possession; they are humans, born with a human spirit/soul, and then possessed by a pre-existent or else heavenly being.\(^3\)

Each of these primary Jewish models of incarnation can be found throughout early Christian literature, which is not to say that all believers in Jesus believed that he pre-existed or that he was ever born. I begin my overview of the various conceptions of him in the first and second centuries CE with those who believed that he was born but didn’t pre-exist. I end it with those who did not believe that he was born or incarnated in any way, for whom there were other Jewish models of fleshless theophany and angelophany. Between these two extremes are those who believed that he was born, that he did pre-exist, and that he was incarnated through birth or virgin birth or by possession at baptism.

\(^3\) Further examples of possession in Jewish as well as Greco-Roman and Christian literature are discussed christologically in Kinlaw 2005, 41-67; also Talbert 2011, 23-25; Clivaz 2010.
CHAPTER ONE

BIRTH BUT NO PRE-EXISTENCE OF JESUS

Some of the earliest believers in Jesus didn’t believe that he pre-existed. As representative of them I group together in this CHAPTER the authors of the synoptic gospels and the author of the *Proto-Gospel of James* along with Justin Martyr’s Christian Jews and Irenaeus’ Ebionites.

Though they didn’t believe that Jesus pre-existed, Matthew and Luke did introduce the idea of his virgin birth and its problems: the problem of how he could be born from the seed of David without a father; the problem of how Mary conceived if not vaginally; and for those who believed in his pre-existence, the problem of how Jesus entered her womb. The first two of these problems were solved in the *Proto-Gospel of James*, whereas virgin birth and its problems were avoided by Irenaeus’ Ebionites and Justin Martyr’s Christian Jews before that.

THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

Jesus is born with a human spirit or soul in the synoptics; while there’s no infancy narrative in Mark, he’s understood to be vivified by a spirit or soul until he expires on the cross. He’s also inspired or possessed by God’s Spirit at his baptism. Those could be called incarnations, the one an incarnation of a human spirit or soul, and the other an incarnation of a heavenly being, namely the Spirit. But Jesus himself doesn’t pre-exist in the synoptics explicitly.

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1 Mark 15.37 / Matthew 27.50 / Luke 23.46.
If he pre-exists, it’s only implicitly.\textsuperscript{2} And if so, any incarnation of a pre-existent Jesus that’s further implied in the Gospel of Mark would be by possession at baptism, beginning as it does without an infancy narrative; this is arguably the kind of incarnation emphasized in the Gospel of John, where Jesus pre-exists explicitly, however. If Jesus pre-exists implicitly in the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke, they might further imply incarnation of a pre-existent Jesus through virgin birth, beginning as they do with their respective infancy narratives in advance of the rewritten story of Jesus’ baptism.

In either case – implied pre-existence and incarnation at baptism in Mark, or implied pre-existence and incarnation through virgin birth in Matthew and Luke – it would be the implication of an implication, since there are no synoptic accounts of Jesus pre-existing in heaven and then descending to earth to be incarnated. What there are instead are references to him as the Son of Man; there are the ‘I have come’ sayings of Jesus; and there are statements about him having been sent. But never does Mark or Matthew or Luke stipulate that he came from heaven or was sent from heaven to be incarnated as a pre-existent being. This can only be assumed. Later Christians assumed as much in their harmonization of the synoptic gospels with John and other New Testament texts, though I see no way to prove that it was already assumed by Mark, Matthew, or Luke.

The pre-existent Jesus in the letters of Paul proves little if anything about what is in the synoptics. It proves, at least to my satisfaction, that the idea of Jesus’ pre-existence was developed by the 40s CE, and so the three evangelists could have known of it. But even decades later, believers in Jesus where not obligated – somehow as a consequence of this early

\textsuperscript{2} In Gathercole’s (2006, 295) argument for pre-existence in the synoptics, while he claims that “[r]eferences to Jesus’ coming have much the same sense in all four Gospels,” he concedes that “John does of course make explicit what is only implicit in the other three: it is a coming ‘down from heaven’ ‘into the world.’”
development – to believe that he pre-existed. In Justin Martyr’s rhetorical yet not altogether implausible dialogue with Trypho, he mentions “some of your race (ἀπὸ τοῦ ύμετέρου γένους), who acknowledge that Jesus is the Messiah, but claim that he was a human being from human parents (ἄνθρωπον ... ἐξ ἀνθρώπων γενόμενον). I naturally disagree with such persons,” he tells Trypho, “nor would I agree with them even if the majority of those who share my opinions were to say so.” While Justin does not agree with these Christian Jews or Jewish Christians, however numerous they are, he has Trypho do it: “It appears to me ... that the ones who say that he was a human being (ἄνθρωπον γεγονέναι αὐτὸν) and was anointed as Messiah only by [sc. God’s] choice, propose a doctrine that is more credible than yours,” that is, Justin’s proto-orthodox doctrine that Jesus pre-existed, descended from heaven and was incarnated through parthenogenesis. “We Jews all expect that the Messiah will be a human being from human parents (ἄνθρωπον ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ... γενήσεσθαι), and that Elijah will come to anoint him,” Justin has Trypho say.3

If Justin’s Christian Jews weren’t compelled to confess a pre-existent Jesus in the middle of the second century, neither were the authors of the synoptic gospels in the first. As for Trypho, he may indeed be a caricature of Judaism; the heavenly Messiahs in the Parables of Enoch and 4 Ezra, for example, do demonstrate that some Jews expected their Messiah to pre-exist, even as others had no messianic expectations whatsoever, it seems. But such heavenly Messiahs only constituted a portion of messianism, which also included royal, priestly, and prophetic figures –

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royal being the most prevalent. While these categories are far from mutually exclusive, and certain royal Messiahs were also heavenly, most were not believed to have pre-existed.  

Mark, Matthew, and Luke could have known of a pre-existent Jesus akin to Paul’s, then, without believing in one themselves. There’s some evidence to suggest that they did assume a pre-existent Jesus, however. The references to him as the Son of Man are perhaps the strongest indication that he pre-exists in the synoptic gospels. There are also the ‘I have come’ sayings of the Jesus, and the statements about him having been sent. But even all together the evidence and arguments don’t seem compelling to me.

Scholarship has endeavored to make sense of the Son of the Man references. This notorious puzzle involves not only the synoptics and their sources, written and oral, but also the historical Jesus. No full explanation has been found or is ever likely to be. In a word, I think the least insufficient (compound) explanation is that the historical Jesus predicted the coming of a Son of Man. He didn’t believe himself to be this heavenly figure (though he may well have referred to himself in the third person as an earthly ‘son of man’); when he died and this heavenly figure didn’t come, Jesus was then identified with the Son of Man. The result in the

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4 On messianism, see the entries by de Jong (1992) and Pomykala (2010) with the titles listed there. Not listed, see also Horbury 1998; 2003; and more recently Bockmuehl & Paget eds. 2007; Chester 2007; Porter ed. 2007; Lucass 2011. As Pomykala (2010, 938-942) explains, “Royal messianism is the most widely attested type in early Judaism,” with priestly and prophetic messianism being “minor,” followed by heavenly figures.

5 For the opposite perspective, see Gathercole 2006, 23-45.

6 E.g. Boyarin 2013; 2012, 25-101. See also Gathercole 2006, 253-271, but he doesn’t consider the Son of Man references to be the strongest indication.

7 Gathercole 2006, 83-189.

8 A succinct overview of scholarship is Burkett 1999. Longer and more recent is Müller 2008.

9 On the “question of reference,” see Burkett 1999, 32-42, where he lists scholars that have understood the Son of Man references to be to a figure “other than Jesus.” They include Julius Welhausen, Rudolf Bultmann, Heinz Tödt, and many more. For continued debate on this particular point, see e.g. Allison 1998, 65-66, 115-120; Ehrman 1999, 125-162, 233-234; Stuhlmacher 2005; and especially Allison 2010, 274-278, 293-303. I’m in basic agreement with
synoptic gospels and their sources is a Jesus who refers to himself as the Son of Man and yet who is also still to come. Such references tend to be either in the narrative present, i.e., up to and including Jesus’ death and resurrection where the gospels end, or in the narrative future sometime after that. Those in the narrative present would imply incarnation of a pre-existent being – assuming that they first imply pre-existence. I don’t think they do.

At a glance, here are the references to Jesus as the Son of Man already in the narrative present. According to the double and triple traditions, Jesus as the Son of Man

“has authority on earth to forgive sins;”
“is lord even of the sabbath;”
“has come eating and drinking;”
“must undergo great suffering ...”
will soon have “risen from the dead;”
“is to go through many sufferings ...”
“is to be betrayed ...”
“has nowhere to lay his head;”
is like Jonah but “greater” and “here;”
“will be handed over ...”
“came not to be served but to serve ...”
“goes ...” and “is betrayed;”
“is betrayed.”

And according to Matthew and Luke alone, Jesus as the Son of Man

Yarbro Collins & Collins (2008, 123-174). My opinion has also been shaped by Chilton (2002) and his “sliding scale of reference.” It should be noted that Horsley (2012) regards the overarching debate about the eschatological or apocalyptic Jesus as a diversion.

11 Mark 2.28 / Matthew 12.8 / Luke 6.5.
13 Mark 8.31 / Luke 9.22.
14 Mark 9.9 / Matthew 17.9.
15 Mark 9.12 / Matthew 17.12.
16 Mark 9.31 / Matthew 17.22 / Luke 9.44.
19 Mark 10.33 / Matthew 20.18 / Luke 18.32.
20 Mark 10.45 / Matthew 20.28.
22 Mark 14.41 / Matthew 26.45.
says “Blessed are you when people revile you ... on my account;”\textsuperscript{23}  
“will be in the heart of the earth” for a three day period;\textsuperscript{24}  
asks who people say he is;\textsuperscript{25}  
“came to seek out and to save the lost;”\textsuperscript{26}  
“will be handed over to be crucified;”\textsuperscript{27}  
is betrayed with a kiss;\textsuperscript{28}  
is said to have predicted that he “must be handed over ....”\textsuperscript{29}

If Jesus the Son of Man is a pre-existent figure in any of these passages (and not just an earthly ‘son of man’) as far the three evangelists are concerned, then his incarnation as a pre-existent being would be implied. But once more that would be an implication of an implication since at the most his pre-existence is itself only implicit in the synoptic gospels.

The pre-existence or else heavenly provenance of the one like a son of man in the book of Daniel and the Son of Man in the Parables of Enoch and 4 Ezra is more than implied by several statements there, such as the statement that he “came with the clouds of heaven;”\textsuperscript{30} or the statement that “[e]ven before the sun and the constellations were created, before the stars of the heaven were made, his name was named before the Lord of Spirits .... For this (reason) he was chosen and hidden in his presence, before the world was created and forever;” or the statement that “[f]rom the beginning the Son of Man was hidden, and the Most High preserved him in the presence of his might;”\textsuperscript{31} or the statement that God’s “Messiah shall be revealed and those who are with him,” presumably Elijah, for one; or the statement that “that man flew with the clouds of

\textsuperscript{23} Matthew 5.11.  
\textsuperscript{24} Matthew 12.40.  
\textsuperscript{25} Matthew 16.13.  
\textsuperscript{26} Luke 19.10.  
\textsuperscript{27} Matthew 26.2.  
\textsuperscript{28} Luke 22.48.  
\textsuperscript{29} Luke 24.7.  
\textsuperscript{30} Daniel 7.13. Translation: Collins 1993, 275, with commentary (304-311).  
\textsuperscript{31} 1 Enoch 48.3-6; 62.7. Translation: Nickelsburg & VanderKam 2012, 166, 254, with commentary (169-174, 264-265).
heaven;” or the statement that “this is he whom the Most High has been keeping for many ages, through whom he will deliver his creation.”32

Mark, Matthew, and Luke state nothing like this about pre-existence in their references to Jesus as the Son of Man in the narrative present. The ‘I have come’ sayings of Jesus and the statements about him having been sent don’t make his pre-existence explicit either. Angels say ‘I have come’ or are said to have come in Jewish literature, which might suggest that Jesus also comes from heaven in the synoptic gospels. But the same is true of prophets, who overall were not believed to pre-exist or come from heaven (unless they had first ascended there and were coming back down). Likewise angels are sent by God in Jewish literature, which might suggest that Jesus is also sent from heaven in the synoptic gospels. But prophets are sent by God too, without usually pre-existing or being sent from heaven (again unless they first ascend there and are then sent back down).33

Jesus and John the Baptist are a curious case in point. It seems that either both of them came from heaven, or neither of them did, since no difference between their respective advents is notable in the synoptic gospels.34 Indeed the three evangelists attest to confusion surrounding their identities. With varying degrees of clarity, Mark, Matthew, and Luke all seek to demonstrate that John the Baptist is Elijah returned, and that Jesus is neither John the Baptist

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33 On the ‘I have come’ sayings of Jesus and the statements about him having been sent, and for an argument that the angelic context is the best but not only one for interpreting them, see Gathercole 2006, 83-189. I discuss some consequences of Jesus as angel in CHAPTER THREE.
34 As Yarbro Collins & Collins (2008, 124) state of Matthew 11.18-19 / Luke 7.33-34 in particular, “The problem that this saying raises for Gathercole’s thesis is of course the necessity of attributing preexistence to John the Baptist, if such is inferred for Jesus.” And they (2008, 126) conclude that “the ‘I have come’ sayings cannot be used to argue that any of the Synoptic Gospels portrays Jesus as preexistent.”
back from the dead nor Elijah returned from heaven; he’s the Son of Man. This is most obvious when Jesus asks the disciples in Mark: “Who do people say that I am?” (Matthew: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”) The disciples respond: “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” Jesus asks them their opinion, Peter says he’s the Messiah, and Jesus then makes the first of three passion predictions about his suffering as the Son of Man.

To clear up any confusion that may linger, next Jesus goes so far as to arrange for Elijah and Moses to appear with him on the mount of transfiguration, where some of the disciples see for themselves that he’s not Elijah, and where they hear God’s voice singling him out. But if he’s not Elijah returned, who is? So the disciples wonder: “Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” And Jesus clarifies: “Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things. How then is it written about the Son of Man, that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him.” (Matthew adds: “Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist.”)

Elijah had gone to heaven on a fiery chariot, according to 2 Kings, and his return was expected already by the end of the book of Malachi along with the coming of God’s eschatological messenger: “See, I am sending my messenger (‘ מלאך, τὸν ἐγγέλλον μου) to prepare the way before me .... Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of

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35 The situation is more complex in Luke than the other two; see e.g. Brown 1977/1993, 275-279.
the Lord comes." These passages in Malachi are made to refer to John the Baptist in the synoptics.

One interpretation of John the Baptist as Elijah returned and as God’s eschatological messenger is that he was an angel sent from heaven. This is what Origen of Alexandria believed, and it’s why he quotes from the Prayer of Joseph, the only ancient author to quote from that lost text. He believes that the Baptist was an angel incarnate in the same way that the patriarch Jacob was the incarnation of the pre-existent archangel Israel, according to the Prayer of Joseph. But Origen is commenting on the Gospel of John, namely the passage about the Baptist having been “sent by God (ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ)” in the Johannine prologue, which he takes together with passages about the Baptist as Elijah returned and as God’s eschatological messenger in the synoptic gospels. In keeping with Platonism, he believes that all human souls pre-exist and so are sent “by God (ὑπὸ θεοῦ)” to be incarnated; but in a more technical sense, he believes that being sent by God is something especially reserved for “the one who visits the world for the divine ministry and service of salvation of the human race.”

It’s doubtful that the authors of the gospels of Mark or Matthew or Luke already believed this. Even when Platonic belief in the general pre-existence of souls is set aside, the interpretation hinges on identifying John the Baptist as the eschatological messenger of the book of Malachi, who must be not only a messenger but an actual angel. That would raise major

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38 Malachi 3.1; 4.5; cf. 2 Kings 2.11.
39 Malachi 3.1 is made to refer to the Baptist in Mark 1.2; Luke 1.76. Malachi 4.5 is made to refer to him in Matthew 11.14; Mark 9.11-12 / Matthew 17.10-11. On Elijah and his return, see the entry by Joynes (2010) with the titles listed there.
40 See Joynes 2005.
41 John 1.6.
43 For an argument in favor of angel, see Joynes 2005, 463-465.
issues. It might have been imagined easily enough that Elijah was angelified when he went to heaven, according to 2 Kings. How could he be (re)born as John the Baptist in the synoptic gospels though, given that angels are very rarely born as humans, and given that humans are most often not if ever reincarnated in Second Temple and early Judaism? Without being born, an angel could appear on earth as if in a human body. But John the Baptist has a body and a mother in the synoptics – indications that he’s not an angel posing as a human, then. As for human heroes such as Elijah, they might return from heaven. But they would not need to be born a second time in order to do so. Having never died, they would simply return with the (glorified) body they already had. For example, this would be the case with Ezra and the rest of the Son of Man’s companions in 4 Ezra, presumably.

Since the three evangelists don’t address these issues, I find it unlikely that they believed John the Baptist to be an angel incarnate or the very prophet Elijah returned from heaven and somehow born twice. Origen and other Christians went to lengths to clarify how he could be one or the other or both. Mark, Matthew, and Luke don’t. They probably saw him fulfilling the role of Elijah returned and of God’s eschatological messenger even though he wasn’t that prophet or an actual angel. It seems that they weren’t interested in descent from heaven or

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44 E.g. Mark 1.6 / Matthew 3.4; Luke 7.28 / Matthew 11.11 (Q). His mother and birth aren’t mentioned directly or indirectly in Mark, just as there’s no direct Markan reference to the birth of Jesus. But Mark doesn’t doubt that they were born.
46 To support her interpretation, Joynes cites M. Smith 1965.
47 Origen believed the Baptist to be an angel incarnate but apparently not the reincarnation of Elijah. Whereas in Pistis Sophia 1.7, the resurrected Jesus tells the disciples how he found Elijah’s soul in heaven and placed it inside the womb of Elisabeth to be reborn as the Baptist. This is in contrast to Justin Martyr (Dialogus cum Tryphone 49), who earlier said that John was not the very prophet returned from heaven but that God gave him the same prophetic spirit Elijah had, as was also the case with Joshua and the prophetic spirit of Moses. See also Tertullian, De anima 35.
incarnation for John the Baptist or Jesus as pre-existent beings. Among other things, what they were interested in was eschatology: the coming of the Son of Man, the (delay of the) parousia.

From a glance at the Son of Man references to Jesus in the narrative present, above, it should be obvious that the kinds of statements about the preexistence or else heavenly provenance of the one like a son of man in the book of Daniel and the Son of Man in the Parables of Enoch and 4 Ezra are missing from the synoptic gospels. So is any language of Jesus coming from heaven or being sent from heaven.

Why would such statements and language be missing? They're not missing altogether, in fact. They occur briefly, but only in Son of Man references that are in the narrative future, i.e., after the death and resurrection of Jesus. According to the triple tradition, Jesus says of this heavenly figure:

he will come “in the glory of his Father with the holy angels;”
he will come “in clouds’ with great power and glory” and “will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heaven;”
he will come “with the clouds of heaven.”

And according to Matthew alone, Jesus says of him:

he “will send his angels;”
he will come “in his glory, and all the angels with him.”

So the three evangelists are willing to make statements about the heavenly provenance of the Son of Man in the narrative future but not in the narrative present. Why?

I would argue that this is because they and their sources had to cope with the delay of the parousia. The historical Jesus predicted the coming of the Son of Man. He may have seen
himself as fulfilling the role of Elijah returned and therefore believed that he was the Son of Man’s companion of sorts, but he didn’t believe himself to be the Son of Man. It was only after he died and the awaited heavenly figure didn’t descend to earth that Jesus was identified with the Son of Man whose coming was now realized in some measure but of course not entirely. Hence the coming of the Son of Man that had been predicted by the historical Jesus was now Jesus’ own second coming, and he was a forerunner no more. That part was to be played exclusively by John the Baptist, so that Jesus could be identified with the heavenly Son of Man. Jesus could be mistaken for John the Baptist – and the confusion is still attested in the synoptic gospels – because the historical Jesus wasn’t the Son of Man. He had been a forerunner like John.

The scenario isn’t purely hypothetical. It’s plain to see that Matthew and Luke retroactively identify Jesus with the Son of Man in their use of Mark and Q. Here it is in their use of Mark:

- In Mark, Jesus asks: “Who do people say that I am?” Matthew adds a reference to Jesus as the Son of Man: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”
- Mark narrates: “It was two days before the Passover ....” Matthew turns this into a saying of Jesus with an additional reference to him as the Son of Man: “You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over ....”
- In Mark, when he’s kissed by Judas, Jesus says nothing. Luke, however, has him say: “Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?”

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53 For the historical Jesus and the role of Elijah, see the discussion in Allison, 2010, 267-270, who is ambivalent.
54 Mark 8.27.
56 Mark 14.1.
57 Matthew 26.2.
58 Mark 14.45.
• In Mark, the youth at the empty tomb says: “But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” Instead Luke’s corresponding two men say: “Remember how he told you, while he was in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over ....”

Each of these added references to Jesus as the Son of Man is in the narrative present and merely emphasizes Markan identification of him as such.

While Matthew and Luke aren’t forging a new identity for Jesus here in their use of Mark, they do that in their use of Q:

• In Q, Jesus says “Blessed are you when people hate you … on account of the Son of Man.” This passage doesn’t seem to refer to Jesus. Matthew makes it refer to him by identifying Jesus as the Son of Man: “Blessed are you when people revile you … on my account.”

• In Q, Jesus says: “And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; but whoever denies me before others will be denied before the angels of God.” This passage refers to Jesus and the Son of Man separately. Matthew identifies them: “Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.”

60 Mark 16.7.
63 Matthew 5.11
65 Matthew 10.32-33.
• In Q, Jesus says: “For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.” This passage refers to the Son of Man in the narrative future and doesn’t seem to refer to Jesus. Luke makes it refer to him by inserting a passion prediction: “But first he must endure much suffering and be rejected by this generation.”

If Matthew and Luke can add references to Jesus as the Son of Man in their use of Mark and even forge a new identity for him in their use of Q, then Mark and Q could have done the same in the use of their sources, whether written or oral. (And if the historical Jesus referred to himself in the third person as an earthly ‘son of man’ besides predicting the coming of a heavenly Son of Man, their work practically would have been done for them in places.)

Despite Mark’s identification of Jesus with the Son of Man in the narrative present, Markan references to the Son of Man in the narrative future nonetheless seem to refer to the coming of someone else. The difference between them is most apparent in this passage where Jesus says: “Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his

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68 Cf. Chilton 2002, 284-5: “Because Jesus, a son of man on earth, saw himself as paired with the Danielic Son of Man in heaven, there is a sliding scale of reference. Sometimes he thinks more of the one, at other times more of the other. This combined, poetic usage is Jesus’ own invention .... [Still] Jesus’ claim was not that he was identical with the Son of Man, but that he was intimate with the Son of Man.”
Father with the holy angels." This Markan passage parallels another in Q, quoted above. In his use of the Q passage, Matthew identifies Jesus with the Son of Man. And in his use of Mark here, Matthew makes equivalent changes so that Jesus does not seem to be referring to the Son of Man as someone else. The saying in Mark and Q is probably authentic or close to it. Mark was able to see it as a reference to Jesus, based on his general identification of Jesus with the Son of Man; following Mark, Luke was too. But Matthew was more attentive to the underlying difference between Jesus and the Son of Man and so had to change it.

Alternatively, as Rudolf Bultmann has pointed out, if the historical Jesus believed himself to be the heavenly Son of Man, it would mean that he predicted his own second coming. It would mean as well that he anticipated not only his own death but also his own resurrection and ascent to heaven, whence he expected to return at last. But all of this faces serious challenges from historical-critical study and cannot explain the fact that the predictions of the Son of Man’s suffering do not refer to his future coming, or vice-versa, except once where Luke inserts a passion prediction.

In sum, then, Jesus doesn’t pre-exist in Mark, Matthew, or Luke any more than the historical Jesus did. The historical Jesus behind the synoptic gospels and their sources was

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71 Matthew 16.27.
73 Sanders (1985, 142-146; original emphasis) draws on 1 Thessalonians 4.15-17 to suggest that Matthew 16.7 is earlier than Mark 8.38 / Luke 9.26: “It is more likely that Matthew is following another tradition here than that, reading the saying which we have in Mark 8.38, he rejected it and composed his own.” If Matthew didn’t compose his own saying, in any event he would have rejected Mark by not following him, I think. However that may be, I concur with Sanders when he goes on to state: “Paul’s expectation of the coming of the Lord ... is not his own creation, but was doubtless held in common with other Christians. The early teachers and apostles changed the expectation of the Son of man coming with his angels to the return of the Lord, just as in the synoptic tradition they identified the Son of man with Jesus; but the general expectation probably goes back to Jesus.”
among other things (e.g. exorcist and healer) an apocalyptic prophet who came and was sent, it could be said, but who didn’t come from heaven (unless he had first ascended there). A forerunner like John the Baptist, he predicted the Son of Man’s coming. It was this Son of Man, not Jesus, who was believed to be a pre-existent figure or at least one with a heavenly provenance. When the parousia didn’t happen, the three evangelists and their sources identified Jesus as this heavenly Son of Man. They did so in response to a failed eschatology. The synoptic gospels weren’t written with the assumption of Jesus’ pre-existence. Mark, Matthew, and Luke weren’t interested in Christ incarnate as a pre-existent being. They could have been; the idea of Jesus’ pre-existence was already developed, as attested in Paul. But they weren’t interested. If they had been, they would have made statements about the heavenly provenance of the Son of Man in the narrative present as well as the narrative future.

MATTHEW AND LUKE INTRODUCE VIRGIN BIRTH
I have argued that Jesus doesn’t pre-exist in the synoptics, not even implicitly. If I’m wrong, and he does pre-exist there implicitly, my overall thesis would only need some modification: instead of Ignatius being the first to harmonize the two separate ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth, Matthew and Luke may have preceded him by a few decades. In that case, though, harmonization would barely have been underway at the time that they were writing.

Suppose that Mark did assume the idea of Jesus’ pre-existence. That would not imply incarnation of the pre-existent Jesus through virgin birth in Mark, since parthenogenesis isn’t mentioned there. It might imply his incarnation as a pre-existent being through birth, since Jesus’ mother is mentioned a few times. But there isn’t a single direct reference to Jesus’ birth, let

\[75\] Mark 3.31-35; 6.3; perhaps also 15.40, 47; 16.1. Discussion in Brown et al. 1978, 51-72.
alone is there a Markan infancy narrative; it’s not that Mark doubted Jesus’ birth, just that he didn’t consider it to be significant, or maybe he preferred not to mention it for some reason. Instead the gospel opens with a descent of the Spirit, as Jesus sees “the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending (καταβαίνον) like a dove into him (εἰς αὐτὸν).” This could more easily imply incarnation of the pre-existent Jesus at baptism and did indeed imply it for at least some of Mark’s readers in the second century.

Even if Mark assumed the idea of Jesus’ pre-existence, and even if Matthew and Luke assumed it in turn, they then would have had to shift any hypothetical Markan incarnation of him as a pre-existent being from his baptism to Mary’s pregnancy in order for there to be incarnation of the pre-existent Jesus through parthenogenesis in these New Testament texts. And Matthew and Luke aren’t that far along. They don’t shift the moment of his incarnation as a pre-existent being because he doesn’t pre-exist there, I would argue. What they do, rather, is introduce the idea of his virgin birth and slightly shift the moment of inspiration from baptism to conception and birth. In Matthew, the unborn Jesus “is from the Holy Spirit (ἐκ πνεύματός ἐστιν ἄγιον).” While in Luke, Gabriel tells the-soon-to-be-mother Mary that “the Holy Spirit will come upon you (πνεύμα ἄγιον ἐπελεύσεται ἐπὶ σέ).” At Jesus’ baptism, both Matthew and Luke keep the descent of the Spirit. But it descends “upon him (ἐπ’ αὐτόν)” instead of the Markan prepositional phrase “into him (εἰς αὐτόν).” Thus the activity of the Spirit is almost equally distributed between Mary’s pregnancy and Jesus’ baptism.

The shift from baptism to conception and birth isn’t complete in Matthew and Luke, nor is it a shift in the moment of the pre-existent Jesus’ incarnation; it’s a shift in the moment of

76 Mark 1.10.
77 Matthew 1.20.
78 Luke 1.35.
inspiration or possession by the Spirit. It only became a shift in incarnation later when proto-orthodox Christians like Justin Martyr completed it, as I will discuss below. For them, the shift had to be completed so that Jesus could pre-exist from birth. Otherwise it might be understood that the Spirit’s descent at baptism was the descent and incarnation of a pre-existent or heavenly Christ, leaving Jesus a mere human before possession and liable to be abandoned by the heavenly being that possessed him. For Matthew and Luke, Jesus doesn’t pre-exist, and they don’t contend with such an understanding of baptismal incarnation. They simply redistribute the activity of the Spirit enough to cover Jesus’ birth, which turns out to be virgin birth.

By introducing the idea of virgin birth, Matthew and Luke (and their sources) introduced several problems. How was it that Jesus could still be born from the seed of David without a father? How did Mary conceive? And, if Jesus’ pre-existence is assumed, how did he enter her womb? Matthew and Luke seem to have been aware only of the basic problem of conception. As it is, given this problem alone and the fact that Mark doesn’t feature an infancy narrative much less parthenogenesis, it must be asked: Why virgin birth?

Scholars are unsure as to why the idea of Jesus’ parthenogenesis was developed. Scholars are also unsure as to why the idea of his pre-existence was developed, though there’s academic consensus that it was developed early if not ubiquitously. But the one idea demands an explanation more than the other, since virgin births were virtually unknown in Second Temple and early Judaism; whereas several divine mediator figures before Jesus could be said to pre-exist, none of which were incarnated through parthenogenesis, however. Why virgin birth then?

While scholars are unsure, a number of potential explanations have been put forward. They range from acceptance of Jesus’ parthenogenesis as simple fact; to the possibility of an

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80 See Chester 2011.
early pregnancy or even adultery or rape; to translation and interpretation of Isaiah 7.14 by Greek speaking Jews; to the influence of Jewish tradition about the miraculous or otherwise unusual births of Noah or Moses, for example; to the influence of pagan myths about the nativities of demi-gods, founders and rulers of the state, plus some philosophers. No single explanation has to be sufficient, and rarely have they been deployed strictly individually. To complicate things as well, the matter of why the idea was developed brings with it the matter of when it was developed. Most scholars see virgin birth in both Matthew and Luke, though others see it only in one of them, and a few see it being developed in the second century after Matthew and Luke were written.\(^\text{81}\)

Granted that Matthew and Luke were writing with different objectives, independently it seems, and likely using some source or another, I take the infancy narrative in Matthew to be the jumping-off point. Matthew tells the story of Mary’s early pregnancy. It may not go back to the historical Jesus and his immediate contemporaries, but I see no good reason for Matthew to have invented it. Mary’s early pregnancy was already being reported when the evangelist set out to write. Apparently he was unable to ignore or deny it, so he tried to account for it as part of God’s plan. He placed four women of questionable standing in Jesus’ genealogy as a kind of precedent for the report, questionable, that is, from the viewpoint of patriarchal society; he had an angel

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declare to Joseph that Mary’s unborn child was “from the Holy Spirit,” thereby seeking to redirect the report; and he was able to read Isaiah as prophesying of this new virgin birth.\textsuperscript{82}

In Matthew’s patrilineal genealogy of Jesus the four women are more noticeable than the men, of course, and their stories aren’t without significance for Mary. But there are also the four men. What might their stories mean for Joseph? The pattern seems to be: male progenitors of Jesus had sex with a woman they weren’t married to (but were later). Judah propositioned his daughter-in-law Tamar, she conceived, and there were never married. Boaz slept with Ruth and married her afterwards. David exploited his authority as king so that he could have sex with Bathsheba, impregnated her, then he had her husband killed and married her. The only story that doesn’t fit the pattern is the story of Salmon and Rahab, which is unknown.\textsuperscript{83} If Joseph and Mary are to be included within this pattern, the minimum suggestion would be that he had sex with her before they were married. The pattern fits him better than it does her in that like Judah, Boaz, and David, he was probably not a young man at Mary’s pregnancy since he seems to have died by the time of Jesus’ prophetic career and execution; whereas odds are she would have been a teenager when she met Joseph and rather inexperienced sexually, unlike Tamar who was widowed twice, Rahab who was a sex worker, Ruth who was also a widow, and Bathsheba who was married to Uriah when David forced himself on her.

\textsuperscript{82} Matthew 1.1-25. Regarding Jewish translation and interpretation of the Isaianic prophecy before Matthew, Brown (1977/1993, 148) cautions scholars not to “jump to the conclusion that he,” that is, the Septuagint translator of Isaiah 7.14, “was speaking of a virginal conception of the Messiah,” and Brown (1977/1993, 148) further notes: “[t]here is no evidence that the presence of parthenos in the LXX gave rise in Alexandrian Jewry to an expectation of the virginal conception of the Messiah.” See also Brown 1977/1993, 523-524.

\textsuperscript{83} Genesis 38; Ruth 3-4; 2 Samuel 11-12; cf. Joshua 2; 6.17, 25. Discussion in e.g. Schaberg 1987, 20-34, who states: “The inclusion of Rahab … cannot be fully explained from the traditions now available to us. The statement that Boaz was her child by Salmon and that she was an ancestress of David … has no support in the Old Testament or elsewhere, and it is strange since the biblical Rahab lived at the time of the conquest, nearly two hundred years before Boaz.”
The Matthean genealogy could easily set the stage for Joseph’s fatherhood and Mary’s (relative) blamelessness or even positive esteem. In the biblical accounts, after his initial condemnation of Tamar, Judah declares that “she is more in the right (צָָֽדְְקָָ֣ה, δεδικαίωται) than I,” or simply more “righteous;” when Ruth approaches Boaz, he tells her that “all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman (חַַ֖י ל א ֵ֥שֶׁת, γυν ι δυναμεως),” or perhaps better “a woman of power;” and following David’s acts of adultery and murder, he’s condemned by the prophet Nathan, in androcentric terms to be sure.\(^84\) At worst, out of self-preservation Tamar was calculating in her encounter with Judah, and Ruth was forward with Boaz, while Bathsheba was David’s victim. Rahab was indeed known as a prostitute, but since the story of her union with Salmon is unknown as well as anachronistic, it could be that Matthew placed her in the genealogy of Jesus because he wanted to transfer some blame from Joseph to Mary.

If the pre-gospel report had Joseph acting inappropriately, i.e., with respect to Mary’s father or else her oldest brother, Matthew comes to his defense. As the evangelist tells the story, Joseph didn’t impregnate her but is righteous: “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together (πρὶν ἦ συνελθεῖν αὐτούς), she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, because he was righteous (δίκαιος ὄν) and because he was not willing (καὶ μὴ θέλων) to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.”\(^85\)

Two reasons are given here for Joseph wanting to divorce Mary, and arguably only one of them has to do with it being private. The first is because he was righteous (δίκαιος ὄν), and the second is because he wasn’t willing (καὶ μὴ θέλων) to shame her. Unless these two circumstantial

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\(^84\) Genesis 38.26; Ruth 3.11; 2 Samuel 12.1-15.
\(^85\) Matthew 1.18-19.
participial phrases are semi-redundant and contradictory, the first about Joseph’s righteousness would most naturally have to do with the claim that he wasn’t the father of Mary’s child. If he was, he could not have broken off their engagement, assuming they were betrothed. Jewish law would have stipulated that he marry her. Legally it would have been equivalent to the ruling in Deuteronomy: “If a man meets a virgin who is not engaged [to another man], and seizes her and lies with her, and they are caught in the act, the man who lay with her shall give fifty shekels of silver to the young woman’s father, and she shall become his wife. Because he violated her he shall not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives.” 86 According to Matthew, Joseph is righteous, meaning he didn’t violate Mary, and so he’s permitted to divorce her; along with being righteous, he also is not willing to shame her (as Matthew knows that she has done nothing wrong?). The evangelist is saying that Joseph first of all has the option of divorce, therefore, and second that it will be private. 87

Matthew goes out of his way to clarify that Joseph didn’t have sex with Mary before her pregnancy or even after that until Jesus was born. The evangelist isn’t referring to perpetual virginity but seems to be overreacting to a report that Jesus was fathered by Joseph while he and Mary were betrothed or even prior to that. 88 Joseph’s personal accusation against her and her

86 Deuteronomy 22.28. For discussion of other Deuteronomic rulings as well as further possibilities in the kind of legal situation Matthew puts Joseph and Mary in, see e.g. Schaberg 1987, 42-62.
87 This understanding of the righteousness of Joseph would preclude the added ‘yet’ in France’s (2007, 46, 51) translation: “Joseph her husband, because he was a righteous man and yet did not want to expose her to scandal, came to the conclusion that he should break the engagement privately,” as though righteous here refers to a man that would be willing to shame his unfaithful fiancée. I am arguing that it could just as easily if not more so refer to a man that has not had sex with her himself before their marriage.
88 Note that in none of the stories of the four women and men from the Matthean genealogy is there any betrothal during which, generally speaking, early pregnancy could have been relatively less scandalous. Again the pattern seems to be that the male progenitor of Jesus has sex with a
supposed illegitimate child with another man could be part of a Matthean agenda to exculpate him, then, and should not be considered factual right away. 89

I see no good reason for Matthew to have invented the story of early pregnancy, but the evangelist may well have invented or at least reinforced the accusation of illegitimacy as an alternative to a report of Joseph’s inappropriate act. In the genealogy, Matthew would appear to be establishing as a fallback the conciliatory position that even if Joseph did have sex with a woman he wasn’t married to, there were already two or three precedents for this in the Davidic family, Judah, Boaz (depending on how the story is read), and David himself. The evangelist’s

woman he’s not married to (but is later). She might be a relative, another man’s wife, a widow; however, in no case – before Matthew gets to Mary and Joseph – was she betrothed to him. 89 In Lincoln’s (2013, 81) treatment of the Matthean infancy narrative, he refers to David’s adultery with Bathsheba as “an act of rape, since she was powerless to resist the demands of the monarch,” but Lincoln (2013, 152) thinks it’s “unlikely ... that Joseph and Mary had intercourse before they actually lived together,” as though Mary would have had altogether much more power to resist Joseph if Joseph didn’t want to wait for their marriage. Lincoln (2013, 152) also thinks it’s unlikely “that it was the resulting early pregnancy that gave rise to the rumours that Joseph was not the father.” He reasons: “Again, under the normal conventions of the time, Joseph’s public acceptance of the child as his own should have been sufficient not only to give Jesus legal status but also to stop any rumours about paternity.” I agree with Lincoln that in the New Testament gospels there’s an overall lack of evidence for Jesus being treated as mamzer, but I am not so sure about the rumors. Whether acceptance by Joseph should have stopped them, the fact is that the rumors continued into the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth centuries, and in Jewish circles from Celsus’ informant to rabbinic material and the Toledot Yeshu. “In any case,” Lincoln (2013, 152) goes on, “if it was this sort of scandal – that intercourse had taken place at too early a stage in the betrothal – that lay behind the Matthean tradition, it would have been much more straightforward to have an angelic announcement to Joseph that this was nonetheless under the providence of God and ‘from the holy Spirit’ than to tell a story in which Joseph is not the father at all.” That’s reasonable enough, though it seems to me to beg the question of why virgin birth. Some Christians in the second century were apparently able to ignore reports of early pregnancy while believing that Joseph was Jesus’ biological father, and other New Testament authors like Mark or John may have been able to ignore them too, if any reports of the kind reached them. But Matthew and Luke were not. Their Jesus couldn’t be so mundane in this way. Despite the stories of Judah and Tamar, maybe Boaz and Ruth, but certainly David and Bathsheba referenced in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus, the evangelist could not admit that the Messiah had been conceived before his parents were married. And as for the Lukan Jesus, who had to outdo the Baptist even in birth, such an admission would not have been possible without inventing a story for Zechariah and Elisabeth that was worse than early pregnancy.
primary line of defense, however, is not to admit any such report. Matthew denies it, while
calling that Joseph and Mary were betrothed: unlike Joseph’s Davidic predecessors, he didn’t
have sex with a woman he wasn’t married to, nor did he during their betrothal or her first
pregnancy. The evangelist can’t deny early pregnancy altogether, though, which is why Mary is
supposed to have been promiscuous, like Rahab perhaps. Matthew doesn’t want her to be an
adulteress much less a prostitute nor does he want her child to be illegitimate – the angel and the
Isaianic prophecy are proof of that – but the evangelist himself temporarily participates in the
shaming of Mary in order to divert attention from Joseph.

The particulars of the pre-gospel report, in the end, may have been no more than that
Mary was pregnant before she and Joseph were married. But if he was the father, it would make
sense of the references to him as such in Matthew and Luke, despite their claim that he was not
Jesus’ biological parent, as well as the references to him as Jesus’ father in the Gospel of John.90
It would also make sense of the multiple attestations of Jesus’ Davidic lineage.91 Joseph was the
father, and Mary’s pregnancy was early, which resulted in talk of illegitimacy, in particular
following the Matthean assertion of virgin birth. Hence Celsus, rabbinic material, and ultimately
the anti-gospel Toledot Yeshu.92

90 John 1.45; 6.42.
91 Discussion of Jesus as Davidid in e.g. Brown 1977/1993, 505-512; Meier 1991, 216-219;
discussion of Jesus as Davidid and son of Joseph in particular in Lincoln 2013, 26-33, 69-74,
118-124, 160-163.
92 Early pregnancy between betrothal and marriage, with Joseph as the father: Chilton 2000, 3-
22, though he refers to Jesus as mamzer and doesn’t see virgin birth in Matthew or Luke, it
would appear. Joseph as the father: Lincoln 2013, though he doesn’t think Joseph had sex with
Mary between betrothal and marriage, while he refers nonetheless to a tradition of illegitimacy,
being uncertain whether it goes as far back as Matthew. Cf. also Crossan 2005 as well as Borg &
Crossan 2007, 81-127, though they stress the influence of Moses’ legendary birth and argue for a
Matthean invention of early pregnancy; also Miller 2003, though he argues that Mary was
plausibly raped by a Roman soldier; also Freed 2001, though he seems to argue that Mary
‘misbehaved’ (according to the report only?), and he’s not confident about virgin birth in Luke;
Jewish literature and tradition about miraculous or otherwise unusual births is clearly at
play in the infancy narratives. And pagan myths probably are too. Above all, however, is this
story Matthew tells about early pregnancy, which cannot be reduced to literary influence or
device. In Luke, the story is less pronounced. The angel is sent to Mary rather than Joseph,
before not after she’s pregnant. But Mary’s pregnancy is early nonetheless: she’s only betrothed
at the time of the annunciation, and she informs the angel that she’s not having sex with Joseph
or another man (ἄνδρα οὐ γινώσκω); the angel says that she will have a son anyhow.93 It’s true
that the Lukan Jesus must surpass John the Baptist, even at birth, and so if the Baptist is born
miraculously, the birth of Jesus will be more incredible.94 Luke could have written a virgin birth
story for Jesus, though, without including the embarrassing circumstance of Mary’s early
pregnancy in the company of Joseph; he could have claimed that Mary became pregnant as a
virgin before she ever met Joseph.

It might seem to be less embarrassing if the mother of the Messiah is at least betrothed
when pregnant. But in the case of parthenogenesis, the further she is from a man and marriage,

also Lüdemann 1998, though he argues that Mary was presumably raped by a man other than
Joseph; also Spong 1992, though he argues the pregnancy was illegitimate and thinks the idea of
virgin birth was common in the ancient Mediterranean world; also Schaberg 1987, though she
sees illegitimacy in Matthew and Luke and doesn’t see virgin birth in either gospel. In arguing
for early pregnancy, with Joseph as the father, I don’t think it’s safe to say, as Chilton (2000, 6)
does, that “the attraction between Joseph and Mary must have been immediate.” And regarding
the issue of whether Mary was raped by a man other than Joseph, which I consider to be less
likely than what I am arguing but which of course is not impossible, in any event it seems to me
to be quite morbid to say, as does Miller (2003, 222), that “Jesus’ illegitimacy [is] theologically
appealing” and “just ‘too perfect’ theologically,” as though the violence to Mary and her son
Jesus at her conception of him and then at his death would make nice gospel bookends. About
female adultery or promiscuity, I think Lüdemann (1998, 77-78) has it right: “[T]he Jewish
patriarchal structure of Mary’s family and her presumed age at the time of marriage ... hardly
make a sexual adventure probable;” so too Lincoln (2013, 158): “Talk of a love affair or a
seduction to which Mary responded is the product of modern romantic imagination.”

the more likely the mother to be a virgin. Pregnancy during betrothal is embarrassing because Joseph is not distant and would be the first suspected father. As with Matthew, so with Luke: I don’t think he would invent such a story. Apparently a report of early pregnancy had reached Luke as well as Matthew, prompting him to defend against it. Luke defended against the report with a claim of parthenogenesis, which also served the purpose of elevating Jesus over the Baptist and his own miraculous birth.

The Lukan angel’s appearance to Mary before her pregnancy is intriguing when read against the legendary background of angelic paternity or suspected paternity. Besides the fallen angels of Genesis 6, there’s the story of Noah’s birth according to certain Jewish tradition. In the *Genesis Apocryphon* from the area around the Dead Sea, the newborn Noah’s father Lamech fears his superhuman look and suspects that “the conception was from the Watchers, and the seed from the Holy Ones.” Noah’s mother Batenosh reassures Lamech that the child is “not from any stranger, nor from any of the Watchers, nor from any of the Sons of Hea[ven].” But Lamech persists in his suspicion and asks his own father Methuselah to ask his hero grandfather Enoch, who then tells Methuselah to tell Lamech: “[The chi][d is t][r][u]ly from you [and ]n[ot] from the sons[ of Heaven].”

In *1 Enoch*, there’s a very similar story except that it’s narrated by the antediluvian hero instead of Lamech and without the reassurance of Batenosh. Since Luke has the angel appear to Mary rather than Joseph, before not after she’s pregnant, it could invoke such legends of angelic paternity or suspected paternity. Indeed it did invoke such legends for those early Christians who harmonized the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke in the *Proto-Gospel of James*. There, after the announcement has been made,

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as in Luke, Joseph hesitates to expose Mary for fear that “the child in her is angelic (ἀγγελικόν),
and I may be handing innocent blood over to a death sentence. What then shall I do with her? I
will secretly divorce her,” he concludes, as in Matthew, and the angel then appears to him. In
this text it’s not openly suggested that Gabriel fathered Jesus at the annunciation. Joseph suspects
a diabolic angel, not the angel of the Lord who appeared to Mary and would then appear to him.
But the Proto-Gospel of James is inclined to a suggestion of that sort, as I will argue
momentarily when I take up the problem of how Mary conceived, along with the idea of aural
conception. And further below I’ll argue that Justin Martyr and the author of the Letter of the
Apostles are anticipating and responding to a suggestion that the angel impregnated Mary as he
made the announcement to her. In later creative Christian commentary on the annunciation,
Gabriel is described metaphorically as the father, even as specifically as the sower of the seed.

Whether the appearance of the angel to Mary was Luke’s addition or already featured in
his source, I don’t think that any pre-gospel report of her early pregnancy included suspicion of
angelic paternity. There’s little if anything in Luke or Matthew to suggest this, though it may
not have been long after the Gospel of Luke started to circulate that Gabriel became suspect.

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98 Creative and not infrequently troubling Christian commentary, it should be noted.
99 Welburn (2008, 109-110) thinks so as he reads Matthew 1.20 against the background of
Noah’s legendary birth in the Genesis Apocryphon and 1 Enoch (the legend itself having an
Iranian myth behind it, he argues), along with the Proto-Gospel of James: “I would say the story
that Jesus was thought to be an angelic offspring is ... part of an original story, surviving in
apocryphal form though suppressed and reinterpreted in the canonical account.”
100 It will remain interesting that Luke has the angel appear to Mary before her pregnancy, unlike
Matthew who has the angel appear to the would-be father after Mary is pregnant. Luke could
have had the angel appear to the father, as he has it in the case of John the Baptist (appearance to
Zechariah before Elisabeth’s pregnancy). So why the appearance to the mother? If it was already
featured in Luke’s source, which he decided not to change, and if Matthew’s source was similar
to Luke’s, it could be speculated that Matthew decided to change it and thereby halt suspicions
of angelic paternity: since the Matthean angel appears to Joseph rather than Mary, after not
before she is pregnant, he cannot be the father. But that would be highly speculative. And again,
The legend of Noah’s birth and suspected angelic paternity does offer some parallels to the infancy narratives. It’s not at all the same as Luke or Matthew, however, in that Batenosh isn’t said to have conceived as a virgin, Lamech’s paternity isn’t denied but on the contrary affirmed even in the face of his suspicion, and there’s no report of early pregnancy before marriage. The legends of Moses’ birth (no suspected angelic paternity here) also offer some parallels, particularly to the Matthean infancy narrative.\textsuperscript{101} They’re also not at all the same, however, in that Moses’ mother Jochebed doesn’t conceive as a virgin, his father Amram’s paternity isn’t denied, and there’s no report of early pregnancy before marriage. The possibility of divorce is featured in the legends, but it has nothing to do with early pregnancy; when Pharaoh decrees the death of Hebrew male babies, the Israelite men consider abstaining from sex with their wives, even divorcing them.\textsuperscript{102}

As influential as Jewish tradition about miraculous or otherwise unusual births was on the infancy narratives, the idea of Jesus’ parthenogenesis wasn’t developed due to this influence.

\textsuperscript{101} See e.g. Aus 2004; Crossan 2005, 40-53; Borg & Crossan 2007, 105-110.

\textsuperscript{102} Crossan (2005, 53) thinks that Matthew “needed to create some paternal hesitation;” or as he and Borg (2007, 110) put it, “Matthew needed to create the suspicion of adultery in order to provide a reason for Joseph to seek a divorce,” as a parallel to Moses’ father in some versions of the legend. I don’t think Matthew would invent the embarrassing story of Mary’s early pregnancy for literary purposes. If he were going to invent a parallel story, why not invent one in which Herod or the emperor decrees the death of Jewish male babies before Jesus’ birth, thus causing Joseph to consider abstaining from sex with his wife Mary, even divorcing her. No suspicion of adultery and no virgin birth would have been needed. What is more, the embarrassing story of early pregnancy before marriage or at least during betrothal is found in Luke as well as Matthew. If Matthew created the suspicion of adultery, I think he did so in order to deny the suspicion that Joseph had sex with Mary before their marriage. Aus points to versions of the legend that have Moses born early. This likely followed from the Israelite plan to conceal any pregnancies from the Egyptians, however, and at any rate it has nothing to do with early pregnancy before marriage nor does it have anything to do with illegitimacy. As Aus (2004, 51) himself states: “nowhere in Judaic tradition on Amram and Jochebed’s marital relationship does a doubt arise on the part of Amram in regard to Jochebed’s fidelity.”
Nor due to the influence of pagan myths alone. Arguably the idea of his virgin birth was developed first of all and in large part because of reports of Mary’s early pregnancy. Matthew and Luke could have presented Jesus as the new Noah or Moses, for example, or the son of a god and rightful ruler of the (Roman) world without claiming that Mary conceived him as a virgin, and without claiming that it was before marriage. Reports of her early pregnancy, historically accurate or not, had to be addressed. Whatever the situation with Paul and Mark, and later John, as far as Matthew and Luke were concerned the reports couldn’t be ignored or denied. Each evangelist in his infancy narrative preferred not to admit Joseph and Mary’s intercourse, however. So for their own reasons and in keeping with their other respective goals (e.g. demonstrating Jesus’ superiority to the Baptist already at birth), Matthew and Luke claimed parthenogenesis instead.

Somewhat ironically, these Matthean and Lukan claims of virgin birth enabled further and unfounded reports. On the one hand, from Joseph’s judgment of Mary as an adulteress in Matthew came reports of illegitimacy in Celsus, rabbinic material, and the Toledoth Yeshu. On the other hand, from Gabriel’s appearance to Mary in Luke came suspicions that Jesus’ father was an angel.

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103 Claims of virgin birth would actually get in the way of divine sonship in the majority of pagan contexts, and Matthew especially doesn’t suggest that God somehow fathered Jesus after the manner of Zeus or Apollo. His claim isn’t sex with deity (via the Spirit); it’s no sex at all: a virgin will conceive. In Luke the claim is no sex with any man. That it includes no sex with a god is less clear, but most probable.

104 It’s worth noting that elsewhere, in Matthew 19.10-12, the evangelist seems to privilege asceticism over sex after divorce at the least if not also over sex in marriage. This further indicates to me that he would have been too punctilious to ignore a report of sex before marriage.
SOLVING PROBLEMS INTRODUCED WITH VIRGIN BIRTH:

THE PROTO-GOSPEL OF JAMES

When Matthew and Luke (and their sources) introduced the idea of virgin birth, they introduced three problems, as I pointed out. First, they introduced the problem of how it was that Jesus could still be born from the seed of David without a father. This was a problem for early Christians whether they believed in Jesus’ pre-existence or not. It was solved by rerouting Jesus’ genealogy matrilineally and placing Mary in the Davidic line. Second, Matthew and Luke introduced the problem of how Mary conceived if not vaginally. This was also a problem for early Christians whether they believed in Jesus’ pre-existence or not. It was solved by an imaginative reading of the Lukan annunciation and the strange idea that Mary conceived aurally as she listened to Gabriel speak the word of God to her. The solution to this second problem could double as a solution to the third problem also, namely how the pre-existent Jesus entered the virgin Mary’s womb, assuming that he pre-existed: he entered her ear as God’s Word, the divine Logos. But the second and third problems with their solutions ought to be kept apart depending on whether Jesus pre-exists or not in this or that early Christian text.

The Proto-Gospel of James addresses the first and second problems. It doesn’t address the problem of how the pre-existent Jesus entered the womb of the virgin Mary, however, because Jesus doesn’t pre-exist in this text. It harmonizes the Matthean and Lukan infancy narratives. It doesn’t harmonize Matthew and Luke with the Gospel of John; it doesn’t harmonize the separate ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth, even though it was written in the mid to late second century while other Christians were indeed harmonizing them.
The first problem is addressed in the text as the adolescent Mary is identified among “the undefiled virgins from the tribe of David (ἀπὸ τῆς φυλῆς τοῦ Δαυίδ).” So Jesus’ mother herself is supposed to be a Davidid. The second problem is addressed as the Lukan angel tells her: “Do not fear, Mary. For you have found favor before the Master of all. You will conceive from his word (ἐκ λόγου αὐτοῦ).” Thus she will conceive aurally. In modern editions of the *Proto-Gospel of James*, it has been standard practice to capitalize logos here, as the Johannine Word would be. But there are limited potential allusions to the Gospel of John in the text, and allusion to the prologue isn’t one of them. I don’t think the text alludes to John at all, and anyhow there’s no Logos theology to be found in it. Jesus doesn’t pre-exist in the *Proto-Gospel of James* either as the divine Word or another mediator figure.

It’s only in later rewritings of this text that the Gospel of John is harmonized along with Matthew and Luke. After the *Proto-Gospel of James* was written in the mid to late second century, the text was then rewritten over hundreds of years. In the *Armenian Infancy Gospel* translated from Syriac perhaps in the sixth century, the text’s harmonization of the Matthean and Lukan infancy narratives is expanded to include the Johannine prologue. By way of preface to the annunciation, it is narrated that “the Word of God was to come and take body from the immaculate and undefiled holy Virgin, and in a body appear as a man wandering on earth.”

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107 In their edition, Ehrman and Pleše (2011, 41 n.1, 63 n.31) list two potential Johannine allusions: John 4.34 and John 20.25.
from the will of man [John 1.13].” She marvels: “To envelop the deity whom heaven and earth cannot contain; nor could the full ranks of the heavenly hosts, the bodiless, spiritual, and fiery beings dare to look upon or behold his glory!” And she wants to know “how it will happen to me, and at what time it will occur.” Gabriel replies with a rewriting of Luke that harmonizes the idea of Jesus’ virgin birth and the idea of his pre-existence: “The Holy Spirit shall come upon you and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you [Luke 1.35], and God the Word shall become embodied in you [cf. John 1.14], and you shall give birth to the Son of the Father Most High [cf. Luke 1.35].” Once Gabriel finishes making the announcement to Mary, it’s narrated that “as the holy Virgin consented, God the Word penetrated through her ear. And her thoughts of a carnal, deadly nature were cleansed .... And she became a holy and undefiled temple and dwelling place for his divinity.”

But the Greek text of the Proto-Gospel of James stemming from the mid to late second century doesn’t feature the Johannine Word, nor do the Armenian versions of the Greek text. Jesus’ pre-existence had to be added to the text as it was rewritten in the Armenian Infancy Gospel. In the Proto-Gospel of James itself, Jesus doesn’t pre-exist, and the separate ideas of his pre-existence and virgin birth aren’t harmonized. It only addresses the problem of how he could still be born from the seed of David without a father and the problem of how the virgin Mary conceived him; it doesn’t address the third problem of how the pre-existence Jesus entered the womb of the virgin Mary. In the text, she conceives aurally, from the word of God spoken to her by the angel Gabriel. While there’s no idea of aural conception in Luke, this word of God

112 For the Armenian versions of the Protevangelium Jaboci apart from the Armenian Infancy Gospel, see Terian 2008, especially 150-170.
appears already in the third gospel. At the angel’s greeting, Mary is “much perplexed by the
word (ἐπὶ τῷ λόγῳ)” that he spoke (εἶπεν) to her. Gabriel speaks (εἶπεν ... εἶπεν) to her again,
telling her that “no saying (πᾶν ῥῆμα) will be impossible with God,” and Luke has her agree: “let
it be with me according to your saying (κατὰ τὸ ῥῆμά σου).” Logos would not be capitalized in
Luke, and it should not be capitalized here in the *Proto-Gospel of James*; it’s not the pre-existent
Word. The early Christian author of this text believed in Jesus’ virgin birth without believing in
his pre-existence, just as the authors of Matthew and Luke before him, whose infancy narratives
he harmonizes.

What differentiates the *Proto-Gospel of James* from Matthew and Luke besides its
harmonization of their infancy narratives is not the idea of Jesus’ pre-existence, then, which is
not there, but the creative idea of aural conception. This gospel’s Gabriel more than hints at aural
conception when he tells Mary she will conceive from God’s word (ἐκ λόγου αὐτοῦ). She
inquires: “Am I to conceive from (ἀπὸ) the living Lord God and give birth like every other
woman?” Gabriel says no, nearly quoting Luke on the power of God that will overshadow her.
And as in Luke, she agrees: “let it be with me according to your saying (κατὰ τὸ ῥῆμά σου).”

There’s another clue that conception from the word of God happens at the same time
Gabriel speaks it to her: Mary weaves during the annunciation, with the loom symbolizing the
uterus, and the fabric or clothing symbolizing the (embryonic) body, per widespread textile
metaphors. The metaphor of speech as begetting, listening as conception, and the weaving
metaphor reinforce one another.

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115 See e.g. Constas 2003, 273-358, especially 325-328 on the *Protevangelium Jacobi*. 
All of this would add up to a suggestion of angelic fatherhood. Gabriel is there when Mary conceives, she conceives from the word of God, and the angel is the one who speaks the word into her ear. Yet the *Proto-Gospel of James* doesn’t openly suggest even metaphorically that Gabriel begot Jesus. It’s a diabolic angel that Joseph suspects, not the angel of the Lord who appeared to Mary and would then appear to him. Joseph finds out about Mary’s pregnancy and says: “Who has done this wicked deed in my home and defiled the virgin? Has not the entire history of Adam been summed up in me? For just as Adam was singing praise to God, when the serpent came and found Eve alone and led her astray, so too has this now happened to me.” From his saying, it’s clear that the father he suspects is an evil angel, as Joseph goes on to say “I am afraid that the child in her is angelic (ἀγγελικόν).”\(^\text{116}\) In Jewish interpretation of the garden story, the snake could be an angel who impregnated Eve, much as the fallen angels of Genesis 6. Joseph suspects that it has happened again.

So there’s some tension in the text. While the idea of aural conception from the word of God spoken by Gabriel solves the problem of how Mary conceived, it also facilitates unwelcomed misunderstanding about angelic paternity. The tension is diffused as Joseph erroneously suspects a repeat of the garden story in which an evil angel seduces Mary like Eve was seduced by the snake. Readers of the text may well have suspected the same thing from the idea of aural conception since metaphorically it has Gabriel impregnating Mary by his speech. The author of the *Proto-Gospel of James* seems to be cognizant of this and seeks to correct any misunderstanding. Joseph’s suspicions of angelic paternity are mistaken because he and the literalist reader suspects a diabolic angel, and because he suspects vaginal conception, when what happened according to the text is that Mary conceived aurally from the word of God. The

word was spoken by an angel. It was spoken by Gabriel the angel of the Lord, however, who didn’t have sex with Mary in any actual way.

AVOIDING VIRGIN BIRTH AND ITS PROBLEMS:

SOME EBIONITES

Given the problems introduced with the idea of Jesus’ parthenogenesis as well as the misunderstanding of angelic paternity that was bound to follow from the Lukan appearance of Gabriel to Mary and the creative idea of aural conception, it’s small wonder that some believers in Jesus didn’t believe in his virgin birth. This includes those who believed in his pre-existence and those who did not.

Among those who believed in neither a pre-existent Jesus nor parthenogenesis are Justin’s Christian Jews, already discussed above, and the Ebionites marginalized later on towards the end of the second century in Irenaeus’ heresiological account.\footnote{For the Ebionites altogether, see e.g. Klijn & Reinink 1973, 19-43; Häkkinen 2005; Skarsaune 2007a; Luomanen 2007; Broadhead 2010, 188-203; Mimouni 2012, 220-247; Luomanen 2012, especially 17-49.} “They use the Gospel according to Matthew only and repudiate the apostle Paul, saying that he was an apostate from the Law,” Irenaeus says.\footnote{\textit{Adversus haereses} 1.26.2. Text and translation: Klijn & Reinink 1973, 104-105. Cf. \textit{Adversus haereses} 3.11.7.} So without John or Paul, their christology wouldn’t have featured a Johannine or Pauline pre-existent Jesus. And despite their use of Matthew, they didn’t believe in Jesus’ virgin birth either. Again, according to Irenaeus, on their reading of Isaiah, Mary was “a young woman (\textit{adolescentula})” not a virgin. And instead of claiming parthenogenesis with Matthew, their claim was that “he (Jesus) was begotten by Joseph (\textit{ex Ioseph generatum})
Irenaeus would have them judged for this, and he considers them to be vain, empty, foolish for not harmonizing the two ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth, as he does. But they believed in neither.\(^{120}\)

Whence Irenaeus got his information about these so-called Ebionites and their disbelief in the proto-orthodox doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis is unknown. No Ebionite texts from the second century survive, and maybe none from any period.\(^{121}\) In the third century, Origen says that while they didn’t believe in Jesus’ pre-existence, only some Ebionites disbelieved his virgin birth; others believed.\(^{122}\) And according to Epiphanius in the fourth century, some Ebionites believed that Jesus pre-existed as a spirit or angel – or rather they believed that Christ pre-existed, the man Jesus technically being the ‘adam’ possessed at baptism by this heavenly spirit-angel.\(^{123}\) But unlike Origen, Epiphanius says nothing about any Ebionite belief in Jesus’ virgin birth; not even the fourth-century heresiologist attributes incarnation through parthenogenesis to any of them.\(^{124}\) Those who believed in a pre-existent and incarnate Christ understood baptism to be the moment of incarnation, not birth or virgin birth, he says.\(^{125}\)

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\(^{120}\) *Adversus haereses* 4.33.4; 5.1.3. Discussion of these passages from Irenaeus as well as similar passages from Hippolytus and Pseudo-Tertullian in e.g. Skarsaune 2007a, 428-435.

\(^{121}\) Epiphanius quotes from a Gospel of the Ebionites and refers to other sources, several having similarities with the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies and Recognitions. The latter were written in the fourth century and are extant though not of Ebionite attribution per se. In Skarsaune’s (2007a, 424) opinion, which seems a bit extreme to me, “[t]he Pseudo-Clementines should not be used as a source for ‘Ebionite’ theology ... until proven to be so independently of Epiphanius’s portrait of Ebionite doctrine, so as to avoid circularity of argument. Epiphanius’s portrait of Ebionite doctrine is itself dependent upon the Pseudo-Clementines. The same remark applies to Epiphanius’s fragments of a Jewish Christian Gospel.”

\(^{122}\) *Commentarium in evangelium Matthaei*. 16.12; *Contra Celsum* 5.61. Discussion of these and other passages from Origen in e.g. Skarsaune 2007a, 440-445.

\(^{123}\) *Panarion* 30.3.1-6, 16.3-4, 17.5-8, 18.5, 34.6. Discussion in e.g. Häkkinen 2005, 267-270; Skarsaune 2007a, 452-453.

\(^{124}\) Häkkinen (2005, 267) writes that Epiphanius “also knows that the Ebionites had two different views about Jesus’ birth”, citing *Panarion* 30.3.1-2. If this means that Epiphanius knew of
If there was variety of opinion within the group in the second century, provided that the Ebionites ever were in fact a self-identifying group, perhaps Irenaeus overlooked it. Perhaps Ebionite belief diversified after the date of his information. Perhaps Origen and Epiphanius were somewhat ill-informed; Epiphanius’ account is certainly confusing if not confused. At any rate, according to the first person to mention Ebionites in the second century, they didn’t believe that Jesus pre-existed or was born to a virgin. Their christology would have been similar to that of Ebionites in parthenogenesis, as did Origen and Eusebius, I am unable to see it there or elsewhere in the Panarion.

125 Baptism is clearest in Panarion 30.3.6, 16.3, 18.5; cf. 30.13.6-8. Incarnation of the pre-existent Jesus, the divine Word, through virgin birth is Epiphanius’ belief. See e.g. 30.20.1-11. Thus Clivaz 2010, who argues for an early christology of “angelic inhabitation” featured in a reconstructed proto-Ebionite text that Tertullian would have read before writing De carne Christi 14.30-41. She proposes to restrict the term Ebionite to the period of the church fathers and to employ the term Poor in discussing the first and early second centuries. What marks off this Poor christology of angelic inhabitation from a Valentinian christology of the same, as Clivaz (2010, 298) sees it, is that the former inhabitation is “intermittent” while the latter is “permanent.” As I see it, the two would be similar indeed due to their emphasis on baptismal incarnation. But in the case of those Poor or Ebionites who may have believed in angelic inhabitation, their Jesus would have been a man possessed, for however long, by an angel-spirit at baptism; whereas the Valentinian Jesus was a tripartite man already having a pre-existent spirit as well as a soul inside of him from birth, before the Christ/Spirit descended upon him at baptism. Furthermore, in my view, most Poor or Ebionites would not have believed in Jesus’ virgin birth, while the opposite is true of Valentinians. Valentinians actually believed in two incarnations, one incarnation of the man Jesus’ individual pre-existent spirit and soul through virgin birth, and another more emphatic incarnation of the Christ/Spirit that possessed Jesus at baptism. I would argue that they emphasized baptismal incarnation while attempting a compromise with proto-orthodoxy and its exclusive emphasis on incarnation through virgin birth.

126 Luomanen (2012, 234) doubts that the information about Ebionite belief in virgin birth is accurate: “Origen has created the picture on the basis of the writings of his predecessors,” namely a variant in the textual transmission of Adversus haereses 1.26.2. The variant has to do with whether Ebionite christology is ‘not similar’ (the manuscript reading in Latin translation) or ‘similar’ (Hippolytus’ Greek) to Cerinthus and Carporates who didn’t believe in Jesus’ virgin birth. If Luomanen’s doubt is well placed, Origen would have read and accepted both, hence he had some Ebionites believe in Jesus’ virgin birth and others not. But Skarsaune (2007a, 445) is “inclined to believe that Origen’s word’s about ‘non-Ebionitic’ Ebionites are based on his own personal contact with such Jewish believers in Alexandria and Caesarea.” As for Epiphanius, I could see, though not quite as minimalistically as Skarsaune (2007a, 453, 461) how a large share of his christological information might have been based on his understanding of Irenaeus’ account of the Ebionites (alongside Cerinthus and Carporates) conflated with Hippolytus’ accounts of them and the Elchasaites, plus the sort of material in the Pseudo-Clementines.
of the synoptic gospels, such as Matthew, their alleged favorite, minus virgin birth. If some Ebionites believed in Jesus’ parthenogenesis but not his pre-existence, as Origen says, their christology would have been similar to that of Matthew and Luke or even the Proto-Gospel of James, minus aural conception. If others, according to Epiphanius, believed that Jesus was possessed at baptism by the spirit-angel Christ, their christology would have been similar to that of many other early Christians, from members of the Johannine community, to Cerinthus, Sethians and Valentinians.
CHAPTER TWO

BIRTH AND PRE-EXISTENCE OF JESUS

In Chapter One, I concluded that Jesus doesn’t pre-exist in any of the synoptics. I likewise concluded that he doesn’t pre-exist in the Proto-Gospel of James, much as Jesus didn’t pre-exist for the Christian Jews described by Justin Martyr in the middle of the second century or the so-called Ebionites relegated to heretical status by Irenaeus before the century’s close. None of their christologies features a Pauline or Johannine Jesus or a pre-existent Jesus from anywhere else. They do feature what could be called incarnation, be it the incarnation of a human spirit/soul in the newborn Jesus, the incarnation of God’s Spirit in him at baptism, or both. But they don’t feature a pre-existent Jesus who is then incarnated.

The upshot of this is that the idea of his virgin birth in Mathew and Luke and later in the Proto-Gospel of James is separate from the idea of his pre-existence. The two separate ideas aren’t harmonized in Mark: neither of them is there. They aren’t harmonized in Matthew, Luke, or the Proto-Gospel of James: Jesus still doesn’t pre-exist in these texts even though he’s born to the virgin Mary, and even though other believers in Jesus as early as Paul believed in his pre-existence. The two separate ideas aren’t harmonized in the christologies of Justin’s Christian Jews or Irenaeus’ Ebionites. They aren’t harmonized in the christologies of Origen’s Ebionites either, some of whom believed in virgin birth, but none of whom believed in a pre-existent Jesus. The two separate ideas aren’t even harmonized in the christologies of Epiphanius’ Ebionites, some of whom believed in the latter but none the former.
Besides concluding that Jesus doesn’t pre-exist in the synoptics, I concluded as well that the idea of virgin birth was introduced as a defense against reports of Mary’s early pregnancy, reports that Matthew and Luke couldn’t ignore or deny. I also started to discuss the three problems that were introduced with the idea of Jesus’ parthenogenesis, namely the problems of how it was that he could be born from the seed of David without a father, how Mary conceived if not vaginally, and how the pre-existent Jesus entered her womb, assuming that he pre-existed. That discussion will be continued shortly.

At this juncture, I turn from early Christians who didn’t believe that Jesus pre-existed to those who did: first those who believed he pre-existed and was incarnated through birth, then those who believed that their pre-existent Jesus was incarnated through virgin birth, then those who believed that he was incarnated at baptism.

INCARNATION OF THE PRE-EXISTENT JESUS THROUGH BIRTH

Due to the occasional nature of early Christian writings, letters in particular, and as a circumstance of their partial transmission from antiquity to the present, it can’t always be certain that Christians did not believe what isn’t mentioned in surviving texts. Paul never mentions Jesus’ virgin birth or Jesus’ baptism in any of his letters from the middle of the first century. From then on and well into the second century, neither do the pastoral letters, the Letter to the Hebrews, 1-2 Clement, the Letter of Barnabas, or the Letter to Diognetus. But Jesus pre-exists and is incarnated in each of these texts, and each of them also features his birth or at least his humanity. I’m grouping them and their authors together as representative of those early Christians who believed that Jesus pre-existed and was incarnated through birth, not through virgin birth or at baptism.
Their silence may not be meaningful in every case; perhaps a few of these believers in Jesus did believe that he was born to a virgin, and several may have believed that he was baptized. The fact remains, however, that in their references to his pre-existence and incarnation, they don’t mention his parthenogenesis or baptism. They could have, that is, if indeed they knew of one or the other or both. And it seems that they would have mentioned either one if that were how they believed their pre-existent Jesus to have been incarnated.

Furthermore if they believed in his incarnation through parthenogenesis, there would have been problems for them to solve, the problems of how Jesus could be born from the seed of David without a father in the Davidic line, how the virgin Mary conceived, and how it was that the pre-existent Jesus entered her womb. They don’t try to solve these problems, which don’t even come up in these texts. Although Matthew and Luke (and their sources) introduced the idea of Jesus’ parthenogenesis in the late first century, and while a couple of the problems introduced with it were being solved by the author of the *Proto-Gospel of James* in the middle of the second century, meanwhile Irenaeus’ Ebionites and Justin’s Christian Jews before them were avoiding the problems altogether by disbelieving in Jesus’ virgin birth. To the extent that they avoided the idea and its problems too and weren’t simply unaware of it (again the idea having not been introduced until the third generation after Jesus’ death), Paul and the authors of the pastoral letters, Hebrews, *1-2 Clement, Barnabas* and *Diognetus* had that in common with those believers in Jesus. What they didn’t have in common was the belief that Jesus pre-existed.
Letters of Paul

Already in the middle of the first century, Paul believed that Jesus pre-existed and was incarnated through birth. Evidence for this comes from Galatians, Romans, and Philippians.¹ In Galatians, Paul says that “God sent forth his Son, born from a woman (γενόμενον ἐκ γυναικός).” In Romans, Paul says that Jesus “was born from the seed of David after the flesh (γενομένου ἐκ σπέρματος Δαυὶδ κατὰ σάρκα),” and that “God sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh (ἐν ὡμιστάτη σαρκὸς ἁμαρτίας).” In Philippians, Paul says that the pre-existent Jesus “emptied himself, took the form of a servant, and was born in human likeness (ἐν ὡμιστάτῳ ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος).”²

With these few quick references to Jesus’ birth, half of which are indirect (γενόμενος by itself could refer to any sort of becoming), Paul hardly stresses the nativity. And some of his staunchest readers would later insist that the Pauline Jesus was never born. But it’s clear enough that he believed Jesus had a mother and was born with a human or at least a human-like body of flesh as well as blood, even if the resurrected body of Jesus was something else.³

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¹ Further evidence for Pauline belief in Jesus’ pre-existence comes from 1 Corinthians 8.6; 10.4, 9; 2 Corinthians 8;9; Colossians 1.15-20; 2.9; as well as 1 Timothy 1.15; 3.16; 2 Timothy 1.9-10; all discussed in Fee 2007, 500-512.

² Galatians 4.4; Romans 1.3, 8.3; Philippians 2.7. There are source-critical issues here to take into account, and commentators disagree over whether these passages attest to belief in Jesus’ pre-existence. See Dunn 1980/1996, 33-46, 114-128, for instance. Whatever Paul’s sources, I think that together these passages do attest to his belief in Jesus’ pre-existence and incarnation through birth, which is one step away, albeit a major one, from proto-orthodox belief in incarnation through virgin birth. But if these passages don’t attest to belief in Jesus’ pre-existence, then my main point is made all the stronger, that incarnation of the pre-existent Jesus through virgin birth is a development of proto-orthodoxy, not of Paul or any other New Testament text.

³ The blood of Jesus before resurrection: Romans 3.25, 5.9; 1 Corinthians 10.16, 11.25, 11.27; Ephesians 1.7, 2.13; Colossians 1.20. Resurrected bodies aren’t flesh and blood: 1 Corinthians 15.50.
The apostle believed in the pre-existent Jesus’ incarnation through birth, not virgin birth. Jesus’ parthenogenesis is something that Paul never mentions, if he even knew about the idea. Once it was introduced by Matthew and Luke (and their sources), problems were introduced with it, such as how Jesus could be born from the seed of David without a father. Second-century Christians solved this problem by rerouting Jesus’ genealogy through his mother instead of his father; the *Proto-Gospel of James* is one example. But not even Matthew and Luke have the problem solved, much less Paul some decades before them. Apparently it wasn’t a problem for him because he understood Jesus to have a father, grandfather, great-grandfather, etc., in the Davidic line. In Galatians, he says that Jesus was born from a woman (γενόμενον ἐκ γυναικός), i.e., that Jesus was a human being. 4 And in Romans, he says that Jesus was born from the seed of David after the flesh (γενομένου ἐκ σπέρματος Δαυίδ κατὰ σάρκα).5 Paul doesn’t say that this woman was a virgin or that the Davidic line ran through her. Since virgin mothers and matrilineal genealogies were entirely unexpected in Second Temple and early Judaism as well as earliest Christianity, it’s too much to suggest that Paul assumes the idea of Jesus’ virgin birth here or anywhere else. 6

On the one hand, Paul’s belief that Jesus pre-existed and was incarnated through birth is shockingly early, even as unsystematic as it is, and it’s not altogether far removed from what would become the proto-orthodox doctrine of Incarnation through virgin birth. But again, on the

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4 Cf. Job 11.2; 14.1; Matthew 11.11 (Q), for general references to human beings born of women.

5 In Romans 1.4, he goes on to mention Jesus’ divine sonship and resurrection. Cf. Acts 2.36; 13.33.

6 As suggested e.g. in Bligh’s (1970, 348) commentary on Galatians and in commentaries on Romans by Cranfield (1975, 1:59) and Royster (2008, 21). Whereas most commentators agree that there’s no idea of Jesus’ virgin birth in Paul. On Galatians, see e.g. Lightfoot 1865/1957, 168; Burton 1921, 217; Lührmann 1978/1992, 80; Betz 1979, 207 n.52; Martyn 1997, 407 n.63. On Romans, see e.g. Fitzmyer 1993, 234. On Philippians, see e.g. Beare 1959/1969, 83; Witherington 2011, 148.
other hand, as I stated of the incarnation of the Son of Man and Davidic Messiah in 4 Ezra and the incarnation of the archangel Israel in the *Prayer of Joseph*, incarnation through virgin birth is conceptually very different from incarnation through birth, despite what may appear to be the minor addition of a single word.

*Pastoral Letters*

Jesus also pre-exists in 1-2 Timothy and Titus, where there are brief references to his incarnation, that is, incarnation through birth. In 1 Timothy, Paul is made to say that Jesus “came into the world (ἦλθεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον) to save sinners,” and that the mystery of Pauline piety “appeared in flesh (ἐφανερώθη ἐν σαρκί), was justified in spirit, seen by angels, heralded among the gentiles, believed in throughout the world, and taken up in glory.” In 2 Timothy, Paul is made to say that the grace given to believers in Jesus before time began “presently appeared through the manifestation of the Savior (φανερωθεὶς ἐν σαρκί ἐπιφανεστέρῳ).” In Titus, Paul is made to say that “the saving grace of God appeared (ἐπεφάνη),” and that “when the goodness and loving kindness of God the Savior appeared (ἐπεφάνη),” he saved believers.\(^7\)

The language of coming into the world (ἠλθεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον) in 1 Timothy seems more Johannine than Pauline. But the pastor could not easily have believed in the pre-existent Jesus’ incarnation at baptism, as John did, since Paul believed in his incarnation through birth, and the baptism of Jesus is never mentioned in any of the undisputed or disputed Pauline letters. With Paul, then, the pastor believed that Jesus pre-existed and was incarnated through birth. As in

\(^7\) 1 Timothy 1.15; 3.16; 2 Timothy 1.9-10; Titus 2.11; 3.4-5.
Romans, so in 2 Timothy, Jesus is “from the seed of David (ἐκ σπέρματος Δαυίδ).”\(^8\) Also as in Paul, it would be too much to suggest that virgin birth is assumed here.

For some reason, though, the pastor uses language of appearance or manifestation to describe the pre-existent Jesus’ incarnation through birth. That wasn’t Paul’s way of describing it, which he described instead in terms of being sent, descending, shape-shifting (e.g. from form of God to form of slave), and becoming human. But Paul did use this language in his more abstract references to Jesus and the righteousness, mystery and wisdom of God that simply and suddenly appeared at the end of time.\(^9\)

Perhaps the Pauline author uses the language of manifestation because he thinks that his opponents have misused it. The pastoral letters aren’t short on polemics against rival Christians.\(^10\) None of those statements are christological, however, and there are no accounts of the christology of any opponents. If other readers of Paul were focusing on his more abstract references to Jesus and the sudden appearance of the righteousness, mystery and wisdom of God, and if they thereby understood the incarnation as no incarnation at all but rather an appearance without flesh, the Pauline author doesn’t point this out.

It’s nevertheless noticeable in 1 Timothy that the manifestation is plainly “in flesh (ἐν σαρκί),” not in “in the likeness of sinful flesh (ἐν δυνατοματι σαρκες ἁμαρτίας),” as Paul had said of the sending of Jesus in Romans.\(^11\) Perhaps the reason for this plainness in 1 Timothy is that readers of Paul already understood him to be saying that Jesus merely resembled a carnal human

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\(^8\) 2 Timothy 2.8; Romans 1.3.
\(^9\) Romans 3.21-22; 16.25-26; Colossians 1.26-27. Cf. 1 Corinthians 1.30; 2.1, 7-8; Ephesians 1.9-10; 3.2-11; Colossians 2.2; 4.3.
\(^10\) 1 Timothy 1.3-7, 19-20; 4.1-3, 7; 6.20-21; 2 Timothy 1.15; 2.14-19, 23-26; 3.1-9, 13; 4.3-4; Titus 1.9-16, 3.9-11. For an argument that the pastorals belong to a post-Marcionite, post-Valentinian, collection of letters attributed to Paul, see Quispel 1998, 357-358.
\(^11\) 1 Timothy 3.16; Romans 8.3.
being but wasn’t one. So the pastor tightens up Paul’s speech for him, bringing the pre-existent Jesus into closer proximity with the flesh. Also in 1 Timothy, Jesus is plainly a human being (ἀνθρωπος Χριστος Ιησους); he’s not born “in human likeness (ἐν ὁμοιωσατι ἀνθρωπων)” or found “as a human being in reference to outward appearance (σχηματι ... ὡς ἀνθρωπος),” which is what Paul had said in Philippians.12

Whatever the reason that the pastor used the language of manifestation, therefore, and despite the potentially non-physical connotation of it, he nonetheless believed that Jesus appeared in flesh. This deuto-Paul was more careful to describe actual incarnation of the pre-existent Jesus than was Paul himself.

*Letter to the Hebrews*

The so-called Letter to the Hebrews isn’t attributed to Paul, but there are some Pauline flourishes in the text, and the language of appearance or manifestation is also used to describe the pre-existent Jesus’ incarnation, that is, incarnation through birth.

Manifestation language is used in the following passage about Jesus’ two advents: “But as it is, he has appeared (πεφανερωται) once at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear (δεμοτεται) a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly awaiting him.”13 This language of appearance or manifestation could be used to describe theophanies or angelophanies, and as I

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12 1 Timothy 2.5; Philippians 2.6-8. Paul does plainly say ‘human’ in Romans 5.15, but one from heaven and contrasted with Adam in 1 Corinthians 15.47.
will argue in CHAPTER THREE, Jesus appeared the first time as an angel according to the (rhetorical) opponents in Hebrews.

The author of the text believed otherwise, however. He believed that Jesus pre-existed as the Son, being instrumental in the creation, and that Jesus was then incarnated through birth, springing up from the tribe of Judah; needless to say Jesus had a biological father.14 There’s even something of an incarnation account in the text or at least a reference to God introducing the Son into the world (eis tēn oïkoumēnēn).15

For the author of Hebrews, the pre-existent Jesus didn’t appear as an angel. Jesus was superior to them but “was made lower than the angels (par’ āγγέλους ἡλαττωμένον)” temporarily.16 The Son then suffered and died, as no angel would. Not even the exceptionally incarnate archangel Israel in the fragments of the Prayer of Joseph is said to suffer and die, let alone be offered as a sacrifice for sin.

1-2 Clement

Jesus pre-exists and is sent forth from God (ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐξεπέμφη) in 1 Clement.17 But how he entered the womb of the virgin Mary wasn’t a problem for the author because he believed in incarnation through birth, not parthenogenesis. His Lord was from Jacob after the flesh (τὸ κατὰ σάρξ).18 The Savior bled, having flesh as well as a soul: “our Lord Jesus Christ gave his blood

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15 Hebrews 1.6.
16 Hebrew 2.9.
(τὸ αἷμα αὐτοῦ) for us (ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν), by God’s will – both his flesh for our flesh (καὶ τὴν σάρκα υπὲρ τῆς σαρκὸς ἡμῶν), and his soul for our souls (καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν υπὲρ τῶν ψυχῶν ἡμῶν).”

From this link between christology and soteriology and anthropology, some extrapolation seems warranted. Following the biblical creation accounts, it’s God’s breath (ἡ πνεῦμα ἡμῶν) that vivifies humans, without which they die. God molded (ἐπλασεν) the first human beings as the representation of his image (τῆς ἐαυτοῦ εἰκόνας χαρακτῆρα), and they were intellectually (κατὰ διάνοιαν) superior to all other creatures. Thus in the womb, God molds and crafts humans (ὁ πλάσας ἡμᾶς δημιουργήσας), that is, their bodies, souls, or both, then he brings them (their souls?) into his world (ἐισήγαγεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἀυτοῦ). Since humans acquire their flesh and apparently their souls through birth, the human Savior would have acquired his through birth also. So what part of the pre-existent Jesus was it that was sent forth from God: was it merely the breath vivifying him, was it his soul, was it something else? And if that part of him pre-existed so as to be sent forth, do not other human beings also have it and therefore pre-exist in some sense? The author doesn’t raise such issues let alone address them. He’s more concerned with the resurrection of the flesh. But odds are that this Jesus pre-existed as something more than a human soul or spirit. And humans may not pre-exist here.

In 2 Clement, there are two references to Jesus’ pre-existence. In one of them he’s said to have become flesh. Before “he became flesh (ἐγένετο σὰρξ)” and “saved us,” Jesus “existed first

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19 I Clement 49.6. Text and translation: Ehrman 2003a, 1:122-123. On his blood and suffering, see also I Clement 2.1; 7.4.
as spirit (ὁν ... τὸ πρῶτον πνεῦμα, in most manuscripts)” or “as Word (λόγος, in one manuscript).”\(^{23}\) The author is making this statement not for christological purposes but in order to establish the importance of the flesh and that the flesh will be resurrected. Descent and incarnation of the pre-existent Jesus as such is of almost no concern here; how he entered the womb of the virgin Mary is certainly not a problem. While it should be noted that the authors of 1-2 Clement aren’t identical, this author seems to have also believed that Jesus pre-existed and was incarnated through birth, not virgin birth or at baptism. The phrase ‘became flesh’ and the variant manuscript reading of Logos point in the direction of Johannine influence. But the divine Word becomes flesh by possession of Jesus at baptism in the Gospel of John, whereas his baptism isn’t mentioned in this text.

A second oblique reference to Jesus’ pre-existence reiterates the importance of the flesh and includes the pre-existence of the spiritual church: “the church is not recent (οὐ νῦν ἐἶναι), but is from above and the beginning (ἀλλὰ ἄνωθεν). For it existed spiritually (ἦν γὰρ πνευματικῆ), as did also our Jesus (ὡς καὶ ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἡμῶν). And he was manifested (ἐφανερώθη) in the last days in order that he might save us (ἵνα ἡμᾶς σώσῃ).”\(^{24}\) Despite the use of the language of appearance, this manifestation couldn’t have been incorporeal, since it was already established that Jesus became flesh, and because elsewhere in 2 Clement the author states that it’s sinful not to recognize “how much Jesus Christ endured suffering for us (δόσα ύπέμεινεν Ἰησοῦς Χριστός παθεῖν ἐνεκα ἡμῶν).”\(^{25}\)

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Letter of Barnabas

How the pre-existent Jesus descended from heaven and entered the virgin Mary’s womb was also not a problem for the anonymous author of the letter attributed to Barnabas. Neither Jesus’ parthenogenesis nor his baptism is mentioned here, suggesting that the author assumed incarnation through birth.

A constant refrain in the letter is the manifestation of the Son of God. It was the Son that God spoke to when the first human beings were created: “Let us make ....” At last the pre-existent Jesus was himself “manifest in flesh (ἐν σαρκί ... φανερωθῇ),” and he “allowed himself to suffer (παθεῖν),” or perhaps better, he endured suffering. Read typologically and allegorically, Jewish scripture is supposed to contain prophecies that this would happen. What is more, “if he had not come in flesh (μὴ ἦλθεν ἐν σαρκί),” people couldn’t have looked at him and been saved, as in the past when the Israelites looked at the brass serpent. They cannot look at the sun much less could they have looked at its creator Jesus in his incorporeal pre-existent form.26

So he was manifest in flesh, “since a human being is earth that suffers (ἄνθρωπος γὰρ γῆ ἐστὶν πάσχουσα).”27 It was his flesh (τὴν σάρκα) that he offered on behalf of sin, this is, “the container of the spirit (τὸ σκεῦος τοῦ πνεύματος).” Only his body may have suffered, then, and in fact according to the author, “the Son of God was incapable of suffering except for our sakes (οὐχ ἡδύνατο παθεῖν εἰ μὴ δι’ ἡμᾶς).”28

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26 Barnabas 5.5-10. Text and translation: Ehrman 2003a, 2:26-28. See also Barnabas 6.7, 12, 14; 12.5, 10; 14.4-5.
Letter to Diognetus

Apologetics are the subject of the so-called Letter to Diognetus, which may have been written in the mid to late second century or thereafter. There are no polemical statements against rival Christians in it, only against pagans and Jews. The problem of how Jesus pre-existed and then entered the virgin Mary’s womb doesn’t come up; parthenogenesis is never mentioned. Since Jesus’ baptism isn’t mentioned either, that leaves incarnation through birth to have been assumed.

This anonymous apologist writing to his pagan addressee characterizes the relationship between God and the Christian Savior as Father and Son, never actually naming Jesus. God “loved human beings, for whose sake he made the world ..., whom he molded from his own image, to whom he sent his only-begotten Son (πρὸς οὐς ἀπέστειλε τὸν οὐν αὐτοῦ τὸν μονογενῆ).”

Before sending him, God and his mind were unknown even to philosophers: “when he had a great and inexpressible thought, he communicated it to his child alone (μόνῳ τῷ παιδί).

And so, as long as he enshrouded it in a mystery and kept his wise plan to himself, he seemed not to care for us or give us any heed.” Humans were not only ignorant and apparently neglected; they were also sinful, proving that without the Son’s descent from heaven they were lost. “But then, when the time arrived that God had planned to manifest his goodness (φανερώσας τὴν ἑαυτοῦ χρηστότητα) and power ..., he did not hate us, destroy us, or hold a grudge against us but was patient and bore with us. Out of pity for us he took our sins upon himself (ἐλεών αὐτὸς τὰς

29 Diognetus 10.2. Text and translation: Ehrman 2003a, 2:152-153. In the reference to God molding humans from his own image, Genesis 1.26-27 and 2.7 are read together. Cf. also John 3.16, for God’s love and the giving of his only-begotten.
ἡμετέρας ἁμαρτίας ἀνεδέξατο),” the apologist states almost as if it was the Father that atoned.

More precisely: “He gave up his own Son as a ransom for us, the holy one for the lawless, the innocent one for the wicked, the righteous one for the unrighteous, the imperishable one (τὸν ἀφθαρτον) for the perishable (ὑπὲρ τῶν φθαρτῶν), the immortal one (τὸν ἀθάνατον) for mortals (ὑπὲρ τῶν θνητῶν).”

If the Father and Son are somewhat indistinct here, with God taking upon himself human sins while at the same time sending his Son, the same indistinctness occurs elsewhere in the text. According to the apologist, no one knew “what God is (τί ποτ’ ἐστὶ θεός) before he came (πρὶν αὐτὸν ἐλθεῖν) .... For no one either saw him or made him known, but he showed himself (αὐτὸς δὲ ἑαυτὸν ἐπεδείξεν). And he showed himself through faith (διὰ πίστεως), by which alone it has been permitted to see God.”

Whom God sent and didn’t send is laid out in a passage where there’s a distinction between “the truly all-powerful and all-creator and invisible God himself (αὐτὸς ἀληθῶς ὁ παντοκράτωρ καὶ παντοκτίστης καὶ ἀόρατος θεός)” and his artisan or builder by whom he created: “he did not send (πέμψας) to humans, as someone might imagine, some servant (ὑπηρέτην τινὰ) or an angel (ἡ ἄγγελον) or a ruler (ἡ ἀρχοντα) or any of those who administer earthly things or any of those who have been entrusted with heavenly affairs, but the artisan and builder of all things himself (αὐτὸν τὸν τεχνίτην καὶ δημιουργὸν τῶν ὅλων)” did he send, “by whom God created the heavens ... by whom all things are set in order and arranged and put into subjection, the heavens and the things in the heavens, the earth and the things in the earth, the sea and the

things in the sea, fire, air, the abyss, the things in the heights, the things in the depths, the things
in between – this is the one that God sent to humans (τοῦτον πρὸς αὐτοὺς ἀπέστειλεν).”

While clarifying who was and wasn’t sent, the apologist doesn’t enter into any specifics
as to how the invisible God sent this artisan and builder as God on the one hand and as a human
being on the other. He continues: “So then, as someone might reason, was it with tyranny, fear
and terror? Not at all. But with gentleness and meekness, like a king sending his son he sent him
as a king (βασιλέα ἔπεμψε); he sent him as God (ὡς θεὸν ἔπεμψε); he sent him as a human being
to humans (ὡς ἀνθρώπων πρὸς ἀνθρώπους ἔπεμψε); he sent him to save and to persuade not to
constrain, for constraint is not an attribute of God.”

It’s far from clear in the text how the artisan and builder of all things could be sent both
as God and as a human, particularly given that the apologist sets up a dichotomy between the
Son and humans, the Son being imperishable and immortal. For him to be sent as a literal
human would imply that he became perishable and mortal in part at least. Yet the link between
christology and soteriology and anthropology here is relatively tenuous. Jesus, who again is
never named in the text, isn’t said to have given “his flesh for our flesh, and his soul for our
souls,” as in 1 Clement, for instance. Nor is it said that he offered his flesh, “the container of
the spirit,” on behalf of sin, as in the letter attributed to Barnabas. Whether meaningful or not,
this Christian apology is silent concerning the body, flesh, blood and suffering of the Savior.

35 Diogenetus 9.2.
36 1 Clement 49.6. Translation: Ehrman 2003a, 1:122-123.
37 Barnabas 7.3-5. Translation: Ehrman 2003a, 2:36-37.
38 It has been argued that the Letter to Diogenetus was written by Marcion or one of his followers.
There may be something to the argument, but not much I think. The text doesn’t posit a
Marcionite cosmology with the Father and Son transcending the creator God; the Father is the
creator God, with the Son as his artisan and builder. At most, the text may share with
What is said in the text is that God gave up “his own Son as a ransom for us (ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν), the holy one for the lawless, the innocent one for the wicked, the righteous one for the unrighteous, the imperishable one (τὸν ἀφθαρτόν) for the perishable (ὑπὲρ τῶν φθαρτῶν), the immortal one (τὸν ἀθάνατον) for mortals (ὑπὲρ τῶν θνητῶν).”

This exchange isn’t described as one for one, kind for kind, or body and soul for body and soul. But the author also understands humans to be more than perishable and mortal. When God molded them from his own image, he gave them reason (λόγον) and intellect (νοῦν). The human soul is immortal (ἀθάνατος ἡ ψυχή), whereas the body that it dwells in is a mortal tent (ἐν θνητῷ σκηνώματι κατοικεῖ). And like the soul in the body, “Christians temporarily dwell in perishable surroundings (παροικοῦσιν ἐν φθαρτοῖς) as they await imperishability in heaven (τὴν ἐν οὐρανοῖς ἀφθαρσίαν).”

So if the artisan and builder of all things was sent as a literal human, he would have had an immortal soul along with a mortal body. How he acquired them isn’t explored, but presumably it was the same way all humans do: through birth. The apologist doesn’t mention the Son’s birth per se; it is stated, however, that he took human sins upon himself, which would most naturally require birth in a body. And it’s stated that he was sent as a human being. He would have been born, presumably, all the while being much more than human. He was the artisan and builder of all things, incarnated through birth.

Marcionites such things as its non-use of Old Testament prophecy about the Son, which might be accounted for by genre here, and its apparent disinterest in the resurrection of the body.

INCARNATION OF THE PRE-EXISTENT JESUS THROUGH VIRGIN BIRTH:

THE PROTO-ORTHODOX DOCTRINE

This is the middle of my historical-critical overview of the various conceptions of Jesus in the first and second centuries CE, the proto-orthodox doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis, among others.

Thus far, as representative of those who believed that Jesus didn’t pre-exist, in CHAPTER ONE I have grouped together the authors of the synoptic gospels and the author of the Proto-Gospel of James along with Justin Martyr’s Christian Jews and Irenaeus’ Ebionites.

As representative of those who believed that Jesus did pre-exist and was incarnated through birth, under the first heading of this CHAPTER I have grouped together Paul, the pastoral letters, the Letter to the Hebrews, 1-2 Clement, the Letter of Barnabas, and the Letter to Diognetus.

Under this heading I group together the letters of Ignatius bishop of Antioch, the Ascension of Isaiah, the Apology of Aristides, the writings of Justin Martyr, and the Letter of the Apostles. They are representative of those who believed that Jesus pre-existed and was incarnated through virgin birth. They are the forefront of the proto-orthodox Christians that I have been referring to, and their belief in incarnation through parthenogenesis is what I have been calling the proto-orthodox doctrine. They are the ones who harmonized the two ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth, and that process is the main topic of my study. I will be focusing on them and their texts in the CHAPTERS of PART TWO where I explain how they harmonized what were two separate ideas into a new one: pre-existence wasn’t new, but virgin birth was itself rather novel, and the harmonization of those two ideas into the proto-orthodox
doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis was without precedent in the ancient Mediterranean world.

*From the Letters of Ignatius to the Letter of the Apostles*

Ignatius was writing in the early second century, followed by Aristides and then Justin. The *Ascension of Isaiah* and the *Letter of the Apostles* were written in the same century. Exactly when is impossible to determine, but conceptually the *Ascension of Isaiah* comes before the *Letter of the Apostles*. The former may have been written between Ignatius and Aristides, while the latter may have been written in the mid to late second century, at about the same time as Justin or else not many decades thereafter.

*New Testament Texts and Harmonization*

They were all writing or written, then, in the second century, as the traditional gospels and other New Testament texts began to circulate en masse. The New Testament had not been canonized and would not be finally for hundreds of years. But the texts that came to comprise it were being read, interpreted, copied and rewritten together already. The idea of Jesus’ pre-existence in Paul and John was harmonized with the idea of his virgin birth in Matthew and Luke. It was an evolutionary and dynamic process, given that not all of these texts were being used everywhere at the same time. Ignatius, Aristides and Justin as well as the authors the *Ascension of Isaiah* and the *Letter of the Apostles* each harmonized the two ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth, but they didn’t all use the same New Testament texts. Indeed, none of them may have used John until the *Letter of the Apostles* was written. But even the idea of Jesus’ pre-existence could be found elsewhere, to say nothing of the idea of pre-existence of heavenly provenance in general.
Introduced by Matthew and Luke (and their sources), it was the idea of Jesus’ virgin birth that was rather unique. Ignatius used the infancy narrative in Matthew. So did the author of the Ascension of Isaiah. Aristides may have used Luke, but he didn’t use the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Mary. Justin Martyr used both Matthew and Luke, harmonizing their infancy narratives together, sometimes following one more closely than the other. He then further harmonized them with his Logos theology and the idea of Jesus’ pre-existence. The author the Letter of the Apostles used the Lukan annunciation, including the appearance of the angel to Mary, which he harmonized with the Johannine prologue.

Virgin Birth and Its Problems Again

Even though Matthew and Luke themselves more or less ignored the problems they (and their sources) introduced with the idea of Jesus’ virgin birth, the problems could not be ignored for long by those who used the Matthean and Lukan infancy narratives. Some believers in Jesus didn’t use Matthew or Luke or at least not their opening chapters. But others did, including proto-orthodox Christians. So Ignatius suggested solution to the problem of how Jesus could be born from the seed of David without a father by rerouting his genealogy matrilineally through Mary. The problem is solved likewise in the Ascension of Isaiah and in Justin’s writings. (Aristides and the author the Letter of the Apostles don’t address it.) But Ignatius and the author of the Ascension of Isaiah didn’t get into psychology and embryology; Justin, with his philosophical training, did.

In the letters of Ignatius, Jesus is described as

both fleshly and spiritual (σαρκικός τε και πνευματικός),
begotten and unbegotten (γεννητός και ἄγεννητος),
in flesh born as God (ἐν σαρκί γενόμενος θεός),
in death true life (ἐν θανάτῳ ζωή ἀληθινή),
both from Mary and from God (καὶ ἔκ Μαρίας καὶ ἔκ θεοῦ).\textsuperscript{42}

The bishop’s most technical account of the child is that “our God Jesus Christ was conceived (ἐκυφοφορήθη, literally: carried as a fetus) by Mary (ὑπὸ Μαρίας), according to the management of God (κατ’ οἰκονομίαν θεοῦ), from the seed of David on the one hand (ἐκ σπέρματος μὲν Δαυίδ), and (the) Holy Spirit on the other (πνεύματος δὲ ἁγίου).”\textsuperscript{43} This reference to Jesus’ conception from the Holy Spirit would be Matthean, and elsewhere Ignatius rewrites the story of the magi’s visit in Matthew chapter 2.

The seed of David would have to refer to biological inheritance and brings with it common knowledge of human reproduction. But Ignatius insists on virgin birth, which introduces the problem of how the seed was transmitted maternally, especially if Ignatius and his addressees understood conception to be single-seed according to the agricultural metaphor of human reproduction, that is, a paternal seed sown in a maternal field/womb. Ignatius himself doesn’t introduce the problem of biological inheritance through maternal transmission within a patrilineal genealogy. In large part it’s in the Gospel of Matthew already, which opens with “an account of the birth of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham.” His Abrahamic and Davidic lineage is then traced through Joseph, even though Joseph is not supposed to be his father, as if tacit adoption by Joseph sufficiently establishes Jesus to be son of David, son of Abraham.\textsuperscript{44} The virgin birth story in Matthew, though, doesn’t feature the agricultural metaphor of reproduction as sowing seed in a field/womb. The metaphor is used elsewhere in Matthew in a passage about Levirate marriage from the triple tradition.\textsuperscript{45} Still there’s no Matthean reference anywhere to the

\textsuperscript{44} Matthew 1.1-16.
\textsuperscript{45} Matthew 22.24-25.
seed (σπέρμα) of David, let alone to Jesus being from his seed, while Jesus is repeatedly said to be his son. Ignatius may be picking up the reference to the seed of David from Paul and conflating it with virgin birth in Matthew, regardless of the fact that Paul never mentioned parthenogenesis.  

The parallel statements in Ignatius about the conception and virgin birth of Jesus suggest that Mary herself was of Davidic lineage: Jesus was conceived “from the seed of David on the one hand (ἐκ σπέρματος μὲν Δαυιδ), and the Holy Spirit on the other hand;” he was born “both from Mary (ἐκ Μαρίας) and from God.” But it is merely suggested. And rerouting Jesus’ Davidic lineage through Mary rather than Joseph introduces even more problems than it solves so long as single-seed conception is assumed. If there’s only a paternal seed and Jesus had no father, how could he be born from the seed of David? Ignatius doesn’t say.

The author of the Ascension of Isaiah doesn’t say either. For the story of parthenogenesis in this text the Gospel of Matthew is also used. Matthew had quoted the prophecy in Isaiah 7.14 about a ‘virgin’ conceiving. And in this Christian pseudepigraphon attributed to the prophet, Isaiah has a vision of the descent and incarnation of the Lord, including his angelic transformation upon descent through each of the lower heavens. Isaiah reports the beginning of the end of the vision in these words:

And after this I looked, and the angel who spoke to me and led me said to me, ‘Understand, Isaiah, son of Amoz, because for this purpose was I sent from the Lord.’ And I saw a woman of the family of David the prophet whose name (was) Mary, and she (was) a virgin and was betrothed to a man whose name (was) Joseph, a carpenter, and he also (was) of the seed and family of the righteous David of Bethlehem in Judah. And he

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46 Romans 1.3; cf. 2 Timothy 2.8.
came into his lot. And when she was betrothed, she was found to be pregnant, and Joseph the carpenter wished to divorce her. But the angel of the Spirit appeared in this world, and after this Joseph did not divorce Mary; but he did not reveal this matter to anyone. And he did not approach Mary, but he kept her as a holy virgin, although she was pregnant. And he did not live with her for two months.\textsuperscript{49}

In Matthew, Isaiah 7.14 is quoted as prophecy fulfilled. In its historical context it is a brief and rather non-descript prophecy about a young woman (MT: יהלומשׂ; LXX: ἡ παρθένος) who will conceive and bear a son to be named Emanuel, God with us, that is, in the sense that God causes children to be born and gives signs to his prophets and so is with his people, not in the sense that the Lord himself would be incarnated as the child. But in the \textit{Ascension of Isaiah}, where Jesus pre-exists, the prophet foretells everything in Matthew, from the names of Mary and Joseph, to their betrothal, her pregnancy, his divorce plan, the visit of the angel to him, and his abstaining from sex with her until after the birth of Jesus.\textsuperscript{50} In the pseudepigraphon, Isaiah even prophesies that Mary will be of Davidic lineage, thus addressing if not entirely solving the problem in Matthew and Ignatius of biological inheritance by maternal transmission within a patrilineal genealogy.

Using Luke as well as Matthew, Justin addresses the problem in the much the same way as it is addressed in the \textit{Ascension of Isaiah}; he says that Mary herself was of Davidic lineage.\textsuperscript{51} Going further back to the protoplast per the Lukan genealogy, however, he says that Jesus came from Jacob, Isaac, Abraham and Adam via this daughter of David. According to Justin, “the fathers of girls are also considered the fathers of the children born to their daughters.”\textsuperscript{52} So in a

\textsuperscript{50} Matthew 1.18-25.
\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Dialogus cum Tryphone} 45.4; 68.5-6. See also \textit{First Apology} 32.14.
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Dialogus cum Tryphone} 100.3 Text: Bobichon 2003, 1:454-455. Translation: Falls 1948, 304. Cf. Luke 3.23-38, where Jesus comes from Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David but through
sense Jesus did have male progenitors: Mary’s (not Joseph’s) father, grandfather, etc. But unlike most biblical fathers’ daughters who bear grandchildren, great grandchildren, and so on, Mary wasn’t copulated with, Justin says, nor did Jesus have blood that came from paternal seed.

Jesus’ blood was “not from human seed (οὐκ ἐξ ἀνθρωπείου σπέρματος) but from a divine Power (ἀλλ’ ἐκ θείας δυνάμεως)” or in other words “from God’s Power (ἐκ δυνάμεως θεοῦ),” says the martyr. 53 This Power took the place of the seed that ordinarily supplies the bones, nerves and flesh. Justin’s understanding of conception and human embryology was single-seed. The body, including the blood, is from the seed of the father. 54 In the case of Jesus, however, his blood, and accordingly his bones and nerves and flesh also, were from God’s Power instead.

As for the vivification and animation of the embryo, Justin believed in a tripartite anthropology, with the body animated by the soul, and the soul vivified by the spirit. When he converted from Platonism to Christianity Justin stopped believing in the Platonic soul and started believing in more biblical models of the human spirit/soul and its incarnation. Hence, for him the soul is not incorporeal. It is not impassible. It is not immortal. It needs something further from God in order to live, namely the spirit or breath of life that vivifies Adam in Genesis 2.7. Before Platonism, Justin had tried Stoicism, and in Stoic fashion this spirit can overlap considerably with the rational faculty that humans have from the Logos.

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54 First Apology 19.1-5; 61.10.
Justin’s anthropology was tripartite, in terms of death, that is; so after the soul ceases to animate the body, then the spirit/reason might continue to vivify the soul long enough for the soul to be punished. But in terms of birth and life in a mundane body, because he believed that the soul is corporeal, passible and mortal like the body, his anthropology was essentially bipartite, with the spirit/reason vivifying the soul-body. In his reading of Genesis chapters 1-3, Justin doesn’t identify the molded Adam in 2.7 with the soul, and the garments of skin in 3.21 with the body, as some interpreters of Genesis did. For Justin, the soul and body of the protoplast were created together and vivified at once by the spirit. In his psycho-embryological speculations, then, Justin favors the idea that souls “come into being with their individual bodies (μετὰ τῶν ἰδίων σωμάτων).” He favors this idea over the idea that souls come into being “altogether individually (ὅλως κατ᾽ ἰδίαν)” and outside their bodies, as a Platonist might say.  

If the soul comes into being with its individual body, and if it’s corporeal, passible and mortal like the body, it could be from the paternal seed along with the bones, nerves, flesh and blood. In his extant writings, Justin doesn’t say that the soul is from the paternal seed. But he does contrast spirit/reason and soul by saying that the spirit is from God, which at least suggests that the soul is from somewhere else, such as the father. Be that as it may, for Justin souls plainly do not pre-exist as they do in Platonism.

The issue of Jesus’ soul is not one that Justin raises directly. He does say that Jesus had a soul however. When Jesus was born, “the entire Rational Principle (τὸ λογικὸν τὸ ὅλον) appeared for our sake and became Christ (Χριστὸν γενονέναι): body (καὶ σῶμα) and reason (λόγον) and soul

56 His work *De anima* is lost.
Assuming that his anthropological beliefs and his embryological speculations apply to Christ incarnate, Justin must have believed that Jesus’ soul was corporeal, passible and mortal too. It probably came into being with his body. There’s not enough information in Justin’s writings, though, to decide once and for all whether he understood it to be from the same divine Power that Jesus’ bones, nerves, flesh and blood were. Perhaps it was.

Jesus’ soul didn’t pre-exist, at any rate. The incarnation here is not the incarnation of a pre-existent human soul within a body. It may not be as straightforward as the incarnation of the Rational Principle within a soul-body either. It seems that Justin understood the Word to have become a human being with a spirit/reason, a soul, and a body. After various transformations and appearances in the Christian Old Testament, the Logos became human and therefore was comprised of three things, two of which he had not been before. The Word became Jesus’ soul and body as well as his spirit/reason. Jesus’ spirit/reason would have been from the Word, intuitively and tautologically enough, while his soul perhaps would have been from the same divine Power that his body was.

While Justin harmonizes the two ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth like his fellow proto-orthodox Christians, he leaves Mary to contribute nothing biological to her child. In this he’s unlike many of them who understood Jesus’ body/flesh to be from Mary, such as the authors of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Take Ignatius as a much earlier example. He understands Jesus to be “both fleshly (σαρκικός) and spiritual ... both from Mary (ἐκ Μαρίας) and from God; Jesus was conceived “from the seed of David on the one hand (ἐκ σπέρματος μέν

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Δαυίδ), and the Holy Spirit on the other.” The fleshly part is from Mary and the Davidic seed, irrespective of whatever way it is that the seed is supposed to be transmitted maternally, with the the spiritual part being from God and the Spirit.

By contrast, Justin understands Jesus to have been born through Mary. Justin would rather say ‘through’ (διά), which is what he always says in his First Apology and most of the time in his Dialogue with Trypho. He’s uncomfortable saying ‘from’ (ἀπό, ἐκ), which he says in only three unguarded passages of the dialogue. In two other passages he actually changes ‘from’ to ‘through.’ He changes it once while quoting Old Testament Christian scripture: “from the womb (ἐκ γαςτρὸς)” in Psalm 109 (LXX) is changed to “through the womb (διὰ γαςτρὸς).” And he changes it again within his own writing: “from a virgin (ἐκ παρθένου)” is changed to “through a virgin (διὰ παρθένου).”

According to Justin’s type of incarnation through parthenogenesis, therefore, Mary contributes nothing or almost nothing biological. Jesus’ blood is “not from human seed,” let alone from his mother. It’s “from a divine Power (ἐκ θείας δυνάμεως)” or in other words “from

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60 First Apology 22.5; 31.7; 32.14; 33.1; 46.5; 54.8; 63.16; also Dialogus cum Tryphone 43.1; 45.4; 48.2; 50.1; 57.3; 63.1, 3; 68.1; 75.4; 84.2; 85.2; 87.2; 100.2-4, 6; 101.1; 105.1; 113.3; 120.1; 127.4.
61 Dialogus cum Tryphone 43.7; 66.4; 84.1.
63 Dialogus cum Tryphone 66.1. Text: Bobichon 2003, 1:362-363. For all of these references to birth through and from the virgin in Justin’s writings, see Bobichon 2003, 2:700-701 n.4, who notes that Valentinians were also uncomfortable saying ‘from;’ see also de Aldama 1970, 66.
God’s Power (ἐκ δυνάμεως θεοῦ).” Yet, Justin wants to trace Jesus’ Davidic and Abrahamic lineage all the way back to Adam via Mary.  

The blood of Christ is not from human seed, because Jesus has no father, human or otherwise. Justin maintains but negates the agricultural metaphor of human reproduction. The Lukan infancy narrative itself features this ubiquitous metaphor of human reproduction as sowing seed in a field/womb where a plant and fruit might then grow. In Luke, Elisabeth refers to Jesus as the fruit (ὁ καρπὸς) of Mary’s womb. And Mary herself, in magnifying the Lord, is made to refer to “our fathers,” somehow inclusive of Jesus’ progenitors, as Abraham and his seed (τῷ σπέρματι); by metonymy the Abrahamic seed sown in the field of woman after woman signifies the fruit of generations.

How the seed of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and later David was sown in Mary’s womb is a problem already in Luke. The agricultural metaphor is maintained and negated there when Mary is supposed not to ‘know a man,’ and Joseph’s paternity is denied. Justin addresses the problem, which is more than Luke does, by tracing Jesus’ lineage through Mary. But again this introduces as many problems as it solves, especially for Justin who believes that Jesus’ blood was from God’s Power, and who prefers to say that Jesus was born through Mary, not from her.

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65 Cf. Goodenough 1923/1968, 242: “These statements [e.g. that Christ was a human among humans but not from human parents] together with Justin’s declaration that Christ was not of human seed, are all made to prove that He was born of a Virgin. But they go much further than they need to go for such a purpose, since they deny to Christ all relationships with the human race, and their implication is not softened by admitting any contribution which the Virgin made to the formation of the God-Man.”
68 Luke 1.34; 3.23.
So much, then, for these proto-orthodox solutions to the problem of how Jesus could be born from the seed of David without a father in the Davidic line. While Ignatius at least suggested a solution to that problem, he neither addressed nor solved the other problems that were introduced with the idea of Jesus’ virgin birth, namely how Mary conceived if not vaginally, and how Jesus entered her womb, assuming that he pre-existed. The solution to those problems required the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Mary in Luke, which Ignatius didn’t use. The bishop used Matthew, as did the author of the *Ascension of Isaiah*. The Matthean appearance of the angel to Joseph was no help in solving the problems, though; appearance to Mary, the mother, was required. Aristides may have used the Lukan infancy narrative, but he didn’t use the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Mary. Justin and the author of the *Letter of the Apostles* used it and solved the problems. They did so similarly and also differently. The solution is less efficient in Justin’s writings, more efficient in the *Letter of the Apostles*.

Imaginative reading of the Lukan annunciation allowed for the development of the strange idea that Mary conceived with her ear as she listened to Gabriel speak the word of God to her. The idea of aural conception is found in the *Proto-Gospel of James*, which may have been written before or after the time of Justin Martyr in the middle of the second century. As I argued above, however, the word from which Mary conceives there isn’t the divine Word; the idea of Jesus’ virgin birth isn’t harmonized with the idea of his pre-existence in that text. Hence, even though the author of the *Proto-Gospel of James* solves the problem of how the virgin Mary conceived, and even though that solution could double as a solution to the further problem of how the pre-existent Jesus entered her womb, the further problem wasn’t one at all for the author, and it’s not solved in the text.
It was indeed a problem for proto-orthodox Christians with their belief that Jesus pre-existed, and it’s solved in the writings of Justin Martyr, albeit inefficiently. Justin has the pre-existent Jesus incarnated through aural conception and auto-parthenogenesis, meaning that Jesus takes the place of his own would-be father. There are two heavenly descents involved. First the angel Gabriel descends from heaven to make the announcement to Mary. She conceives aurally from the word that he speaks to her about the Spirit and the power that will come upon and overshadow her. For Justin, these are the Spirit and the Power of God, with which he also identifies the divine Word. So it’s the pre-existent Jesus as Logos who then comes upon and overshadows Mary, causing her to become pregnant. Again according to Justin, Jesus’ blood is “not from human seed but from a divine Power” or in other words “from God’s Power.” His blood, bones, nerves and flesh are from himself, apparently, as Jesus the Word/Spirit/Power of God takes the place of his own would-be father. As paradoxical as it is, Mary’s biological contribution turns out to be insignificant at best even after Justin goes to the trouble of rerouting Jesus’ genealogy matrilineally and placing her in the Davidic line.

Thus following Gabriel’s annunciation to Mary, there’s a second heavenly descent, and the pre-existent Logos does what the angel told her would be done. He comes upon and overshadows her. This is in a passage from Justin’s *First Apology*, where Justin doesn’t actually refer to aural conception:

But lest some people, not understanding the aforementioned prophecy, should charge against us the things we charge against the poets, who said that Zeus came to women for the sake of sexual gratification, let us try to elucidate the words. So the phrase, ‘Behold the virgin will conceive [Isaiah 7.14 / Matthew 1.23],’ signifies that the virgin conceived even though she was not copulated with; for if she had been copulated with by anyone whatsoever, she would have no longer been a virgin. But God’s Power (δύναμις θεοῦ)

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came upon the virgin and overshadowed her and caused her to become pregnant, despite being a virgin [Luke 1.34-35].

Indeed the angel of God sent at that time to this virgin announced the good news to her, saying [Luke 1.26-28]: ‘Behold, you will conceive in your womb [Luke 1.31] from (the) Holy Spirit (ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου) [Matthew 1.20], and you will call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins [Matthew 1.21],’ as those who recorded everything concerning our Savior Jesus Christ taught. We have come to believe them because also through the aforementioned Isaiah the prophetic Spirit said that this would happen, as we indicated before.

Now it is right to understand the Spirit (τὸ πνεῦμα) and the Power from God (τὴν δύναμιν τὴν παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ) as none other than the Word (οὐδὲν ἄλλο ... ἢ τὸν λόγον), who is even God’s firstborn (πρωτότοκος τῷ θεῷ), Moses the aforementioned prophet disclosed. And this (τοῦτο) came upon the virgin and overshadowed her and caused her to become pregnant, not through copulation but through Power (διὰ δυνάμεως). 70

The word spoken to Mary is not identified with the divine Word here. Instead the Logos is identified with the Spirit and Power that the angel tells her about in his annunciation. And so the pre-existent Jesus doesn’t enter her womb aurally; he comes upon and overshadows her.

Elsewhere in Justin’s writings, the martyr does refer to aural conception. In his Dialogue with Trypho, Justin sets up a reverse parallel between Eve and Mary: both are virgins and conceive aurally, though the father of Eve’s offspring, the serpent, is destroyed by Mary’s child. Besides being reversed, the parallel is strained in that Eve listens to the wicked snake, while Mary listens to Gabriel:

And as we find it written in the memoirs of his apostles that he is the Son of God, and as we say that he is the Son, we have understood that he existed (ὄντα), and that before all creatures (πρὸ πάντων ποιημάτων) he proceeded (προελθόντα) from the Father by his Power and Will, he who is addressed as Wisdom ... in the words of the prophets; and [sc. we have understood] that he became a human being through the virgin, so that in the way in which (διὰ ταύτης τῆς ὁμοιότητος) the disobedience (παρακοή) from the serpent began, in this way (διὰ ταύτης τῆς ὁμοιότητος) also it might be destroyed.

For although Eve was a virgin and undefiled, she conceived (σύλλαβοντα) the word from the serpent (τὸν λόγον τὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ ὅψεως), and she gave birth to disobedience (παρακοήν) and death. The virgin Mary, on the other hand, received (λαβοῦσα) faith and joy as the angel Gabriel announced to her the good tidings that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon her, and that the Power of the Highest would overshadow her, and that

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70 First Apology 33.3-6. Text and translation: Minns & Parvis 2009, 172-175.
therefore the holy child begotten from her would be the Son of God [Luke 1:35], and she answered: ‘Let it be with me according to your saying (κατὰ τὸ ῥῆμά σου) [Luke 1:38].’ And in this way (διὰ ταύτης) he was begotten, concerning whom we have shown that so many passages of scripture were spoken. And through him God destroys both the serpent and those angels and humans who came to resemble it (τὸν τε ὃφιν καὶ τοὺς ὅμοιωθέντας ἄγγελους καὶ ἀνθρώπους), but he produces an escape from death for those who repent of their sins and believe in him.\textsuperscript{71}

Justin doesn’t openly suggest even metaphorically that Gabriel fathered Jesus as the serpent might be understood to have impregnated Eve. Still there’s tension here, which was seen to be the case in the \textit{Proto-Gospel of James} too. The idea of aural conception solves the problem of how Mary conceived, but it also facilitates unwelcomed misunderstanding about angelic paternity. The tension is diffused in the \textit{Proto-Gospel of James} as Joseph erroneously suspects a repeat of the garden story in which an evil angel seduces Mary, like Eve was seduced by the snake. Readers of the text may well have suspected the same thing from the idea of aural conception since metaphorically it has Gabriel impregnating Mary by his speech. The author of the \textit{Proto-Gospel of James} seems to be cognizant of this and seeks to correct any misunderstanding. Joseph’s suspicions of angelic paternity are mistaken because he and the literalist reader suspects a diabolic angel, and because he suspects vaginal conception, when what happened according to the text is that Mary conceived aurally from the word of God. The word was spoken by an angel. It was spoken by Gabriel the angel of the Lord, however, who didn’t have sex with Mary in any actual way. That was my argument above.

Here in this passage from the \textit{Dialogue with Tryphon}, Justin doesn’t diffuse the tension between Eve and Mary, the snake and Gabriel, by having Joseph and the literalist reader mistakenly suspect angelic paternity of Jesus. Justin doesn’t even go as far as the author of the

\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Dialogus cum Tryphone} 100.4-6. Text: Bobichon 2003, 1:454-457. Translation: Falls 1948, 304-305.
Proto-Gospel of James and say that Mary conceived from the word of God spoken to her by the angel. Justin leaves aural conception all but unstated. Why?

I would argue that the martyr is anticipating and responding to a suggestion that Gabriel impregnated Mary as he made the announcement to her. Justin wants to set up the parallel between Eve and Mary, and he does so, but all the while he recognizes the possibility of misunderstanding. He can’t trust an angel, not even Gabriel, around Mary. Or rather, he can’t trust his readers not to misunderstand. So he downplays the metaphor. To return to the passage from his First Apology for a minute, Justin seems to trust the pre-existent Jesus around Mary, sort of. He doesn’t want anyone to misunderstand and “charge against us the things we charge against the poets, who said that Zeus came to women for the sake of sexual gratification.” Mary was “not copulated with; for if she had been copulated with (ἐὰν γὰρ ἐσυνοισάθη) by anyone whatsoever (ὑπὸ δυνάμεως), she would have no longer been a virgin.” What happened was the pre-existent Jesus as the divine Word/Spirit/Power “came upon the virgin and overshadowed her and caused her to become pregnant, not through copulation (οὐ διὰ συνοισίας) but through Power (διὰ δυνάμεως).”

Justin’s solution to the problems of how Mary conceived if not vaginally and how the pre-existent Jesus entered her womb is inefficient, and it’s not because aural conception is left all but unstated in his writings. His solution is inefficient because of its two heavenly descents, those of the angel Gabriel followed by the pre-existent Jesus as the divine Word/Spirit/Power. The two descents come from the Gospel of Luke, though Jesus doesn’t pre-exist there. In Luke, Gabriel descends to tell Mary about another descent of sorts, that of the Spirit and power that will come upon and overshadow her. Justin maintains the first descent of the angel. He maintains

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72 First Apology 33.3-6. Text and translation: Minns & Parvis 2009, 172-175.
the second descent as well, but Justin identifies the pre-existent Jesus from his Logos theology with the Spirit and Power of God so that Jesus takes the place of his own would-be father.

In the *Letter of the Apostles*, the pre-existent Jesus is incarnated through aural conception and auto-parthenogenesis too. There’s only one heavenly descent involved, however. Jesus the divine Word is clothed with God’s Wisdom and Power as he’s about to descend from heaven. Then as in the *Ascension of Isaiah* but not in Justin’s writings, angelic transformation occurs upon descent to earth. Having been transformed to look like the angel Gabriel, the divine Word/Wisdom/Power makes the announcement to Mary, and in so doing enters through her ear into her heart and womb, where the Word becomes flesh.

This highly efficient solution to the problems is supposed to be an apostolic account of the risen Jesus’ instruction for harmonizing the Johannine prologue with the Lukan infancy narrative and its appearance of Gabriel to Mary. After an account of the doubting Thomas episode from the Gospel of John, the male apostles record Jesus saying:

> When I was to come down from the Father of all and pass by the heavens, I put on the Wisdom of the Father (αἰῶνια ὁμοίως Ἃγιόν ἡμῶν), and I put on the Power of his might (αἰῶνια ἁγιασμός ἡμῶν) [cf. Luke 1.35]. I was in the heavens, and I passed by the archangels and the angels in their likeness (ὁπογενεῖον) as if I were one of them among the rulers and authorities .... For I became all things in everything so that I might fulfill the Father’s plan of salvation, the glorious work of him who sent me, and return to him. For you know <don’t you> that the angel Gabriel brought the good news to Mary [Luke 1.26-38]? ... So on that day, when I took the form of the angel Gabriel (εὐαγγελίζων Ἰωάννης), I appeared to Mary, and I spoke to her (Ἰησοῦς ἔφεσε); her heart received me, and she believed. I molded myself (ἀναλαμβάνω καταλαμβάνω), I entered her womb (ἀναλάμβανος ἄνθρωπος), and I became flesh (ἀνεγέρθη Χριστός) [John 1.14]; because for myself I alone was servant to Mary (ἐγὼ ἑγέρθη πασί οὖν ὑμῖν ἐγείρει τὸν χριστὸν κατὰ τὴν γυναῖκα) in a perceptible likeness of an angel (διὸ ὑπάρχεις εἰς παρθένον γενετος).  

The *Letter of the Apostles* would have been written in Greek sometime in the last half of the second century, but it only survives in a Coptic manuscript from the fourth or fifth century, in a

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Latin fragment from that approximate date as well, and in a number of Ethiopic manuscripts from the sixteenth century and later.\textsuperscript{74}

It happens that the Latin fragment covers some of this passage. Badly damaged, it has been restored as follows:

When I came down from the Father almighty and passed by the heavens, I put on the Wisdom of the Father (\textit{sapientia ind\textit{u}t\textit{u}s su\textit{(m)} pat\textit{r}is}) and the Power of the Holy Spirit by the Power of the Father (\textit{vi}r\textit{t}u\textit{te sp\textit{(i)ritu)s s\textit{(a)n)c\textit{(t)i pe\textit{r} vir\textit{t}(ute\textit{m}) pat\textit{r}is}}). And I passed by the archangels and the angels in the appearance of their likeness (\textit{in simil\textit{u}tudinem effigies il\textit{lo}rum) as if I were one of them among the powers and rulers and principalities ....\textsuperscript{75}

Here in the restored Latin text, the Word is clothed with “the Wisdom of the Father and the Power of the Holy Spirit by the Power of the Father,” whereas in the Coptic text he just puts on “the Wisdom of the Father” and “the Power of his might.” The Ethiopic text agrees more with the Coptic than the Latin: “When I was coming from the Father <of> the all, as I passed through the heavens, having put on the Wisdom of the Father I was clothed with the Power of his might.”\textsuperscript{76} God’s Wisdom and Spirit being interchangeable, this a reference to the annunciation in Luke, where Gabriel tells Mary that “the Holy Spirit (\textit{p\textit{v}e\textit{u}μα \textit{z\textit{g}ιον}) will come upon you, and the power of the Most High (δ\textit{ό}να\textit{μ}ις υ\textit{ψ}ί\textit{σ}\textit{τ}ο\textit{u}) will overshadow you.”\textsuperscript{77}

What is striking is that in the \textit{Letter of the Apostles}, the angel doesn’t tell Mary that this will happen in the future; the risen Jesus is telling the male apostles that as the divine Word he was clothed with God’s Wisdom and Power in heaven before he made the announcement to Mary. God’s Spirit/Wisdom and Power then implicitly come upon and overshadow her at the same time that Logos appears to her in the form of the angel Gabriel. The descent of the angel

\textsuperscript{74} See Hills 2009, 4-13; and Schmidt 1919/1967 4-22.
\textsuperscript{77} Luke 1.35.
and the descent of the pre-existent Jesus, which were two descents in Justin’s writings, are one and the same descent here: the Word/Wisdom/Power descends as Gabriel.

Reference to the Johannine prologue and its incarnate Word (ὁ λόγος σάρξ ἐγένετο) in the Coptic text of the *Letter of the Apostles* is somewhat subtle. Jesus says: “I appeared to Mary, and I spoke to her (ἀφ’ ἡμῶν) .... I entered her womb (ἀνεστηκεν ἀπὸ θεοτόκου), and I became flesh (ἀνάστηκεν ὡς ἄγας) [John 1.14].” But in the underlying Greek, it would have been unnecessary for the Word to be specified as the one who spoke to her since the noun (λόγος) is verbal (λέγω, εἶπον). The Johannine reference is more blatant in the Ethiopic text, where he says: “I appeared to Mary in the form of the angel Gabriel and spoke to her .... I, the Word, entered her and became flesh [John 1.14].” The Ethiopic text also features an introduction to the letter that the Coptic text doesn’t. In it, the male apostles state:

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is he who was sent from God almighty ... the Word who became flesh [John 1.14] in the womb of the virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit [cf. Matthew 1.18, 20; Luke 1.35] and was born not by the lust of the flesh but by the will of God [John 1.13], and was wrapped <in swaddling cloths> in Bethlehem [Luke 2.7] – he who was to be killed [cf. Matthew 2] was nursed and grew up.

Such a thorough and compressed harmonization of the Johannine prologue with the Matthean and Lukan infancy narratives may not derive from the Greek that underlies the Coptic text. But this variant manuscript reading of John 1.13 as if it were about the Word (singular) and his virgin birth instead of those (plural) who received him and became children of God through spiritual rebirth, probably at their baptism, is attested by Irenaeus in the late second century, then by Tertullian, and so forth.

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81 John 1.12-13 can be connected with baptism and spiritual rebirth in John 1.33; 3.1-10.
As was seen above, the variant reading of John 1.13 is also attested in a rewriting of the *Proto-Gospel of James*, that is, the *Armenian Infancy Gospel*. In that sixth-century translation from Syriac, Gabriel tells Mary that the conception and birth of the Logos incarnate will be “not from humankind, neither from blood nor from the will of man [John 1.13],” and he tells her that “The Holy Spirit shall come upon you and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you [Luke 1.35], and God the Word shall become embodied in you [cf. John 1.14].”\(^{82}\) Then at the conclusion of his announcement in that gospel it’s narrated that “as the holy Virgin consented, God the Word penetrated through her ear.”\(^{83}\)

The problems of how the virgin Mary conceived and how the pre-existent Jesus entered her womb are solved as inefficiently in that harmonized gospel as in the writings of Justin Martyr centuries before. There are two descents, one of Gabriel, and then another of the pre-existent Jesus as the Logos. Again the solution to the problems in the *Letter of the Apostles* is more efficient because the Word is transformed to look like the angel and has already been clothed with the Wisdom and Power of God. So when the risen Jesus instructs the male apostles to harmonize the Johannine prologue and the Lukan infancy narrative in this letter, he not does tell them what Gabriel tells her in Luke. That would be redundant. The Spirit and Power of God aren’t going to come upon and overshadow Mary after the appearance of the angel to her; they already have. They already have because the pre-existent Logos was clothed with them before he was transformed to look like Gabriel. When he appeared to her, the Spirit and Power did too.

Thus the problems are solved most efficiently here. One of the forces driving this efficiency is the author’s anticipation of and response to the suggestion that Gabriel impregnated Mary as he made the announcement to her, I would argue. Justin left aural conception all but

\(^{82}\) *Armenian Infancy Gospel* 5.3-5. Translation: Terian, 2008, 21-23.

unstated and didn’t want anyone to misunderstand the metaphor of her conceiving with her ear as she listens to Gabriel. But Justin did maintain the Lukan appearance of the angel to Jesus’ mother. In his writings, Gabriel is still there suspiciously enough at about the time that she conceives. The author of the Letter of the Apostles trusts the angel even less than Justin did. In this text, Gabriel is replaced by Mary’s child, who can be trusted. The pre-existent Jesus undergoes angelic transformation in order to prevent any angel from having sex with her even metaphorically: “So on that day, when I took the form of the angel Gabriel, I appeared to Mary, and I spoke to her (ἀπὸ ἑξῆς ἡμῶν); her heart received me, and she believed. I molded myself (ὕπησαν Χριστὸς ἀπὸ ἑαυτοῦ) into her womb, and I became flesh [John 1.14]; because for myself I alone was servant to Mary (επει ηὐρίσκει ἡ ὄγγε τὴν ἁγίας ἑαυτῶν ἡ Μαρία) in a perceptible likeness of an angel.”84 Jesus took the form of Gabriel lest anyone else be ‘servant to Mary.’ It was Jesus unannounced and unaccompanied. He spoke into her ear, not the angel. He even molded his own fetal body, like Adam was molded according to the biblical creation account, apparently so that none of God’s angels would do even that much.

INCARNATION OF THE PRE-EXISTENT JESUS AT BAPTISM

While in the Letter of the Apostles the divine Word speaks into the virgin Mary’s ear and becomes flesh in her womb, in the Gospel of John itself the Logos is not incarnated through birth, much less through parthenogenesis or auto-parthenogenesis and aural conception. Arguably in John the Word becomes flesh at Jesus’ baptism when the Spirit descends upon him and possesses his adult body.85

As representative of those who believed that Jesus pre-existed and was incarnated at baptism, I group together under this heading members of the Johannine community that produced the Gospel and Letters of John. Along with them, I would also group together the author of the *Shepherd of Hermas*, some Ebionites (according to Epiphanius and perhaps Tertullian), Cerinthus, some Basilidians (according to Hippolytus and Clement of Alexandria), Sethians, and Valentinians. I won’t be as thorough here in my treatment of the mid to late second century as I have been under the previous headings and subheadings of *Chapter One* and of this *Chapter* because my focus is the proto-orthodox doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis; virgin birth or at least birth is what matters to me, not baptism. To make my basic point, I only need to show that the two ideas of Jesus’ pre-existent and virgin birth were originally separate. It has already been shown that Jesus doesn’t pre-exist in Matthew and Luke, where the sole New Testament accounts of parthenogenesis are found. Conversely it has also already been shown that the pre-existent Jesus is not born to a virgin in the letters of Paul, the pastoral letters, or the Letter to the Hebrews. Here I will show that while Jesus does pre-exist in the Gospel and Letters of John, the idea of his virgin birth is not to be found in these New Testament texts either.\(^{86}\)

Sethians and Valentinians did accommodate virgin birth within their christologies and so might seem similar to proto-orthodox Christians. They were indeed like them in that they believed in Jesus’ parthenogenesis. Despite this accommodation, however, Sethians and Valentinians emphasized Jesus’ baptism as the moment of the incarnation. His human or even superhuman spirit and soul could be incarnated through virgin birth, but what made him the

\(^{86}\) Whereas, e.g., Bruner (2012, 32, 34, 52-53; also 424-425, 488-489) sees allusions to Jesus’ virgin birth in John 1.13, and his interpretation of John 1.14 is that the Word became flesh “about ... the year 6 B.C.”
Christ was his baptismal possession by the heavenly Savior. And that wasn’t what Ignatius believed – or the author or the Ascension of Isaiah or Aristides or Justin Martyr or the author of the Letter of the Apostles. They believed that their pre-existent Jesus was incarnated through virgin birth, as did other proto-orthodox Christians such as Irenaeus in the late second century.

Proto-orthodox Christians had to work hard in order to shift the moment of the incarnation from Jesus’ baptism to his conception and virgin birth. Why would the Spirit descend on Jesus and inspire him at baptism if he were already a divine pre-existent being? Heavenly beings generally don’t inspire other heavenly beings in Jewish literature; they possess humans. In his Dialogue with Trypho, Justin Martyr admits that this “truly seems to be a difficulty (ἀληθῶς ... ἀπόρημα δοξεῖ εἶναι).” Still he says that Christ incarnate “approached the river not because he himself was in want (οὐχ ὡς ἐνδεξα αὐτῶν) of either baptism or the Spirit that came down upon him in the shape of a dove ... but for the sake of the human race.” Likewise the Spirit didn’t descend for his sake but for the sake of others so that they would recognize him. When God called Jesus his Son and told him that he had begotten him on the day of his baptism and anointing with the Spirit, it didn’t signify any change in his status; it signified that “his ‘birth’ happened for people when they first recognized who he was.”\(^{87}\) Even after Justin and these forced readings of the synoptic gospels, Irenaeus had to struggle against baptismal incarnation within the christologies of Cerinthus, Sethians and Valentinians. Baptismal incarnation and possession by God’s Spirit or Wisdom was more Jewish than was incarnation of a divine pre-existent being through birth, to say nothing of virgin birth.

In a sense the shift from baptism to conception and virgin birth began with the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke (and their sources), as I pointed out above. But that was a shift

in the moment of inspiration by the Spirit; it wasn’t a shift in the incarnation of the pre-existent Jesus, as he did not pre-exist for them. In their rewriting of Mark, the authors of Mathew and Luke kept the descent of the Spirit at Jesus’ baptism and simply redistributed the Spirit’s activity enough to cover his conception and parthenogenesis. It was part of their defense against reports of Mary’s early pregnancy and was unrelated to the incarnation of a pre-existent Jesus.

Gospel and Letters of John

Any actual shift in the moment of Jesus’ incarnation as a pre-existent being was largely interrupted by the writing of the fourth gospel. Indeed it may have been the composition of this New Testament text (after Mark) that made the shift from baptism to conception and virgin birth as urgent as it was for proto-orthodox Christians, first because of the baptismal incarnation in John, and second because of the lack of a Johannine infancy narrative or reference to virgin birth. Paul believed that Jesus was incarnated as a pre-existent being through birth, so had his letters been the only New Testament texts written and subsequently used by proto-orthodox Christians, there would have been no shift necessary from baptism to conception and birth – Paul never mentioned Jesus’ baptism anyhow, at least not in his extent letters. No shift would have been necessary in the development of the proto-orthodox doctrine of Incarnation through virgin birth, just introduction of the idea of parthenogenesis. But the Gospel of John was written (again after Mark). And this other and even more prominently pre-existent Jesus, the Johannine Word, becomes flesh at baptism.

Jesus pre-exists in John, which may or may not have been written with knowledge of the synoptics. Whether it was written with knowledge of Matthew and Luke, the fourth gospel doesn’t feature an infancy narrative. Its first mundane scene is Jesus’ baptism, as in Mark.
According to the Johannine prologue, “the Word became flesh (ὁ λόγος σάρξ ἐγένετο) and tabernacled among us (καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν), and we have seen his glory.” What follows is not a reference to Jesus’ birth, however. It’s a reference to his baptism, albeit indirect: “John,” that is, the Baptist, “testified concerning him and cried out, saying, ‘This was the one of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me outranks me because he existed before me.’” 88 The Johannine Jesus has a human father, mother and siblings, but his birth is not narrated because the baptism is what is significant to the author. 89 The Baptist is mentioned in the prologue even before the Word becomes flesh. He’s sent by God to testify in order that all may believe through him. And it’s at the baptism that he testifies. 90

Incarnation of John’s pre-existent Jesus is fundamentally different from Paul’s. Whereas Paul in the middle of the first century never mentioned his baptism, some fifty years later it would be the very moment of his incarnation in the Gospel of John. And while Paul at least had two brief statements about Jesus’ birth from a woman and his birth from the seed of David after the flesh, anything along those lines in John is minimized. Paul said that “God sent forth (ἐξαπέστειλεν) his Son, born from a woman, born under the law,” and that “God sent (πέμψας) his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh.” 91 God the Father also sends the Son in the fourth gospel (both terms ἀποστέλλω and πέμπω are used). Sent by the Father, he descends from

89 Father, mother, and siblings: John 1.45 (cf. 6.42); 2;1-5, 12; 7.1-10; 19:25-27. The baptism also would have been significant to the author because of rivalry with the Baptist’s disciples.
90 John 1.6-7, 19-34.
91 Galatians 4.4; Romans 8.3.
heaven. He comes into the world. But neither this sending nor this descending and Johannine advent are connected with Jesus’ birth.\(^{92}\)

The only possible direct reference to his birth in the fourth gospel is near the end in the passion narrative, where Pilate asks whether Jesus is a king, and he replies: “I was born for this (ἐγὼ εἰς τὸῦτο γεγέννημαι) and came into the world for this (καὶ εἰς τὸῦτο ἐλήλυθα εἰς τὸν κόσμον).”\(^{93}\) The reference to birth here could be taken with the reference to coming into the world, both referring to a single occasion. They could also be taken one after the other, referring to a birth followed by an advent, especially the descent of the Spirit at baptism.

Either way, birth has two meanings in John. The reference here in the passion narrative could be to the conception and literal birth of Jesus. Or as elsewhere in John it could be a reference to spiritual rebirth at baptism.

The first would imply that the Word became flesh as Jesus was conceived and born; it was then that the Son was sent, that he descended from heaven and came into the world. This would be a lot to imply in such a short reference and at the conclusion of the Johannine good news, however. Perhaps it’s implied in the Baptist’s testimony, though, in the prologue and when he says once more from hindsight: “This is the one about whom I said, ‘There comes a man after me (ὅπισώ μου ἔρχεται ἄνήρ) who outranks me (ὅς ἐμπροσθέν μου γέγονεν) because he existed before me (ὅτι πρῶτος μου ἦν),’ that is, the ‘man (ἄνήρ)’ Jesus pre-existed and was incarnated at


\(^{93}\) John 18.37.
birth, perhaps, but not recognized until baptism. Still his birth is not narrated anywhere in John, and the inaugural event on earth in chapter 1 is the descent of the Spirit at Jesus’ baptism, as testified of by the Baptist.

The second meaning of γεννάω would imply that the Word became flesh as Jesus was reborn at baptism. During his talk with Nicodemus in chapter 3 about the kingdom of God, Jesus describes two births, one of flesh, i.e., literal birth, and another of water and the Spirit, i.e., baptism. “What has been born of the flesh is flesh (τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τῆς σαρκός σάρξ ἐστιν), and what has been born of the Spirit is spirit (καὶ τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ πνεῦματος πνεῦμα ἐστιν),” he tells Nicodemus. “Do not marvel because I said to you, ‘you must be born again from above (δεῖ ὑμᾶς γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν).’ The Spirit (τὸ πνεῦμα) blows where it wants, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from (πόθεν ἔρχεται) and where it is going. Thus is everyone who has been born of the Spirit (πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ πνεῦματος).”

In the passion narrative where he is replying to Pilate’s inquiry about whether he is a king, then, Jesus’ reference to ‘birth’ (γεγένημαι) could refer to his baptism, his rebirth, not his literal birth; and his reference to coming (ἐλήλυθα) into the world could refer to the advent of the Spirit.

Indeed, in John 6-8 his descent from heaven and coming into the world are privileged over his literal birth even as the s/Spirit is privileged over the flesh. When in the synagogue in Capernaum Jesus says that he’s the bread that descended from heaven, ‘the Jews’ grumble and say: “Is this not Jesus the son of Joseph (οὗχ οὗτός ἐστιν Ἰησοῦς ὁ υἱὸς Ἰωσήφ), whose father and

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94 John 1.30, also 1.15 and 1.27. Cf. Mark 1.7; Matthew 3.11; Luke 3.16. Whether or not the descent and incarnation of a pre-existent Baptist himself is assumed in the Gospel of John, later Christians assumed so. God does send the Baptist, who does come [from heaven?] in John 1.6-7. He’s probably the one who comes from earth, however, in contradistinction to the one who comes from above and from heaven, in John 3.31.

95 John 3.1-8.

96 John 18.37.
mother we know (οὐ ἡμεῖς οἴδαμεν τὸν πατέρα καὶ τὴν μητέρα)? How then does he say, ‘I have descended from heaven (πῶς νῦν λέγει ὦτι ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβέβηκα)?’” In chapter 6 Jesus goes on to say that the bread of life is his ‘flesh,’ and that in order to live eternally believers must eat it and drink his ‘blood.’ He also tells the disciples, however, that “the s/Spirit is the one that vivifies (τὸ πνεῦμα ἐστὶν τὸ ζωόποιον); the flesh is of no benefit (ἡ σάρξ οὐκ ὧφελεὶ σωδέν).” Later in chapter 7 the crowd listening to Jesus at the Feast of Tabernacles disagrees over his identity because of his human origin and birth place. Some of them say that he’s the Christ. Others say that “the Messiah does not come (μὴ ... ἔρχεται) from Galilee;” according to scripture, “the Messiah comes from the seed of David and from Bethlehem (ἐκ τοῦ σπέρματος Δαυίδ καὶ ἀπὸ Βηθλεέμ ... ὁ χριστὸς ἔρχεται), the village where David lived.” Back in the temple again, in chapter 8 Jesus says that he’s the light of the world, and the Pharisees say that his self-testimony is not true. He says: “Even if I testify concerning myself, my testimony is true because I know where I came from (πόθεν ἦλθον) and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from (πόθεν ἔρχομαι) or where I am going.” In these chapters the advent of the pre-existent Jesus is more important than where Jesus was born. His birth itself is relatively inconsequential and has little to do with the Word becoming flesh other than the Spirit’s need of a body to inspire or possess.

Jesus’ lineage and home town are distractions in these chapters, distractions from his pre-existence and heavenly provenance. That he was born is nowhere denied in them or anywhere else in the Gospel of John. Jesus has a father, mother, and siblings. But even though he does come from Galilee and may be expected to come from the seed of David, that coming is not

97 John 6.41-63.
98 John 7.40-42.
significant to the Johannine author.\textsuperscript{100} It was significant to Paul that Jesus had been born from the seed of David after the flesh. Paul said that “God sent forth his Son,” and Paul connected that sending with birth: the Son was sent forth and “born from a woman, born under the law.”\textsuperscript{101} The author of the Gospel of John, however, doesn’t connect the incarnation of the divine Word with the birth of Jesus. He seems to detach them. His Jews find descent from heaven to be incongruent with being born, and the incongruence is not exactly denied. Instead, the author privileges descent from heaven, minimizing Jesus’ birth, his coming from Galilee, and his expected coming from the seed of David. Flesh is even minimized categorically.

The coming that’s significant to the Johannine author is the descent of the pre-existent Jesus into the world, and this arguably happens at his baptism with its occurrence of the term descent, the first such occurrence in the Gospel of John. The Word becomes flesh as the Spirit descends (καταβάνων) upon Jesus in the water.\textsuperscript{102} The pre-existent Jesus can be characterized as the Spirit in fact. So Nicodemus doesn’t know where the baptismal Spirit “comes from and where it is going (πόθεν ἐρχεται καὶ ποῦ ὑπάγει),” just as the Pharisees don’t know where the pre-existent Jesus comes from or where he’s going (πόθεν ἐρχομαι ἡ ποῦ ὑπάγω).\textsuperscript{103} Put briefly, the Word was God (θεὸς ἢν ὃ λόγος),” and “God is Spirit (πνεῦμα ὃ θεὸς).”\textsuperscript{104} Hence the Word and Spirit are commensurate, and Jesus pre-existed as both. The Word was “life (ζωή)” and became

\textsuperscript{100} From Galilee, Nazareth to be precise, not Bethlehem: John 1.45-46; 7.41, 52; 18.5, 7-8. But see also John 4.44.
\textsuperscript{101} Galatians 4.4.
\textsuperscript{102} John 1.32-33, followed by occurrences of καταβάνω in 3.13; 6.33, 38, 41-42, 50-51, 58.
\textsuperscript{103} John 3.8; 8.14.
\textsuperscript{104} John 1.1; 4.24.
“flesh (σάρξ),” but “the Spirit is the one that vivifies (τὸ πνεῦμα ἐστὶν τὸ ζωοποιοῦν); the flesh is of no benefit (ἡ σάρξ οὐκ ὃψελεὶ οὐδέν).”

This baptismal incarnation is essentially a Jewish model akin to the incarnation of God’s Spirit or Wisdom by inspiration and possession of a human body, as in the synoptics. But in the case of the fourth gospel here Jesus is identified with the heavenly being possessing him, so he himself pre-exists, and he pre-exists as the divine Word as well as God’s Spirit. Recall that in the Parables of Enoch, for example, if Wisdom had found a human dwelling when she descended, it wouldn’t immediately follow that the people she inspired or possessed were themselves pre-existent thereafter, much less before the inspiration or possession occurred. They might be understood to have a pre-existent or else heavenly being inside their body, and they might even speak as that being. But without some identification between the figure doing the possessing and the person possessed, such people aren’t pre-existent beings by virtue of the possession; they are humans, born with a human spirit/soul, and then possessed by a heavenly being.

In the fourth gospel, Jesus is born with a human spirit or soul vivifying him until death, just as any other person. That could be called an incarnation, though it’s not significant to the Johannine author. He minimizes Jesus’ birth. Jesus is also inspired or possessed by God’s Spirit at his baptism, and that’s what is significant. In Mark and the other synoptics, Jesus is possessed at baptism too. There it could be called the incarnation of a heavenly being, namely the Spirit. But Jesus himself doesn’t pre-exist in the synoptics. He’s not identified with the heavenly being possessing him. In John he does and is. He’s identified with the divine Word, he’s characterized as the Spirit, and he speaks as God’s Son sent from heaven.

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105 John 1.4; 6.63.
Nevertheless, the particulars of this Johannine identification are at best vague prior to the baptism since there’s no infancy narrative. Leading up to it, the Spirit and Jesus are independent. The Baptist sees the Spirit descending towards Jesus, and he sees Jesus. The two aren’t one and the same at that time: “And John testified saying, ‘I saw the Spirit descending as a dove from heaven, and it remained upon him ....’”\textsuperscript{106}

At Jesus’ baptism, then the two are united. From that time forward the Spirit remains upon him, and he speaks as a divine pre-existent being throughout the rest of the gospel more or less. When Jesus dies on the cross, he exhales the human spirit or soul vivifying him, of course; he lays down his life, in Johannine language.\textsuperscript{107} The Spirit that possessed him at baptism, however, and that remained upon him thereafter is still inside his dead body as signified by the water that comes out from his post-mortem spear wound along with the blood. This is significant to the author, and testimony is given here as it was by the Baptist at the Spirit’s descent: “But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water (\(\alpha\,\iota\,\mu\alpha\,\kappa\alpha\,\omicron\,\upsilon\,\delta\omicron\nu\rho\)) came out. He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.”\textsuperscript{108}

The Johannine author verifies that the Spirit descended and remained upon Jesus from his baptism throughout his passion and even after his death. The Son of God, God, and Lamb of God suffers and dies. While he’s omnipotent and cannot be killed but has power to lay down his life and take it up again, and while he doesn’t feel enough human weakness to cause him to pray for the cup to be removed from him in the garden, Jesus conspicuously carries the cross by himself,

\textsuperscript{106} John 1.32-34. 
\textsuperscript{108} John 19.33-35. Cf. \textit{Martyrdom of Polycarp} 16, where the bishop is pierced and a dove exits the wound along with blood.
as opposed to the synoptic passion narratives where Simon of Cyrene carries it for him.\textsuperscript{109} It’s also conspicuous that he utters no cry of dereliction from the cross, as opposed to the Jesus of Mark and Matthew who cries: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”\textsuperscript{110}

These are adjustments to the gospel tradition, along with the adjustment that’s made to the story of the baptism so that the Spirit descends and remains upon Jesus; in the synoptics, which the Johannine author may or may not have known, the Spirit only descends. The adjustments could be directed against rival Christian belief that Jesus was temporarily possessed by the Spirit/Christ at baptism and then abandoned on the cross, or that Simon of Cyrene was the one crucified in place of Jesus. But if so, the Johannine author is not overt about it. Rivalry between Christians is likely reflected in Thomas’ refusal to believe without seeing and feeling Jesus’ body. That’s doubt about bodily resurrection, however, not the Logos incarnate.\textsuperscript{111}

For all these adjustments and the author’s verification that the Spirit descended and remained upon Jesus, there’s a major time-lapse in the Johannine Jesus’ pre-existence. After the baptism he speaks as a divine pre-existent being: he says that he existed before Abraham and even claims to be God.\textsuperscript{112} He existed before the patriarch was born, but was Jesus a pre-existent being from his own birth, before his baptism? It seems not. The Word would have been in heaven with God at the time of Jesus’ birth and throughout his adolescence and early adulthood, as would have the Spirit. It’s by no means clear from the Gospel of John that they are united until

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\textsuperscript{110} Mark 15.34; Matthew 27.46. There’s no cry of dereliction in Luke either.
\textsuperscript{111} John 20.24-29. For an argument that the christology in the Gospel of John as well as in 1-2 John is “antidocetic,” see Schnelle 1987/1992. Kinlaw (2005) argues that Johannine christology is an example of what she calls permanent possession or indwelling, and that it’s directed against what she calls temporary possession rather than what she calls metamorphosis with a non-material emphasis; thus it would not be ‘antidocetic’ on a narrow definition of ‘docetism.’
\textsuperscript{112} John 8.56-59.
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the Word becomes flesh at his baptismal possession, with the Spirit descending and remaining upon him. If the incarnation of the pre-existent Jesus happens at baptism in the Gospel of John, this would suggest that Jesus himself didn’t pre-exist and wasn’t the Son of God or the Messiah until then, leaving him a mere human before possession.

The author of the fourth gospel didn’t account for the time-lapse in Jesus’ pre-existence, if he even noticed it. It’s partially accounted for in 1 John. This Johannine text was written against rival members of the community after there had been a split regarding belief in Jesus and the incarnation. Some community members were denying that he was the Christ (ὅτι Ἰησοῦς οὐκ ἔστιν ὁ Χριστός), that is, they were denying Jesus, which according to 1 John, was to deny the Son (τὸν υἱὸν). They weren’t confessing that Jesus Christ came in flesh (ἐν σαρκί ἐληλυθότα), that is, they weren’t confessing Jesus (τὸν Ἰησοῦν). Apparently they also believed that Christ came through and by water alone (ὁ ἐλθὼν δι’ ὑδατος ... ἐν τῷ ὑδατι μόνον), not through or by blood (δι’ ... αἵματος ... ἐν τῷ αἵματι).

Scholarship has debated who these members of the Johannine community were and what their christology was. They may have been diverse and had multiple christologies between them, but one was most likely the belief that Jesus wasn’t the Messiah before his baptismal possession. Christ came by water. He didn’t come by blood or in flesh. The rival members of the community are described as antichrists, liars, deceivers and false prophets in 1 John; moreover in

113 1 John 2.22-23.
114 1 John 4.2-3; 2 John 7.
115 1 John 5.6.
116 For an overview of scholarship, see Streett 2011, especially 5-111. Streett (2011, 1-2) himself argues that the opponents were not ‘docetizing’ or ‘gnosticizing’ innovators but “Jewish apostates,” that is, from the Johannine community, “who returned to the synagogue.” Whereas DeConick (2013c) more recently argues that the Gospel of John itself is gnostic and so were the opponents in 1 John.
2 John they are not to be allowed into the houses of other members nor are they to be greeted.\textsuperscript{117} Their christologies weren’t necessarily that different from the christology in the Gospel of John, though. With some of them, the difference may have been that they noticed the time-lapse in Jesus’ pre-existence and didn’t try to account for it, instead further privileging descent from heaven over Jesus’ birth, and further minimizing the flesh.

In the fourth gospel, it had not been significant to the author that Jesus’ parents were known or that Jesus came (ἐρχεται) from Galilee whereas the Messiah comes (ὁ χριστὸς ἐρχεται) from the seed of David, according to scripture.\textsuperscript{118} The pre-existent Jesus had even told the Pharisees that they didn’t know where he comes (ἐρχομαι) from.\textsuperscript{119} Jesus’ birth, his coming from Galilee, and his expected coming from the seed of David were all minimized, as was the flesh categorically: “the s/Spirit is the one that vivifies (τὸ πνεῦμα ἐστιν τὸ ζωοποιοῦν); the flesh is of no benefit (ἡ σαρξ ὦκ ὡφελεὶ οὐδέν).”\textsuperscript{120}

In 1 John, the author opposes community members if they deny that Jesus is the Christ and thereby deny Jesus, whom he regards as the Son.\textsuperscript{121} He opposes them if they don’t confess that Jesus Christ came in flesh (ἐν σαρκὶ ἐληλυθότα) and thereby don’t confess Jesus.\textsuperscript{122} He asserts that Jesus the Son of God is “the one who came through water and blood, Jesus Christ, not by water alone but by water and by blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify, the Spirit and the water and the blood, and the three are in accord.”\textsuperscript{123}

\textsuperscript{117} 1 John 2.18-20; 2 John 10-11.  
\textsuperscript{118} John 6.42; 7.40-42.  
\textsuperscript{119} John 8.14.  
\textsuperscript{120} John 6.63.  
\textsuperscript{121} 1 John 2.22-23.  
\textsuperscript{122} 1 John 4.2-3; 2 John 7.  
\textsuperscript{123} 1 John 5.6-8.
The water followed by the blood here could be taken as references to baptism followed by crucifixion. And in the Gospel of John there’s the testimony about the blood and water that come from Jesus’ post-mortem spear wound. But the gospel reference is not to any advent of Jesus then, which would be out of place at his death; the blood and water signify Jesus’ humanity and the Spirit that descended upon him and was still inside his dead body. So in 1 John, the advent by blood must not refer to the crucifixion. The order of water and blood in 1 John must be a result of the back and forth between the author and his rivals in the community: they believe that Christ came by water alone at baptism; the author opposes them and asserts that Jesus, Jesus Christ, came also by blood. He came in flesh. And that would be through birth presumably.

If coming by blood and in flesh refer to birth in a body of flesh and blood, it’s interesting that the author does not shift the moment of incarnation from baptism to conception and birth. He doesn’t assert that Jesus Christ came by blood alone. He asserts both advents, by water of course and by blood as well. This would amount to one incarnation through birth and another at baptism, with the specifics yet to be determined. The author is trying to account for the time-lapse in Jesus’ pre-existence and to oppose the minimization of Jesus in the christology of his opponents. He’s not working to shift the moment of incarnation from baptism exclusively.

Proto-orthodox Christians, with their doctrine of Incarnation through virgin birth, would later assert that the pre-existent Jesus was not in want of baptism or the Spirit that descended upon him. But that’s not what the author of 1 John claims, and parthenogenesis isn’t mentioned anywhere in New Testament Johannine literature. It was proto-orthodox readers and a few copyists of the Gospel of John who added virgin birth to the prologue, as I have discussed above. It wasn’t enough for them to harmonize the Johannine prologue with the Matthean and Lukan infancy narratives; in their efforts to shift the moment of the incarnation from baptism to
conception and virgin birth, they added parthenogenesis to the actual text of the fourth gospel in at least one Latin manuscript.

All surviving Greek manuscripts of John 1.10-13 read:

He was in the world, and the world was created through him, and the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own did not receive him. But as many as did receive him, he gave them (αὐτοῖς) power to become children of God (τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι) – [sc. he gave it] to those (τοῖς) who believe in his name, who were born (οἳ ... ἐγέννησαν) not from blood (οὐκ ἔξε αἰμάτων) and not from carnal desire (οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς) and not from male desire (οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρὸς) but of God (ἄλλ’ ἐκ θεοῦ).

The Logos gave power to those who were born of God and became God’s children then. For the author of the fourth gospel, it was probably through spiritual rebirth at their baptism. But by altering two terms from singular to plural, several proto-orthodox readers and a few copyists made the Logos the subject of this divine birth. In a fifth-century Latin manuscript, the plural terms οἳ ... ἐγέννησαν (“who were born”) are altered to the singular terms qui ... natus est (“who was born”), so that the Word becomes the one “who was born not from blood and not from carnal desire and not from male desire but of God.” Along with the change from plural to singular, this also changed the birth from figurative to literal, from the spiritual rebirth of God’s ‘children’ to the biological parthenogenesis of God’s Son without a human father.

Though this Latin manuscript was copied in the fifth century, in the second and third centuries Irenaeus and Tertullian were already making the same alteration from plural to singular so that the text of the Gospel of John would refer to their proto-orthodox doctrine of Incarnation through virgin birth. Tertullian even alleged that the plural reading, the original reading, was a

124 John 1.12-13, 33; 3.1-10.
textual corruption by so-called heretical Valentinians, when in fact it was the other way around:
proto-orthodoxy had corrupted scripture.\footnote{Irenaeus, \textit{Adversus haereses} 3.16.2, 19.2, 21.7-10; Tertullian, \textit{De carne Christi} 19. Ehrman (1993/2011, 123 n.72) treats it as what he calls an anti-adoptionistic orthodox corruption of scripture but notes that it might also be treated as what he calls anti-separationist or anti-docetic. For Tertullian at least, the alteration also served more than a christological purpose; it undercut the anthropology of those, such as Valentinians and the author of 1 John incidentally, who believed themselves to be the children of God, spiritually (re)born of him.}

The corruption allowed for a reference to parthenogenesis, but it was incompatible with the rest of the text. According to this proto-orthodox version of the Johannine prologue, Jesus could not be the son of Joseph of Nazareth, as Philip tells Nathanael in the same chapter, because he wasn’t born from male desire. The corruption was also incompatible with 1 John, whose author claims to be among those born of God. In the prologue to the fourth gospel, the Logos is not known by the world or received by his own, but he gives power to those who are born of God and become God’s children. In 1 John the author claims that the world doesn’t know him and his audience either. He claims that they are the children of God. And he claims that they have been born of God. They are plural not singular, and they are spiritually (re)born of God not biologically born to virgin mothers.\footnote{John 1.10-13, also 3.3-8; 18.37; 1 John 2.29-3.10; 4.7; 5.1-4, 18-19. The use of the aorist passive participle for Jesus (ὁ γεννηθεὶς ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ) in 1 John 5.18 instead of the perfect for others throughout hardly constitutes a reference to his virgin birth.}
CHAPTER THREE
NO BIRTH OF JESUS AT ALL

I began this historical-critical overview of the various conceptions of Jesus in the first and second centuries CE with those who believed that he was born but didn’t pre-exist. I now end it with those who didn’t believe that he was born or incarnated in any way, for whom there were Jewish models of fleshless theophany and angelophany.

Paul has to be revisited here, not because he believed in an incorporeal Jesus, but because he identified Jesus with the (angel/glory of the) Lord in Jewish scripture, and in so doing Paul somewhat naively hooked the Jesus into established exegetical traditions that would challenge any appearance of God or angels as human. The ‘I have come’ sayings of Jesus in the synoptic gospels have to be revisited as well, and the consequences of their interpretation in an angelic context have to be discussed, even though Jesus doesn’t pre-exist in the synoptics, much less is he an angel. Then as representative of those who did believe that Jesus appeared as God or an angel would and thus was not born, I group together the (rhetorical) opponents in the Letter to the Hebrews, some of the opponents in 1 John, and the opponents of Ignatius. Along with them, I would also group together Simonians, some Basilidians (according to Irenaeus), and Marcionites. Again I won’t be as thorough here in my treatment of the mid to late second century as I have been under previous headings and subheadings of CHAPTERS ONE and TWO because my focus is the proto-orthodox doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis; virgin birth or at least birth
is what matters to me, not the appearances of God or angels as if in a body yet without being born.¹

JEWS MODELS OF FLESHLESS THEOPHANY AND ANGELOPHANY

Of whatever kind, incarnation doesn’t automatically follow from pre-existence or heavenly provenance, even in Christian contexts. Past scholarship on early christology has treated the development of belief in Jesus’ pre-existence like it were necessarily the development of belief in his incarnation; and his incarnation, through virgin birth in particular, is my interest too. But in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple and early Jewish literature, descent from heaven is entirely possible without a human body or human birth, so much so that it’s the norm for God and angels. They certainly appear anthropomorphically, but rarely, if ever in the case of deity, do they undergo birth as they make their appearance. And never before the proto-orthodox Christian doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis was it believed that God or God’s pre-existent Son or even an angel underwent virgin birth.

This was shown in the INTRODUCTION when I discussed the book of Daniel, the Parables of Enoch, 4 Ezra, and the Prayer of Joseph. Each features a pre-existent or else heavenly and divine mediator figure. There is, however, no incarnation of the one like a son of man in the book of Daniel; this figure, along with the rest of the angels in that text, appears anthropomorphically but is not born as a human being and has no human body. There may not be

¹ Such appearances have been studied before in scholarship on ‘docetism,’ which has been defined both narrowly (no birth at all) and broadly (so as to include incarnation by possession at baptism), both in terms of the incarnation and the crucifixion as well as the resurrection. See e.g. Davies 1962; Tröger 1977; Slusser 1981; Yamauchi 1982; Brox 1984; Riley 1994; Stroumsa 2004; Kinlaw 2005, 73-93; Goldstein & Stroumsa 2007; Streett 2011, 35-52. For general treatment of angelomorphic christology, see Gieschen 1998; on the angel Michael and Jesus in particular, see Hannah 1999b.
any incarnation of the Son of Man in the Parables of Enoch either. The Son of Man is incarnated through birth in *4 Ezra*, implicitly anyway, though no account of it is given. For an account of the incarnation of a divine pre-existent being through birth as a human in non-Christian Jewish literature, I had to go the *Prayer of Joseph*, where the archangel Israel is born in a human body, and where the birth is miraculous but still not virginal. And that text is unattested before the third century CE. Even if it were to be dated to before the Common Era, its angelic incarnation through birth is exceptional.

Before the time of Jesus and any believers in him, it was regularly assumed that the angelophanies and theophanies in Jewish literature, as anthropomorphic as they might seem, had nothing to do with incarnation. It might even be assumed that manifestations of God and angels weren’t corporeal at all. In the book of *Tobit* from the third century BCE, the angel Raphael is sent to earth. About to return to heaven, he reveals that despite his human appearance, and despite having accompanied Tobit’s son as they traveled extensively and were hosted together, he was never born as a human being and did not in fact do what human bodies do. “I am Raphael,” he finally reveals to Tobit and his son after having posed as Azariah, the son of Hananiah, their relative. “Every day I appeared (ὡπτανόμην) to you, and I did not eat or drink (καὶ σὺν ἔφαγον οὐδὲ ἔπιον), but you were seeing a vision (ἀλλὰ ἔβασιν ὑμεῖς ἐθεωρεῖτε).”

Likewise Philo of Alexandria in the first century could read Genesis 18 as a theophany and angelophany in which the three ‘men’ who appeared to Abraham and were hosted by him didn’t drink or eat and were actually bodiless: “It is a marvel indeed that they gave the appearance (παρέχειν φαντασίαν) of both drinking and eating, when they did not drink and did not eat (μὴ πίνοντας ... μὴ ἔσθιοντας). But that is a secondary matter; the first and greatest wonder

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2 *Tobit* 12.15, 12.19. The version of 12.19 in Codex Sinaiticus and translated in the NRSV only includes not eating.
is that, despite being incorporeal (ἀσωμάτους ὄντας), they had been shaped into human form (εἰς ἰδέαν ἀνθρώπων μεμορφώθην).”\(^3\) Also according to Josephus’ interpretation of this passage later in the first century, the three who appeared to Abraham “gave him the supposition of eating (δόξαν αὐτῶν παρέσχων ἐσθίοντων).”\(^4\) The same basic line of interpretation is found in Jewish literature in Aramaic as well. In Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, for example, as the patriarch hosted the angels “it seemed to him that they were eating,” but they weren’t.\(^5\)

In none of this is there deceit. Tobit and his son aren’t upset at Raphael when they learn that he’s not their relative, that he wasn’t born as a human, and that he didn’t really do what human bodies do. Neither does he ask to be pardoned for tricking them. It’s understood that the appearances of angels on earth are precisely that, appearances. As for Abraham, in Philo’s words the contrafactual exhibit was done “as a kindness (χάριτι)” to him and for the sake of “giving perception (τοῦ παρασχεῖν αἰσθησιν) to the sage through a more distinct sight (διὰ τρανοτέρας ὄψεως).”\(^6\) Without that favor, he would not have been able to entertain heavenly beings.

Other divine mediator figures, like God’s Spirit and Wisdom, could inspire and possess a human body as they manifest themselves on earth. Crossover between them and angels might afford angelic inspiration or possession too. God’s Spirit or Wisdom or perhaps an angel, then, could be said to be incarnated in someone, however transitory or permanent it was. Incarnation of that kind would have been common in Second Temple and early Judaism. It’s arguably the sort of incarnation featured in the Gospel of John, where the Word becomes flesh as the Spirit

\(^3\) *De Abrahamo* 118. Text and translation: Colson 1935, 60-63. See also *De Abrahamo* 113.


descends upon Jesus, who pre-exists insofar as he’s identified with them. But it didn’t become
pro-orthodox Christian doctrine.

Jewish belief that God and angels could appear on earth as if in a human body yet
without being born was also longstanding. But it didn’t become proto-orthodox christology
either, even though early believers in Jesus had already identified him with Yahweh or his
emissary appearing incorporeally in the Hebrew Bible. The life and death of Jesus of Nazareth
wouldn’t allow it.

JESUS AS LORD ACCORDING TO PAUL

The apostle to the gentiles believed that Jesus pre-existed and was incarnated through birth.
Paul’s references to the nativity are quick, though, and half of them are indirect. He didn’t
anticipate that they might be insufficient for later Pauline Christians. In Romans he says that
Jesus was “in the likeness of sinful flesh (ἐν δομιώματι σαρκάς ἁμαρτίας),” and in Philippians he
says that Jesus was “in human likeness (ἐν δομιώματι ἀνθρώπων),” so some of Paul’s most
careful readers could understand that Jesus merely resembled a carnal human being but was not
one.7 Paul uses the term δομιώμα elsewhere only in Romans, and his use of it could support such
an understanding. He refers to idolatry as the likeness of the image of humans and animals. Also
in Romans he refers to baptism as the likeness of Christ’s death and burial.8 But statues of
humans and animals aren’t humans and animals, nor is baptism death and burial. So the likeness

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7 Romans 8.3; Philipians 2.7.
8 Romans 1.23 (Psalm 106.20); 6.5. His only other use of the term is in Romans 5.14.
of flesh might not be identical to flesh, and human likeness might not be identical to humanity for all readers of Paul, whatever Paul himself meant when he used ὁμοίωμα of the incarnation.\(^9\)

Furthermore Paul didn’t use an obvious term in referring to Jesus’ birth; he used γίνομαι, which by itself could be taken to refer to any sort of becoming. Thus the nativity in Paul rests on the added statements of Jesus’ birth “from a woman” in Galatians, and birth “from the seed of David after the flesh” in Romans, two scant statements that radical Pauline Christians in fact removed from their edition of his letters as they would interpolations.\(^10\)

These two scant statements could indeed be seen to be at odds with other more numerous passages in Paul’s letters where the language of manifestation is used to refer abstractly to Jesus and the righteousness, mystery, and wisdom of God that simply and suddenly appeared at the end of time.\(^11\) There’s even a contrast between Jesus and Adam in 1 Corinthians: “The first human was dust from the earth (ἐκ γῆς);” Jesus “was from heaven (ἐξ οὐρανοῦ).”\(^12\) Given this text, which would become a proof text for radical Pauline Christians, how could Jesus then belong to the human race? Paul’s point was about resurrection not incarnation, and he saw no problem with the contrast between the earthly and heavenly, any more than he saw a problem with saying that Jesus was in the ‘likeness’ of flesh and in human ‘likeness.’

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\(^9\) See Bauer et al. 2000, s.v. ὁμοίωμα: “There is no general agreement on the mng. in two related passages in which Paul uses our word in speaking of Christ’s earthly life. The expressions ... [in Philippians 2.7 and Romans 8.3] could mean that the Lord in his earthly ministry possessed a completely human form and that his physical body was capable of sinning as human bodies are, or that he had the form of a human being and was looked upon as such ..., but without losing his identity as a divine being even in this world. In the light of what Paul says about Jesus in general, it is prob. that he uses our word to bring out both that Jesus in his earthly career was similar to sinful humans and yet not totally like them.”

\(^10\) Galatians 4.4; Romans 1.3.

\(^11\) Romans 3.21-22, 16.25-26; Colossians 1.26-27. Cf. 1 Corinthians 1.30; 2.1, 7-8; Ephesians 1.9-10; 3.2-11; Colossians 2.2; 4.3.

\(^12\) 1 Corinthians 15.47.
He also didn’t see a problem with identifying Jesus as the Lord in Jewish scripture, even though Paul’s fellow Jews would have understood appearances of God, the angel/glory of the Lord, and other angels to be incorporeal. Paul was among the first believers in Jesus to retroject him into the Hebrew Bible and Christian Old Testament. Paul didn’t consider what the implications might be for Jesus’ humanity, from his birth to his suffering and death. The frequently discussed theophany and angelophany in Genesis 18, for example, was understood by Greek and Aramaic speaking Jews alike to be an appearance to Abraham. The three ‘men’ entertained by the patriarch descended from heaven and appeared on earth as humans, but were not humans. They were not born. Abraham fed them, but they didn’t really eat. It was a show for the patriarch’s benefit. Thus by identifying Jesus as Yahweh or his emissary, Paul was somewhat naively hooking Jesus into established exegetical traditions that would challenge any appearance of God or angels as human.

Paul didn’t doubt Jesus’ humanity, but later Pauline Christians did, doubting that he was born, ate, drank, suffered and died a bloody death on the cross. They were denounced as heretics. Yet what many of them were doing was following the identification of Jesus as the Lord or his emissary to a natural conclusion based on pre-Christian exegesis of Jewish scripture. God and angels had descended from heaven and appeared on earth previously. If they were not born and didn’t have a human body, why should the case have been different with Jesus, that is, if he was Yahweh, the angel/glory of the Lord?

These weren’t issues that Paul considered. He had more practical things to worry about, like whether his converts were involved in idolatry. In 1 Corinthians he warns them by retelling Israel’s history with a jealous God. He identifies Jesus with the (angel/glory of the) Lord who accompanied the Israelites in the wilderness, a role also played by Wisdom in other Jewish
Accordingly for Paul, Jesus was the rock that they drank from. In the Pentateuch it’s the Lord (LXX: χύριος; MT: יהוה) who tells Moses to strike the rock and who appears standing on it. Mort to the point, Paul’s Jesus was also the one who sent the serpents to destroy the Israelites when they tried him: “And let us not try Christ (μηδὲ ἐκπειράζωμεν τὸν Χριστὸν), just as some of them tried him (καθὼς πνευ αὐτῶν ἐπείρασαν) and were destroyed by the serpents.” In the Pentateuch it’s the Lord that the Israelites try (LXX: τί πειράζετε χύριον, asks Moses), and it’s the Lord who sends the serpents. After this identification of Jesus with Yahweh, in the same passage against idolatry, Paul then mentions the blood of Christ crucified, but without mentioning how the Lord of Jewish scripture became human so as to die, and seemingly aware that the incarnation of God or his angel might be a problem.

JESUS AS ANGEL IN THE SYNOPTICS?

The “I have come” sayings of Jesus and the statements about him having been sent in the synoptic gospels and their sources could be interpreted in an angelic context: Jesus is said to come [from heaven] and be sent [from heaven] like an angel would say in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple and early Jewish literature. Above I argued for a prophetic context and no pre-existence or heavenly provenance in Mark, Matthew, or Luke. But here I will discuss some

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14 1 Corinthians 10.4; Exodus 17.5-6; Numbers 20.6-8.
15 1 Corinthians 10.9; Exodus 17:2, 7; Numbers 21:6. Paul’s passive construction, ‘they were destroyed,’ may suggest a hesitance to identify Jesus fully with the Lord. In 1 Corinthians 10.22, however, he also warns against making the Lord, i.e., Christ, jealous, as the Israelites did per Deuteronomy 32.21.
16 1 Corinthians 10.16. Of course Paul is also interpreting typologically (e.g., Christ as the rock), but that doesn’t account for his pre-existence christology, nor is it exclusive of identifying Jesus with the Lord of Jewish scripture.
consequences of this interpretation of Jesus as angel, consequences that I think are difficult to get around whether the interpretation is ancient or modern. While it’s not something that the three evangelists believed, different groups of Christians did believe that Jesus was an angel or else that he had descended from heaven to earth as an angel would.

In Mark, the only angels that presumably descend are the ones that wait on Jesus in the wilderness after his baptism. In Matthew there’s this descent and the descent of the angel that opens Jesus’ tomb: “And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven (καταβὰς ἐξ οὐρανοῦ), came (προσέλθων) and rolled back the stone.” Otherwise in Matthew, angels don’t descend from heaven so much as they appear (ἐφάνη, φαίνεται) in dreams (κατ’ ὄναρ). In Luke, an angel appears (ὡφθη) to Zechariah in the Jerusalem temple and speaks to him. Gabriel is sent from God (ἀπεστάλη ... ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ) to Nazareth and speaks to Mary. An angel stands before the shepherds, speaks to them, and is then accompanied by many more. During his agony in the garden, an angel from heaven (ἀπ’

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18 Gathercole (2006, 116) would like to get around them: “Does this argument make Jesus an angel? By no means. The point here is simply to draw an analogy between the respective ‘comings.’ Jesus sums up his life’s work with the ‘I have come’ + purpose formula; similarly, angels also sum up the purpose of a particular earthly visit by using the formula. But the present argument does not intend to draw attention to any similarities of Jesus to the angels beyond the fact that they are sent by God from heaven. A common heavenly provenance and an analogous coming to the earthly realm do not imply any particular ontological similarity between Jesus and angels.” Whatever the case with contemporary theology, I don’t think different groups of early Christians had it sorted out so neatly.

19 Mark 1.13 / Matthew 4.11.
20 Matthew 28.2-5.
21 All appearances to Joseph: Matthew 1.20-24; 2.13, 19.
22 Luke 1.11-23.
οὐρανοῦ) appears (ὤφθη) and strengthens Jesus. At the empty tomb, the women see a vision (ὁπτασίαν ... ἑωρακέναι) of angels who speak to them.

So angels descend, come, and are sent from heaven in one or more of the synoptics. They also appear, sometimes in dreams. But what they never do is undergo birth, and they don’t have human bodies. They’re not incarnated in that way or any other way, as long as incarnation means human flesh. There’s nothing about an angelic context that requires Jesus to be born if he’s going to descend from heaven as an angel would. He might appear anthropomorphically and do tangible, visible, audible, or otherwise perceptible things, all without being human. But it would be almost unheard of for an angel to have a mother, let alone a virgin mother, and to live some thirty years on earth, eating, drinking, etc., then die.

If Jesus’ pre-existence were implied in the synoptic gospels, which I don’t think is the case, and if the three evangelists had described his coming [from heaven] in angelic terms, they could not have readily done so without some consideration of the exegetical tradition of Genesis 18 and other theophanies and angelophanies. If Jesus descended from heaven as an angel would, was he born? Did he have a human body and do what human bodies do? Or was his anthropomorphic manifestation supposed?

Mark, Matthew and Luke don’t address these issues any more than they address the issues that would be raised if John the Baptist were an angel incarnate or the very prophet Elijah returned from heaven and somehow born twice. Overall I think this is because Jesus doesn’t pre-exist in the synoptics any more than John is believed to be an angel.

After the Baptist, the historical Jesus behind the gospels and their sources predicted the coming of a Son of Man. It was going to be a descent from heaven with angels. And the expected

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25 Luke 22.43. The passage doesn’t seem to be original; see e.g. Metzger 1971/1994, 151.
Son of Man may well have been an angel himself, as was the one like a son of man in the book of Daniel. When he came, his appearance would be anthropomorphic, but he was probably not going to be born as a human or have a human body; the synoptic Son of Man references in the narrative future are about imminence and don’t mention him being born, much less as a Davidid (unlike Jesus). They don’t mention him growing to adulthood and dying, except once where Luke inserts a passion prediction.\(^{27}\) The historical Jesus may or may not have predicted his own death. But he didn’t understand himself to be the heavenly Son of Man, and he did not predict the death of this figure. He predicted the Son of Man’s coming and perhaps his own death in conjunction with the advent.

This figure is close to the corresponding figure in the book of Daniel: they’re not incarnated. This figure would also be close to the corresponding figure in Parables of Enoch if that one isn’t incarnated either. The historical Jesus’ Son of Man is closer to those figures than he is to the one in \textit{4 Ezra}, where incarnation of the Son of Man as a pre-existent being is implied because of his birth and death. (In the synoptic gospels, Jesus, while he is born and dies, doesn’t pre-exist even implicitly, and so his incarnation as a pre-existent being isn’t further implied.) The Son of Man predicted by the historical Jesus was heavenly, but he wasn’t going to be a mortal Messiah. He wasn’t going to be born, and he wasn’t going to die. He was going to come with his angels, and by all accounts as an angel himself.

But the expected Son of Man didn’t come. Following that eschatological failure, when the three evangelists and their sources identified Jesus with this heavenly Son of Man, they nevertheless did not make any statements about the heavenly provenance or pre-existence of Jesus in their references to him as the Son of Man in the narrative present. Their Jesus is not pre-

existent. If he were, and if they had identified him with the heavenly Son of Man before his birth in Nazareth (or Bethlehem), it would imply similarity between the two advents. The original, now second, coming of the Son of Man predicted by the historical Jesus wasn’t going to be an incarnation, so what about his first coming? Was it the advent of an angel also? Did Jesus come the first time as an angel would without undergoing birth?

It is fully possible that Mark, Matthew and Luke didn’t consider these issues. But the logical development – from Jesus of Nazareth and his prediction of the coming of a heavenly Son of Man, to Jesus as angel and his identification with the Son of Man – is built into early christology, I think. Mark may not have considered the issue of whether the identification of Jesus with the heavenly Son of Man implies that Jesus descended from heaven as an angel and so was not born and didn’t have a human body. It’s striking to me, however, that Mark begins with Jesus’ baptism, not with an account of a pre-existent Jesus descending from heaven as an angel, which would better reflect the coming of the Son of Man and his angels. Matthew and Luke feature infancy narratives prior to the baptism, still it’s striking that they don’t begin with such an account either. I stated above that they were uninterested in Christ incarnate. Speculatively, I would state as well that they may have been wary of a pre-existence or heavenly/non-terrestrial provenance for Jesus.

Mark seems to recognize the danger at least in the live Jesus being mistaken for the ghost (φάντασμα) of the dead Baptist.28 And Luke is clearly concerned to correct what is supposed to be the erroneous understanding that Jesus appeared as a spirit (πνεῦμα in most manuscripts) or a ghost (φάντασμα in one important manuscript) after his own death.29 Perhaps they also knew what could result from identifying Jesus with the heavenly Son of Man before birth. They didn’t

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make any statements about his pre-existence or heavenly provenance in the narrative present because they didn’t want it to be assumed that he was not born and did not have a human body, which would have been a common assumption about most any angelophany or theophany, unless it were understood that God’s Spirit or Wisdom or perhaps an angel had possessed someone.

THE (RHETORICAL) OPPONENTS IN HEBREWS

Jesus’ first and second comings mirror each other more in the Letter to the Hebrews, which was written within the same general period as Mark, Matthew and Luke. The two advents mirror each other more in this text than in the synoptics because here Jesus pre-exists and so comes from heaven both times. The language used, however, is of appearance or manifestation, not coming:

“But as it is, he has appeared (πεφανέρωται) once (ἀπαρέξ) at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once (ἀπαρέξ), and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once (ἀπαρέξ) to bear the sins of many, will appear (ἐφθάσεται) a second time (ἐκ δεύτερου), not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly awaiting him.”

The language of appearance or manifestation is the language used to describe angelophanies, such as in the synoptic gospels and elsewhere in Jewish and Christian literature. According to this passage, when he is seen again Jesus isn’t going to be born and then die a second time. He was incarnated the first time. It will not be happening again. Yet, if the inference were reversed, it could be reasoned that because Jesus will not be born and die when he appears for the second time, maybe he wasn’t incarnated the first time either. Maybe he appeared as an angel would. This very notion is opposed in the text.

Hebrews is likely the most philosophically oriented writing in the New Testament, certainly more so than Mark and Matthew if not also Luke-Acts. While its author doesn’t specifically interpret – along with the philosophical Philo and later Josephus – the appearance of God and angels to Abraham in Genesis 18, its world is one in which such appearances happen: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,” is the instruction in the final chapter, “for by doing that some have failed to notice that they were entertaining angels (Ἕλθον τίνες ξενίσαντες ἄγγέλους).” This point is not christological, but the points made about Jesus’ superiority and yet inferiority to the angels in the opening chapters are.

Per chapters 1-2, the Son pre-exists and is involved in creation. He’s superior to the angels already, then, but part of his superiority is acquired after his birth and death: “As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels (βραχύ τι παρ’ ἄγγέλους ἠλαττώμενον), now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.” In order to die for humans, Jesus had to be born as one. He had to be made inferior to the angels at least temporarily, because he could not have appeared as an angel: “Since, therefore, the children have flesh and blood in common (κεκοινώνηκεν αἵματος καὶ σαρκός), he himself also likewise shared in the same things (καὶ αὐτὸς παραπλησίως μετέσχεν τῶν αὐτῶν), so that through death he might destroy the one who has power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he does not take hold of angels (οὕ ... ἄγγέλων ἐπιλαμβάνεται), but he takes hold of the seed of Abraham (ἄλλα σπέρματος Ἀβραάμ ἐπιλαμβάνεται).” He suffered and died as a human not only for their

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31 Hebrews 13.1.  
32 Hebrews 1.2.  
33 Hebrews 2.8-9.
freedom but also to enable him to sympathize: “Therefore he had to become like his siblings in every respect (κατὰ πάντα τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς ὑμωθήμενοι), so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.”

Certainly Jesus is incarnated in Hebrews, probably through birth, given that neither virgin birth nor his baptism is mentioned: he pre-exists as the Son, he springs up from the tribe of Judah, and he dies. It’s less certain whether the opponents in chapters 1-2 are real or rhetorical. If there were read, they would have had much in common with the author of Hebrews, despite the major difference of opinion as to Christ incarnate. In the world of this letter, angels still appear on earth anthropomorphically incognito, and so humans can never be sure that the guests they are entertaining with food and drink are not in fact messengers from heaven. Jesus could have been one. He was already superior to the angels before his manifestation on earth, though indeed his superiority would have been increased after his terrestrial appearance. But why must it be that he was made lower than the angels, even temporarily? If angels can descend from heaven and give the supposition of doing what bodies do on earth, angels such as the ones that appeared to Abraham or Tobit, why could not Jesus have appeared likewise? As a courtesy to humans, they seemed to eat and drink, and there was no deceit involved. Why could not Jesus have seemed to eat and drink and then suffer and die even, again not deceitfully?

Issues of this kind were considered either by the author alone, in which case there are no christological opponents in Hebrews, or they were considered by the author precisely because they were first considered by his opponents. At any rate, they were being considered, and in the author’s estimation Jesus could not have been an angel while on earth. He had to be born human.

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34 Hebrews 2.14-18.
That’s not the only inference, however, especially when starting from the assumption of Jesus’ pre-existence or heavenly provenance. Yes, Jesus belonged to one of the Israelite tribes, but supposedly so did the angel that appeared to Tobit and travelled with his son day after day. Moreover, in Hebrews, Jesus is associated with Melchizedek, who had no parents, no genealogy, and so was never born it seems.\(^{36}\)

Again according to the author, though, on the Son’s rescue mission “he does not take hold of angels (σὺ ... ἁγγέλων ἐπιλαμβάνεται), but he takes hold of the seed of Abraham (ἀλλὰ σπέρματος Ἀβραὰμ ἐπιλαμβάνεται).”\(^{37}\) The tacit assumption here is that if angels were enslaved, they would be freed by an angel. Jesus doesn’t take hold of angels. He takes hold of humans. So he didn’t appear as an angel. He appeared as a human being. It does not have to follow, however, that only a human rescues humans. An angel could. Angels had appeared to humans and rescued them several times before, without undergoing any incarnation, even as God had appeared to Moses and rescued the Israelites. God didn’t undergo human birth or have a human body when Moses saw the invisible one (τὸν ... ἀδρατον).\(^{38}\) Why then would the pre-existent Son, “the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being,” have appeared any differently?\(^{39}\)

Whatever the opponents may have believed, for the author of Hebrews, even though Jesus pre-existed as the Son and was superior to the angels, he had to be made lower than them, to be born as a suffering mortal. He shared flesh and blood (ἀίματος καὶ σαρκός) with humans, and “he had to become like his siblings in every respect (κατὰ πάντα τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς

\(^{36}\) Hebrews 7.3.  
\(^{37}\) Hebrews 2.16.  
\(^{38}\) Hebrews 11.27.  
\(^{39}\) Reflection and imprint: Hebrews 1.3.
He could not have appeared as an incorporeal angel, one that could not be touched, for instance.

SOME OPPONENTS IN 1 JOHN

“We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and our hands have felt, concerning the Word of Life – and the Life appeared and we have seen and testify and declare to you the Eternal Life that was with the Father and appeared to us.” These are the opening lines of 1 John. And they don’t fit the profile of rival community members that I sketched above in CHAPTER TWO, which is why I stated that the Johannine opponents may have been diverse and had multiple christologies between them. One was most likely the belief that Jesus wasn’t the Messiah before his baptismal possession. Christ came by water alone, not by blood or in flesh when Jesus was born. Another may have been that Jesus was not born at all. There was no incarnation. Christ simply appeared.

The appearance described in the opening lines of 1 John could be an appearance of the risen Jesus, whose corporeality was doubted in the fourth gospel. But because the author of 1 John rephrases the gospel prologue here (e.g. the terms ἀρχή, λόγος, ζωή, and the phrase ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν/πατέρα), the appearance is probably not that one; it doesn’t refer to the resurrected body but to the incarnation.

In 1 John the author includes himself among the disciples who literally had first-hand knowledge of Jesus. In the gospel prologue, it’s said that “the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us (ἐν ἡμῖν), and we saw (ἐθεασάμεθα) his glory.” Rephrasing, for his part, the author of 1 John includes himself in the first person plural who saw the incarnate Word. But he

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40 Hebrews 2.9-18.
41 1 John 1.1-3.
embellishes sight (ἐθεασάμεθα plus ἐωράκαμεν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς ἡμῶν) with hearing (ἀκούσαμεν) and touch (αἱ χεῖρες ἡμῶν ἐψηλάφησαν). And perhaps because the opponents were using it, he uses the language of manifestation (ἐφανερώθη ἡμῖν) instead of stating that “the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us (ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν).”

Elsewhere in 1 John the language of manifestation is used to state that Jesus “appeared (ἐφανερώθη) in order to take away sin;” that he “appeared (ἐφανερώθη) in order to destroy the works of the devil;” and that “the love of God appeared among us (ἐφανερώθη ἐν ἡμῖν): God sent his only begotten Son into the world (τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ τὸν μονογενῆς ἀπέσταλκεν ὁ θεὸς εἰς τὸν κόσμον).”

This is not the standard language used in the Gospel of John, which is instead the language of being sent, descending and coming into the world. In the fourth gospel it’s only used three times before the crucifixion, once to state that the Baptist came so that the one coming after him might appear to Israel (ἵνα φανερωθῇ τῷ Ἰσραήλ); again to state that Jesus manifested his glory (ἐφανέρωσεν τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ) with his first sign at Cana; and finally in the farewell discourse to state that he manifested the Father’s name (ἐφανέρωσά σοι τὸ ὄνομα) to the disciples. This language is also used after the resurrection to state that Jesus manifested himself (ἐφανέρωσεν ἑαυτὸν) or appeared (ἐφανερώθη) to the disciples.

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42 John 1.14; 1 John 1.1-2.  
43 1 John 3:5, 8; 4.9.  
44 The language of manifestation is used by Paul in his more abstract references to Jesus and the wisdom, righteousness, mystery, and word of God that simply and suddenly appeared at the end of time. See Romans 3.21-22; 16.25-26; Colossians 1.26-27. Cf. 1 Corinthians 1.30; 2.1, 7-8; Ephesians 1.9-10; 3.2-11; Colossians 2.2, 4.3. It’s also used in the pastoral letters.  
45 John 1.31; 2.11; 17.6.  
There’s some doubt about his resurrected body in the Gospel of John, but in the opening lines of 1 John the manifestation at issue is not the appearance of the risen Jesus; it’s the body of the incarnate Word, the physicality of which the author tries to verify as he rephrases the gospel prologue. Verification could have been required once the Johannine Jesus had been identified with Yahweh or his emissary. Much as Paul did, but believing in incarnation by possession at baptism not incarnation through birth, the author of the fourth gospel somewhat naively hooked Jesus into established exegetical traditions of Jewish scripture that could challenge any appearance of God or angels as human. And what is more the fourth evangelist did so without an infancy narrative, and while minimizing Jesus’ birth, Jesus’ coming from Galilee, and Jesus’ expected coming from the seed of David.

In the Pentateuch the (angel/glory of the) Lord appears to Abraham and the other patriarchs, to Moses, and to the children of Israel, who are protected by the Passover lambs in Egypt, sustained with manna in the wilderness and healed by looking at the brass serpent. The Johannine Jesus is retrojected into these episodes from Jewish scripture: he exists before Abraham and the other patriarchs; he uses as a self-designation the name that the Lord told to Moses; he’s the Lamb of God, dying exactly on Passover, not the day before as in the synoptic gospels; he’s the true bread descended from heaven; and he’s lifted up just as the brass serpent. In short, the Pentateuch was written about him.⁴⁷

Readers of the Gospel of John therefore could wonder what made the appearance of Jesus any different from previous manifestations of the (angel/glory of the) Lord. The (angel/glory of the) Lord appeared (mostly ὄφθη but also ἐπεφάνη) to the patriarchs, he appeared (ὡφθη) to Moses, he descended (κατέβη) from heaven and appeared (ὡφθη) at the tabernacle (ἐπὶ τῆς

⁴⁷ John 5.46.
σκηνής) to the children of Israel (ἐν πᾶσι τοῖς υἱοῖς Ἰσραήλ); they saw his glory (ὁρώντες τὴν δόξαν) and the signs that he performed (καὶ τὰ σεμεῖα ἡ ἐποίησα) in Egypt and the wilderness.48 The Johannine Jesus also descends (καταβέβηκα) from heaven and tabernacles among the community (ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν), he appears to Israel (φανερῆς τῷ Ἰσραήλ), his glory is seen (ἐθαυμαζόμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ), and so are the signs that he performs (θεωροῦντες αὐτοῦ τὰ σεμεῖα ἡ ἐποίει).49

The Word does become flesh in the Gospel of John, arguably when the Spirit descends upon Jesus at baptism. But in Jewish scripture the (angel/glory of the) Lord is certainly not born as a human being, and according to Jewish exegetical traditions in Greek and Aramaic he and his angels don’t eat or drink much less suffer or die. If they weren’t born and didn’t have a human body when they appeared throughout the Hebrew Bible, why should the case be different with Jesus, that is, if he’s Yahweh or the angel/glory of the Lord?

Some of the Johannine opponents may have doubted the physicality of the incarnation, understanding it to be another fleshless theophany or angelophany. This would explain why the author of 1 John includes himself as an eyewitness of the Word incarnate and declares that Jesus was palpable. But it should be noted that in the opening lines of 1 John, no rival members of the community are mentioned, and there are no expressly polemical statements against opponents in that chapter or the next until midway through it, where the author mentions them for the first time along with their denial that Jesus was the Christ. At any rate I don’t think all rival members of the Johannine community believed that Jesus was not born or incarnated.

49 Descent: John 6.38; also 1.32-33; 3.13; 6.33, 41-42, 50-51, 58. Tabernacle: John 1.14. Seeing glory: John 1.14; also 2.11; 5.44; 11.4, 40; 12.41, 43; 17.5, 22, 24. Seeing signs: John 2.32; also 2.11, 18; 3.2; 4.48, 54; 6.2, 14, 26, 30 (in reference to manna specifically); 7.31; 9.16; 11.47; 12.18, 37; 20.30.
IGNATIUS’ OPPONENTS

The christological opposition in the letter to the Hebrews is perhaps rhetorical, and polemical statements in 1 John could owe something to style as well. But Ignatius’ opponents seem real enough, which is not to say that he portrays them fairly. Incarnation was controversial for him and his opponents. They believed that Jesus pre-existed or else had a heavenly provenance but wasn’t incarnated, whereas Ignatius insisted on incarnation. Harmonizing the two ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth, he insisted on incarnation through parthenogenesis.

In his letters he describes the christology of his opponents as follows. They claim that Jesus “suffered suppositiously (τὸ δοκεῖν πεπονθέναι).” They don’t confess that the Lord bore flesh (αὐτὸν σαρκοφόρον). From Ignatius’ perspective they aren’t Christians but godless (ἄθεοι) unbelievers (ἀπιστοι), who aren’t to be associated with, and whose names he will not acknowledge “until they repent concerning the passion (εἰς τὸ πάθος).”

Parodying their christology, he says that they are the ones who exist suppositiously (αὐτοὶ ὄντες τὸ δοκεῖν), and that just as they understand their Savior to have been, so will it happen to them when they die and are incorporeal and daemon-like (ἀσωμάτως καὶ δαιμονικῶς), that is, not resurrected per Ignatius’ carnal definition.

He opposes them with several statements about the truthfulness of Jesus’ birth, body, suffering and death as well as resurrection in the flesh. Ignatius tells the Magnesians “to have full assurance in the birth and suffering (ἐν τῇ γεννήσει καὶ τῷ πάθει) and resurrection,” which “were accomplished truly and certainly (ἀληθῶς καὶ βεβαιῶς) by Jesus Christ.” He tells the Trallians to “be deaf when anyone speaks to you without Jesus Christ, from the family of David (ἐκ γένους

Δαυίδ), from Mary (ἐκ Μαρίας), who truly was born (ἀληθῶς ἐγεννηθῆ), ate and drank (ἐφαγέν τε καὶ ἔπιεν), truly (ἀληθῶς) was persecuted at the time of Pontius Pilate, truly (ἀληθῶς) was crucified and died ..., also truly raised from the dead." Likewise he commends the Smyrnaeans on their belief in Jesus, "that he was truly from the family of David after the flesh (ἀληθῶς ὄντα ἐκ γένους Δαυίδ κατὰ σάρκα), Son of God after the will and power of God, truly born from a virgin (γεγεννημένον ἀληθῶς ἐκ παρθένου), and baptized by John ..., truly (ἀληθῶς) crucified for us in the flesh (ἐν σαρκί) ... and he truly suffered (ἀληθῶς ἐπαθεν), just as he also truly raised himself from the dead."54

There’s no way to determine from Ignatius’ letters whether his opponents denied the nativity altogether or just denied that Jesus was born in an actual human body. They may have believed that he was born suppositiously in the same way that he appeared to suffer. At any rate, they believed that he didn’t bear flesh but was incorporeal (and daemon-like?), so he didn’t eat or drink much less suffer and die on the cross. In other words, they believed that he appeared as God and angels had appeared before, according exegetical traditions and interpretations of Jewish scripture.

Ignatius regards his opponents as godless unbelievers, but they were almost certainly not disingenuous. Philo and Josephus weren’t disingenuous in their interpretation of the theophany and angelophany in Genesis 18 as an appearance (Philo: φαντασία) or supposition (Josephus: δόξα). Like Ignatius’ opponents and their bodiless Jesus, Philo understood the three ‘men’ that appeared to Abraham to be incorporeal (ἀσωμάτους).55 The anthropomorphic manifestation

wasn’t a trick, however. It was a favor. Without it, the patriarch would not have been able to entertain divine beings. And humans would not have been able to receive the pre-existent Jesus either if he had not given the supposition of corporeality.
PART TWO

HOW THE PROTO-ORTHODOX DOCTRINE OF INCARNATION EMERGED
The ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth were originally separate. The one is found in the letters of Paul, the Pastoral Letters, and the Letter to the Hebrews, for example, as well as in the Gospel and Letters of John, while the other is found in the Matthean and Lukan infancy narratives. The two ideas are not found the same text; they are found in different New Testament texts that were written by different authors at different times in different places and for different reasons, such as against christological opponents, whether real or rhetorical.

Some of the New Testament texts themselves were written in the second century, and the two ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth continued to be separate as far as several second-century Christians were concerned, including: the author of the *Proto-Gospel of James* (no pre-existence), Justin Martyr’s Christian Jews (no pre-existence or virgin birth), and Irenaeus’ Ebionites (no pre-existence or virgin birth); the authors of *1-2 Clement* (no virgin birth), the *Letter of Barnabas* (no virgin birth), and the *Letter to Diognetus* (no virgin birth).

Though separate, the ideas were harmonized by Ignatius, Aristides and Justin Martyr as well as the authors of the *Ascension of Isaiah* and the *Letter of the Apostles*. They were harmonized by these and more proto-orthodox Christians as the gospels and other New Testament texts began to circulate en masse, being read, interpreted, copied, and rewritten together. The idea of Jesus’ pre-existence in Paul and John was harmonized with the idea of his virgin birth in Matthew and Luke. The process was evolutionary and dynamic, given that not all New Testament texts were being used everywhere or by everyone in the second century. For example, Ignatius used the infancy narrative in Matthew, while Aristides may have used the one in Luke, and Justin Martyr used both. Use of the Lukan infancy narrative and its annunciation by Gabriel to Mary was a prerequisite for development of the further ideas of aural conception and
auto-parthenogenesis, according to which Jesus was understood to take the place of his own would-be father, and Mary was understood to conceive him strangely enough with her ear.

**Historical-Critical Methods at Their Limits**

All of this I have shown in the last chapter. It has not been apparent to most scholars before. To a few it has. In his standard reference volume *The Birth of the Messiah*, it was apparent to Raymond Brown that the two ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth were originally separate and cannot be found together in any of the different New Testament texts: “I stress this difference between conception christology,” in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, “and pre-existence christology,” such as in Philippians, Colossians, and John in particular, “because Christian theology soon harmonized the two ideas, so that the pre-existent Word of God was described as taking flesh (John) in the womb of the virgin Mary (Matthew and Luke). The virginal conception was no longer seen as the begetting of God’s Son, but as the incarnation of God’s Son, and that became orthodox Christian doctrine.”¹ Brown never pursued it, but he does go on to note that “[t]his thought process is probably already at work in the beginning of the second century in Ignatius of Antioch .... It is clear in Aristides ... Justin ... and Melito of Sardis.”² Again Brown never pursued it, and Melito actually didn’t add much to the thought process; whereas the author of the *Ascension of Isaiah* added the idea of Jesus’ angelic transformation upon descent from heaven, and the author of the *Letter of the Apostles* added to

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that the ideas that Jesus appeared to Mary in the form of the angel Gabriel and impregnated her by his speech as he made the announcement to her.

Following Brown, harmonization of the two ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth was apparent to John Meier: “Notice in Ignatius the typical blending of elements from the Johannine tradition (Jesus is God), Matthew (conceived by [the virgin] Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit), and the pre-Pauline tradition (of the seed of David).”³ It was also apparent to John Shelby Spong: in the second century, the prologue to the fourth gospel “was read into the birth tradition of Matthew and Luke so that it soon became the incarnate Word and the preexistent Lord who was born to the virgin Mary by the impregnation of the Holy Spirit. Traditions that were mutually exclusive and antithetical were in fact merged by that incredible blending capacity that has always marked the life of the typical believer.”⁴

And more recently it has been apparent to Adela Yarbro Collins that the two ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth were originally separate: “As in Matthew, the narrative about the virginal conception of Jesus in Luke implies that he is divine. In both gospels, Jesus is ‘son of God’ in a stronger sense than in Mark. The narratives in Matthew and Luke do not imply preexistence, but the notion of virginal conception was easily combined with ideas about preexistence later on.”⁵ I am in full agreement that Jesus does not pre-exist in the synoptic gospels, not even implicitly, and that belief in his divine sonship at conception and birth as opposed to his baptism does not require belief in his pre-existence. I wouldn’t say that combining

³ Meier 1991, 237-238 n.43. Brackets are Meier’s and signal the possibility that there’s no parthenogenesis in the Matthean infancy narrative, only in later use of it.
⁴ Spong 1992, 167. He continues: “The result of this process was the steadily weakening grip that the Christ of the church had on his own humanity. In time this tradition also fed the gradual dehumanization of Mary, whose virginity became a bulwark behind which the divine nature of Jesus was defended.”
⁵ Yarbro Collins & Collins 2008, 145.
the two ideas of his pre-existence and virgin birth was simple, however. As the idea of parthenogenesis itself was introduced, so were the problems of how Jesus could be born from the seed of David without a father and how Mary conceived. For those who believed in his pre-existence, the latter problem was compounded because the pre-existent Jesus had to enter Mary’s womb somehow, and it couldn’t be vaginally. Imaginative reading of the annunciation in Luke allowed for a solution to the problem: Mary conceived aurally as she listened to Gabriel speak the word/Word of God to her. But such an imaginative reading might lead to a misunderstanding about angelic paternity. Hence some proto-orthodox Christians had the pre-existent Jesus descend from heaven and take the place of his own would-be father. The thought process was evolutionary, dynamic and creative.
The Birth of the Messiah was first published in the 1970s. At that time Brown was referring to Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth as separate ‘ideas,’ and he was referring to the harmonization of these ideas as a ‘thought process.’ In the 1990s Meier referred to it as ‘the typical blending of elements’ from different traditions, while Spong referred to ‘that incredible blending capacity that has always marked the life of the typical believer.’ But why should such a capacity be limited to believers in Jesus, however typical?

It so happens that in the field of cognitive science, the subfield of cognitive linguistics, a theory of human thought and thought processes known as blending theory was formulated starting in the 1990s.

Historical-critical methods could not get at the details of the thought process that Brown was referring to in the 1970s, and they cannot now get at the details now. As a supplement to those methods, then, in this chapter I will be applying blending theory from the subfield of cognitive linguistics. It will allow me to explain how the separate ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth were harmonized, that is, how the doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis emerged. It will also allow me to explain how the further ideas of aural conception and auto-parthenogenesis were developed.
After its formulation by scholars of cognitive science and cognitive linguistics, blending theory alongside other cognitive theories has been applied in the humanities with increasing frequency during the 2000s and 2010s, so much so that some humanities scholars refer to a cognitive turn.¹ Within biblical and related studies specifically, blending theory has been applied by a few scholars to the study of: 1 Thessalonians; 1 Peter; the Gospel of John; the *Exegesis on the Soul* and the *Gospel of Philip* from the Nag Hammadi codices; early Christian discourse per socio-rhetorical interpretation; Pseudo-Philo; Jeremiah 1.1-6.30; the ‘traditional western nativity story;’ 1 Corinthians 6.12-7.7; gnostic spirituality and heresiological accounts of the Ophian Christians.² It has also been applied in studies of the body in Egyptian coffin texts and the arrows of love in Greek mythology.³

Many of the applications of blending theory in biblical and related studies have been to the study of one or two texts or even individual passages and metaphors from one or two texts, while some have been to the study of topics as comprehensive as the rhetorical dialects of early

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¹ Cognitive turn: e.g. Hamilton & Schneider 2002; also Toolan & Weber 2005. For an overview of cognitive linguistics applied to the study of literature, see Freeman 2007. Slingerland (2008; see also 2012, with Collard) is perhaps the most forceful advocate of uniting the humanities and sciences in general by uniting the mind and body via cognitive science and cognitive linguistics, including conceptual metaphor theory, mental space theory, and blending theory. He mounts an attack against post-structuralism, etc., while other applications of cognitive linguistics to the humanities are more diplomatic.


Christian discourse. My application is not that narrow or that broad. And the study that I make here is cognitive as well as diachronic, unlike cognitive studies that have been abstract and historically decontextualized.

This is the first application of the theory to the study of early christology and the proto-orthodox doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis, hence the need for a thorough yet I hope lively and accessible illustration of blends and blending theory. The primacy of my application in that respect is insignificant of course compared to the theory’s suitableness for analyzing thought and thought processes, particularly creative thought processes such as the one that led to the blended Jesus of orthodoxy and traditional Christianity.

4 It’s nearest to the applications of blending theory by Lundhaug (2010a): ‘the traditional western nativity story,’ by Pagán Cánovas (2011): the arrows of love in Greek mythology, and by DeConick (2013a): gnostic spirituality.

5 There have been some diachronic studies of invention in mathematics, such as the invention of complex numbers over the course of the 1500s to the 1800s, made by cognitive scientists. In brief: e.g. Fauconnnier & Turner 1994, 12-14; 2002, 25, 270-274. For infinity, see also Núñez 2005. But on the importance of diachronic history in cognitive studies and the lack thereof, see especially Pagán Cánovas 2011. It should be noted that blending theory was not necessarily formulated for the purpose of reading and interpreting texts written and read in historical contexts. Certain matters both in the formulation of the theory itself and in its application to text-based studies within the humanities, including biblical and related studies, are “outstanding,” a term that I borrow from Taylor’s (2009) review of Luomanen et al. 2007. Several of these matters are by no means exclusive to blending theory and its application, and I won’t be able to resolve them in this book or elsewhere. They include the matter of whether blending theory is totalizing, whose thoughts and thought processes it’s supposed to analyze (the author’s? reader’s? ideal reader’s?), and whether the mental spaces and operations of blending theory could be recognized at all neurologically. Whatever the case in neurology, I have proceeded on the understanding that blending is one way but surely not the only way humans think, and that authors and their minds are as accessible for study as the minds of readers.

6 Couliano (1990/1992, 7-19) applied cognitive scholarship to the study of early christology, but that was before blending theory was formulated.
BLENDING THEORY

First some requisite technical terms and a definition of the theory which frankly may not mean much before I begin to illustrate it in the next paragraph: As definitively stated by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, blending theory is based on an analytical division of thought and thought processes into mental spaces and operations. Among these mental spaces are two or more input spaces and a blended space.\(^7\) Such blended spaces or simply blends are part of what are called integration networks, with mental operations occurring throughout. “Building an integration network involves setting up mental spaces, matching across spaces, projecting selectively to a blend, locating shared structures, projecting backward to inputs, recruiting new structure to the inputs or the blend, and running various operations in the blend itself,” such as elaborating it. In their writing about all these mental operations both within the integration network as a whole and within the blended space more narrowly, Fauconnier and Turner have to write about one operation after the other, as will I, though it should always be remembered “that

\(^7\) For my purposes and the sake of simplicity, I omit the generic mental space, as have others recently, Turner himself among them. But see Fauconnier & Turner 2002, especially 41-42. On the complicated theoretical business of global generics in multiple blend networks, refer to Fauconnier & Turner 2002, 288-289, 296-298. While doing away with the generic space altogether, in their critique of blending theory, L. Brandt and P.A. Brandt propose a network of six mental spaces in order: first, a semiotic space, which has no real equivalent in the theory of Fauconnier and Turner; followed by a reference space and a presentation space, which roughly correspond to Fauconnier and Turner’s minimum of two input spaces, and which are understood as source and target according to the conceptual metaphor theory of Lakoff and Johnson; then a virtual space, a relevance space, and a meaning space, which together roughly correspond to Fauconnier and Turner’s blended space with its operations, and which flow back to the semiotic space, forming a kind of circuit. See L. Brandt & P.A. Brandt 2005a; P.A. Brandt 2005; L. Brand & P.A. Brandt 2005b; see also Coulson & Oakley 2005, for what they call a grounding box instead of the semiotic space. Brandt and Brant’s six space syntactical and semiotic network may be especially useful for analyzing slow motion meaning production in blends that are essentially metaphoric (e.g. this surgeon is a butcher) and that have two input spaces, a source (e.g. butchery) and target (e.g. surgery). It seems to be less useful for analyzing blends that are not and that have more than two input spaces.
any of them can run at any time and that they can run simultaneously. The integration network is trying to achieve equilibrium.”

**DROPPED BY THE STORK ON THIRD BASE:**

**AN ILLUSTRATION OF BLENDS AND BLENDING THEORY**

Blending theory and its applicability to my study are illustrated well by the Born on Third network and by the Bush-Stork-Baseball-Spoon multiple blend network that Fauconnier and Turner contrive from it. They analyze an example of an integration network with two input spaces and a blended space, and from it they contrive a multiple blend network. ‘Born on third base’ has become a stock phrase in reference to United States politics, business, and finance. The two inputs here are baseball and life in American society and economics. While these are not immediately related to early christology, I will show that all examples of Jesus’ incarnation through virgin birth operate much the same as examples of the Born on Third network and the multiple blend network built over it. In order to I do that, I must give examples of the Born on Third network and then proceed with analysis of them according to blending theory. Fauconnier and Turner have analyzed one of these examples of the Born on Third Network. On the model of their analysis, I will be analyzing all examples of the blend of Jesus’ incarnation through parthenogenesis in the second century. What comes next, then, are examples of the Born on Third network, followed by analysis of them. These examples are the data to be analyzed. They correspond to the christological statements of Ignatius, etc., that I presented summarily under the

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8 Fauconnier & Turner 2002, 44.
heading of incarnation through parthenogenesis in the last chapter, and that I will be analyzing in
detail in this one.

The first example of the Born on Third network that I give and the one that Fauconnier
and Turner analyze is an instance of political satire. During the 1988 United States presidential
election, George H.W. Bush, son of a wealthy banker and senator, was described as “a man who
was born on third base and thinks he hit a triple.” The description was repeated by a political
rival during the 1992 presidential election, and the same thing has been said of his own son,
President George W. Bush.\(^{10}\)

Moving from politics directly to business and finance, the next example takes the shape
of an assessment of the Forbes list of four hundred Americans with the most money in 1997. The
assessment of the list was titled “Born on Third Base.” It asks: “how many of our wealthiest
citizens actually started life in the batter’s box and faced the pitcher? And how many started life
on first, second or third base? How many were born crossing home plate and inherited their way
directly onto the Forbes 400 list?”\(^{11}\)

This “Born on Third Base” assessment was repeated in 2012, marking the thirtieth
anniversary of the Forbes list. That year, following the American economic crunch of 2006-
2010, Forbes stated that “[t]here has been much discussion of late about the widening gap
between rich and poor and what role the wealthiest Americans should play in fixing society’s
ills, and how much taxes they should pay. This list on the surface will perhaps exacerbate those
concerns,” Forbes recognized, though it claimed that “the American dream is still very much

\(^{10}\) See Toner 1991; Reynolds & Letkemann 2004; Popik 2012.
\(^{11}\) Bayard et al. 1997.
alive. Seventy percent of the Forbes 400 members are classified as self-made.”¹² According to
the “Born on Third Base” assessment of the list, however, that classification was
misrepresentative, since only thirty-five percent of the Forbes 400 were “born in the batter’s
box.” The rest were born on ‘first,’ ‘second,’ ‘third,’ or ‘home plate.’¹³

To return briefly to politics, the final example that I will give for now is another squib.
The 2012 Forbes list and its assessment appeared in September, prior to the United States
presidential election that year, with Mitt Romney, son of a wealthy businessman and governor,
as the Republican candidate. The phrase, born on third base, was being used even before footage
from an extravagant Romney fundraiser was leaked, and before Romney’s tax files became the
subject of public interest. As one opinion piece put it, “today’s born-on-third Republicans not
only think they hit triples, but – without any hint of irony – seem hell-bent on preventing those at
the bottom from reaching first base.”¹⁴

*Mental Operations including Matching and Selective Projection to the Blend*

Fauconnier and Turner analyze the 1992 Bush example. The input spaces in this network are
baseball and life in American society and economics.

There is matching across these spaces, as the runner’s position on third base, close to
home plate, is matched to a privileged person’s socio-economic status at birth.

¹² That classification came as an edit, as noted by Forbes staff (Kroll 2012): “First version of this
post said that 70% built their fortunes entirely from scratch; it should have said 70% are self-
made, as some might have borrowed money from in-laws or parents, or started businesses with
spouses or other relatives, but nevertheless built these fortunes themselves.”
¹⁴ Fanlund 2012.
There is selective projection from the input spaces to the blended space, which has a runner on third and a privileged person born.

Shared structures are located within the network: both the sport and life are competitions with agents vying to win.

Structure and meaning unique to the blended space emerge: now it’s possible for the runner/privileged person to be on third without having faced the pitcher or run to first and second base, all the while thinking that he hit a triple; he’s unaware of the advantage he has from the socio-economic status he inherited when he was born on third base.  

Further Matching and Elaboration of the Blend as an Imaginative Scenario

In other examples of this network there is further matching across input spaces, and the blend is elaborated. Going beyond its title “Born on Third Base,” the assessment of the Forbes list further matches each of the positions of the runners in baseball to certain advantages of socio-economic status owing to family. In the elaborated blend, therefore, only a few of the Forbes 400 are born on third base. The rest are born in the batter’s box, on first, second, or even home plate.

Elaboration of the blend is also what is happening in the statement from the 2012 political opinion piece, that “today’s born-on-third Republicans not only think they hit triples, but ... seem hell-bent on preventing those at the bottom from reaching first base.”

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17 Fanlund 2012.
These elaborated blends have additional emergent structure and meaning. In baseball itself, no more than one runner can be on a single base at a time, and there are two teams. The runners from the same team do not try to prevent each other from reaching first. They want their teammates at bat and in the batter’s box to get a hit and reach home plate, so as to defeat the opposing team. But in these elaborated blends, there is only one team, many runners can be on a single base at a time, and all runners compete against each other. It’s as if ‘today’s born-on-third Republicans’ were trying to prevent those at bat and in the batter’s box from reaching first base by pitching curves and fast balls, catching pop flies, and throwing runners out at first, as they themselves run from third base to home plate.

Fauconnier and Turner write that “[w]e elaborate blends by treating them as simulations,” imaginative scenarios such as being born in the batter’s box, at bat, on first base, and so forth. “Part of the power of blending is that there are always many different possible lines of elaboration, and elaboration can go on indefinitely.” So if one person is born on third base, another could be born at bat and moreover just a swing away from striking out. Consider this recent comment from a sociologist:

As the old baseball joke has it, some begin life with two strikes against them while others are born on third base and think they’ve hit a triple. And while the former may reach home in some instances, and the latter may fail to do so, the probabilities overwhelmingly favor the latter over the former, as any good baseball statistician will verify. The respective chances of the two players are not even remotely equal, even when the two players are exactly equal in talent and drive. Would any rational and informed person seriously argue that the son or daughter of a billionaire and the son or daughter of a migrant farm worker share anything even remotely approaching an equal opportunity to acquire material wealth? Yet many among us seem implicitly to believe that this is the case, and grow hostile at the mere suggestion that it may be patently untrue.

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18 Fauconnier & Turner 2002, 48-49.
19 Rigney 2010, 8.
Treated as an imaginative scenario, the blend of baseball (input 1) and life in society and economics (input 2) allows for endless elaboration. In the elaborated blend, the sociologist here is able to state that “any good baseball statistician will verify” this comment about who is favored to become rich, the child of a migrant farm worker or a billionaire.

The blend might be elaborated along the lines of the players, sportscasters, team owners, sponsors, fans, etc. The assessment of the 2012 Forbes list included mock trading-cards of the “Forbes 400 All Stars.” The cards feature player stats and game information, such as: “Did you know? 60% of the income owned by the Forbes 400 comes from capital gains, which is taxed at 15%.” Or: “Did you know? Hispanics and blacks are the nation’s two largest minority groups, making up 16 percent and 12 percent of the U.S. population respectively, yet Oprah is the only black person on the Forbes 400.” A sarcastic advertisement for the trading-cards and players reads: “Collect them all! Trade with your friends! Watch their wealth averages grow!”

Projection backward from the Blend as well as Projection across Inputs

Besides matching across input spaces, selectively projecting from the inputs to the blended space, locating shared structure within the network, further matching across inputs and elaborating the blend, another important mental operation is projecting from the blend backward to the inputs as well as projecting across inputs.²¹

So in baseball, statisticians know batting averages and comment on a batter’s odds of hitting a triple or crossing home plate. But they do not know statistics on socio-economic

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²¹ The term retrojection might be less awkward than projection backward, but I retain the terminology of the theory.
mobility and do not comment on how probable it is that a given child will be financially successful. It’s the sociologist who makes that comment above, and as he elaborates the blend he puts words into the baseball statistician’s mouth when he wryly states that the statistician will be able to verify. He’s projecting from the blend backward to the baseball input as well as projecting across from the input of life in society and economics.

*Pattern Completion and Integration by Recruitment*

One more important mental operation in the blended space itself is completing the pattern. This is done by recruiting structure from areas of background knowledge so that the emergent structure and meaning in the blend are well integrated. In the 1992 Bush example of the Born on Third network, and in examples of the elaborated blend, the pattern is left fairly incomplete. How is someone supposed to be born on third base or anywhere else on the field? Elaboration is not pattern completion. Before walking from the batter’s box to face the pitcher, the batter/non-privileged person still must be born there someplace. But how? Children are born every day with certain advantages and disadvantages of socio-economic status. They are not born in the middle of a baseball game.

From the 1992 Bush example Fauconnier and Turner contrive a completion to the pattern. It’s this: “The stork dropped George Bush on third base with a silver spoon in his mouth, and he thinks he hit a triple.” The pattern is completed here by recruiting structure from an area of background knowledge associated with birth (the stork), not to mention structure from an area of background knowledge associated with socio-economic status (the silver spoon). So instead of being born there inexplicably, President Bush is flown into the stadium and dropped on third
base by the stork, known to bring babies into the world according to popular imagination. This unique structure and meaning emerge in the blend, and they are thoroughly integrated as the pattern is completed.\textsuperscript{22}

\textit{Multiple Blend Networks and Hyper-Blended Spaces}

Fauconnier and Turner’s contrivance is better integrated than the 1992 Bush example because it accounts for his birth in the middle of a baseball game. It also demonstrates what they call multiple blending. The Born on Third network has two input spaces and a blended space. The pattern is completed as the Bush-Stork-Baseball-Spoon multiple bend network is built over the Born on Third network. This multiple blend network adds two sub-networks to the Born on Third network, and it has a hyper-blended space.

The sub-networks are used as additional inputs. One of them is the Birth Stork network, which itself has numerous input spaces. Another is the Silver Spoon network, which blends socio-economic status with eating and dinnerware. To the hyper-blended space in this multiple blend network, then, there is selective projection from the initial inputs of the Born on Third network as well as from each of the added sub-networks and their many respective input spaces. The emergent structure and meaning in the hyper-blend are thoroughly integrated and cannot be reduced to any of initial input spaces, sub-networks or their own inputs.\textsuperscript{23}

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\textsuperscript{22} Fauconnier & Turner 2002, 285-289.
\textsuperscript{23} For multiple blends, including the contrived Bush-Stork-Baseball-Spoon network, see Fauconnier & Turner 2002, 279-298.
Frames, Clashes, and Creativity

Structure within a blend has to do with its organizing frame, and integration networks can be classified according to a typology of framing, from simplex and mirror networks, to networks that are single-, double-, and multiple-scope.

In a simplex network, the organizing frame in the blend comes from one of the inputs, the other input does not have a frame, and there are no clashes between inputs.

In a mirror network, all mental spaces have the same organizing frame, and so there are no clashes between frames, although there may be some clashes between other input elements.

In a single-scope network, both inputs have an organizing frame. They are typically different and so clash. But only one of the input frames is projected to the blend.

In a double-scope network, both inputs have an organizing frame. They are typically different and so clash. Instead of only one of the input frames being projected to the blend, however, both input frames are selectively projected, clashes and all.

In a multiple-scope network, there are more than two inputs and more than two organizing frames. The frames tend to be different and so clash. More than two of them are selectively projected to the blend, clashes and all.\(^{24}\)

The Born on Third network is double-scope. The organizing frame in the blended space comes partially from the input of baseball and partially from the input of life in society and economics, with clashes between the two frames. “Far from blocking the construction of the

network, such clashes offer challenges to the imagination; indeed, the resulting blends can be highly creative,” Fauconnier and Turner write of double-scope networks.25 A challenge to the imagination in the Born on Third network is how a person is supposed to be born in the middle of a baseball game. Fauconnier and Turner meet that challenge and complete the pattern by recruiting structure from areas of background knowledge associated with birth (the stork) and socio-economic status (the silver spoon).

Their contrived Bush-Stork-Baseball-Spoon network is multiple-scope. It’s multiple-scope not due to the fact that it’s a multiple blend: the output from a simplex network might be used as the input for another simplex network again and again, resulting in a multiple blend that would nonetheless not be multiple-scope with respect to its frame.26 The Bush-Stork-Baseball-Spoon network is multiple-scope because the organizing frame in the hyper-blended space comes partially from the Born on Third network (itself double-scope), partially from the added Birth Stork sub-network, and partially from the added Silver Spoon sub-network. Their organizing frames are different and so clash. As they are selectively projected to the hyper-blended space, their clashes are too. But by recruitment, the pattern is completed and the emergent structure and meaning in the hyper-blend are thoroughly integrated.

THE THEORY APPLIED HERE

The Born on Third network and the Bush-Stork-Baseball-Spoon multiple blend network built over it are just a few of the dozens of blends that Fauconnier and Turner analyze in their

26 See Fauconnier & Turner 2002, 121 fig. 7.1, 152 fig. 8.6, 165-166, on the ‘father of’ blend and the ‘great-grandfather of’ megablend.
formulation of blending theory. Any one of these blends might be studied in more breadth and depth, such as examples of the Born on Third network besides the 1992 Bush example. The assessment of the Forbes list, for instance, expressly adds another input to the network, i.e., money, which is itself a blend of goods and values; per the assessment of the 2012 list, in order to be “born on third base” members of the Forbes 400 must have “[i]nherited wealth in excess of $50 million or a large and prosperous company.”

In their formulation of blending theory, Fauconnier and Turner’s purpose, though, “is not to give an exhaustive presentation of any particular integration network but, rather, to explain the cognitive operations by which they all work.” For my part, I apply blending theory to the study of early christology, and I give an historical presentation of a particular network as comprehensively as possible, though not exhaustively, within a set time-period. That network is the harmonization of the ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth. I consider all of the earliest examples of incarnation through parthenogenesis from first half of the second century (Ignatius to Justin) and another important example from a bit later (Letter of the Apostles). I consider them diachronically, one example of the network after another.

I will be referring to the generalized network, which is what all these and other examples of the doctrine have in common.

More or less interchangeably, I will also be referring to the initial network, which is the first harmonization of the ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth by Ignatius and others in the early second century.

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27 Moriarty et al. 2012, 9. For money as a blend, see Fauconnier & Turner 2002, 201-203.
I will also be referring to the multiple blend networks built over the initial network by Justin Martyr and the authors of the *Letter of the Apostles*.

*Matching the Two Jesuses and Projecting Them to the Blend*

Baseball and life in American society and economics are not immediately related to early christology, but all examples of Jesus’ incarnation through virgin birth operate much the same as examples of the Born on Third network and the Bush-Stork-Baseball-Spoon multiple blend network built over it.

They all have at least two input spaces: the idea of Jesus’ pre-existence and the idea of his virgin birth (see diagram 1).

There is matching across these input spaces as the pre-existent Jesus in one input is matched to Jesus the son of the virgin Mary, in the other (see diagram 2).

There is also projection from the inputs to the blended space where the structure and meaning of incarnation through parthenogenesis emerge (see diagram 3).

The mental operations of matching across input spaces and of projection from the inputs to the blended space are much the same here in this generalized network as they are in the Born on Third network. They are much the same with a notable exception having to do with metaphor. The Born on Third network is essentially metaphoric, as are several of the blends that Fauconnier and Turner analyze in their formulation of blending theory. They formulated it in part from the metaphor theory of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. According to this theory, metaphors consist of a ‘source,’ such as baseball, and a ‘target,’ such as life in society and economics.
Diag. 3

Diagram illustrating the pre-existence of Jesus, his descent from heaven, and his resurrection. The diagram also shows the relationship between Jesus and Mary, highlighting the concept of 'virgin birth' and the role of Joseph in the narrative. The text explains the various events and their connections, providing a comprehensive view of the religious narrative.
Projection is unidirectional, from source to target, and not the other way around. The target, which is usually complex or otherwise unknown, is understood in terms of the source projected onto it. For instance, life in society and economics, with its many variables, is understood in terms of the familiar game of baseball, with its straightforward rules and somewhat predictable outcomes.²⁹

Although Fauconnier and Turner formulated their theory in part from the metaphor theory of Lakoff and Johnson, blending theory takes into account far more in the analysis of human thought, including but not limited to essentially metaphoric blends.³⁰ In the Born on Third network, the inputs of baseball and life in society and economics roughly correspond to the source and target in Lakoff and Johnson’s metaphor theory. With its blended space besides the two minimum input spaces, however, blending theory is uniquely equipped to handle emergent structure and meaning that cannot be reduced to source or target. And according to blending theory, projection is not unidirectional but is from two or more inputs to a blended space. Projection also occurs backward from the blended space to the inputs as well as across them. Furthermore, blending theory is uniquely equipped to handle multiple inputs and multiple blends, whether they are essentially metaphoric blends or not.

In the Born on Third network, matching across the input spaces of baseball and life in society and economics allows for the foundational metaphor of ‘life is baseball;’ projection from the inputs to the blended space allows for the particular metaphoric phrase ‘born on third base, thinks he hit a triple.’ But in all examples of Jesus’ incarnation through virgin birth, matching across the two minimum input spaces allows the pre-existent Jesus in one input to be identified

²⁹ For overviews of conceptual metaphor theory, see Evans & Green 2006, 286-327; Grady 2007.
³⁰ See e.g. Grady 2007, 200-201.
non-metaphorically with Jesus, son of the virgin Mary, in the other; projection from the inputs to the blended space allows for the emergent structure and meaning of Jesus’ incarnation through parthenogenesis, which is not metaphor.

While this exception to the sameness between the mental operations in the Born on Third network and in all examples of Jesus’ incarnation through parthenogenesis is notable, it should also be noted that early Christians certainly did use metaphors to understand the unknown in terms of the familiar. Along with their fellow inhabitants of the ancient Mediterranean, they understood human reproduction in terms of agriculture, embodiment in terms clothing, and pregnancy in terms of weaving, the uterus being understood as a loom. Christians used these metaphors to understand themselves as well as Jesus. They used them in elaborating the blend of his incarnation through parthenogenesis and in their attempts at completing that pattern, as I will be discussing below.

Notwithstanding this use of metaphors to think and to state that Jesus was the seed of David, for instance, or that he clothed himself with flesh, all examples of the blend remain essentially non-metaphoric in their identification of the pre-existent Jesus with Jesus, son of the virgin Mary. To state that one Jesus is another Jesus is not metaphor. It’s harmonization. The pre-existent Jesus is not the familiar ‘source’ in terms of which Jesus, son of the virgin Mary, is understood as unknown ‘target,’ nor vice versa.

*The Blended Jesus that Emerges, Irreducible to Textual Inputs*

Unlike the Born on Third network, then, harmonization of the ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth is not an essentially metaphoric blend. But just as in the Born on Third network,
there are at least two input spaces in all examples of incarnation through parthenogenesis, namely the ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and his virgin birth. They cannot rightly be labeled inputs 1 and 2 because the blend is not essentially metaphoric, there being no source (input 1) and target (input 2), as there is in the Born on Third network.

It’s often possible to ascertain the text/s used as the input/s for Jesus’ pre-existence, Paul and John in particular. It’s also often possible to ascertain the text/s used as the input/s for Jesus’ virgin birth, overall the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke. Occasionally it isn’t.

This occasional impossibility of ascertaining textual inputs is not a real concern because mine is not a study in source criticism, whether written or oral sources (naturally the sources involved in source criticism should not be confused with the ‘source’ and its ‘target’ in the metaphor theory of Lakoff and Johnson). When Fauconnier and Turner analyze the 1992 Bush example of the Born on Third network, they do not ask where his political rival’s knowledge of baseball came from. To an extent, it does not matter what the source of the rival’s knowledge was. If I were going to give a comprehensive presentation of the Born on Third network, I would not be concerned with the source of baseball knowledge in each example, and I might not even be interested in why the sport was ever developed.

In this book, however, I am interested in why the ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth were developed, the latter more than the former; I argued in the last chapter that the idea of Jesus’ parthenogenesis was developed first of all and in large part as a defense against reports of Mary’s early pregnancy. But in addition to why the ideas were developed, I am interested in how they were harmonized, and I am especially interested in the structure and meaning emergent in their harmonization. This novel pattern of incarnation through virgin birth is, among other things,
what distinguished proto-orthodox Christianity from Second Temple and early Judaism, from the texts that were canonized in the New Testament, and from heterodox Christians. There was much continuity between them all as well, but my focus is on proto-orthodox Christian innovation. Emergent structure and meaning in the blend cannot be reduced to the network inputs:

Incarnation through parthenogenesis is not reducible to the ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth, any more than it’s reducible to Paul and John, Matthew and Luke, Jewish or pagan literature. It was a new idea that emerged from the blending of two separate ideas in the second century and has since been taken for granted as it became proto-orthodox and then orthodox Christian doctrine.

*Christology as Simulation*

Elaborating a blend is treating it as an imaginative scenario. The blend of Jesus’ incarnation through parthenogenesis has been and continues to be elaborated, from the early second-century appearance of the ‘new’ star in Ignatius (in Matthew the star is not new), to the mid second-century prophetic vision of Jesus’ descent from heaven and angelic metamorphosis in the *Ascension of Isaiah*, to the late-second century dialogue between the male apostles and the risen Lord about his appearance to Mary in form of Gabriel in the *Letter of the Apostles*, to the third- or fourth-century dialogue between the male apostles and the virgin Mary about how she conceived the divine Word in the *Questions of Bartholomew*, etc.\(^{31}\) Christian imaginativeness is found in these examples of elaborated blending. They are clearly simulations.

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\(^{31}\) Further discussion of Ignatius below. In the *Quaestiones Bartholomaei* 2.1-22 (Elliot 1993, 658-660), he wants Peter to ask Mary how she conceived. The chief apostle passes to John, on the logic that the beloved disciple is himself a virgin and so should be the one to ask her. But
But blends are not always recognized as such. The unelaborated blend is so entrenched in culture that anciently people lived in the imaginative scenario of Jesus’ incarnation through virgin birth and presently still do. From the entrenched blend of incarnation through virgin birth there have been centuries of projection backward to the inputs of Paul and John, Matthew and Luke, as Christianity has spread, sometimes coercively, and become a world faith.

When people live in a blend, they rarely see the inputs discretely. The blend of baseball and life in society and economics is not one that people live in, but money is. Children have to learn to live in the money blend. Having learned, adults assume the blending of goods and values. They cannot see goods without thinking of a value and cash price. They cannot see a dollar bill without thinking of a value and corresponding goods they might purchase at that price, or perhaps how many more dollar bills they must acquire in order to be listed among the Forbes 400. People live in this blend and many others, including time with its clocks and watches, as well as sacraments with their practices and holy objects. While only some blends are lived in, “[b]lending is not something we do in addition to living in the world; it is our means of living in the world. Living in the human world is ‘living in the blend’ or, rather, living in many coordinated blends,” Fauconnier and Turner write. “Once we have the blend of money or the watch or social action or ritual, we are not consciously aware of the different input spaces and

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even John is reluctant. When Bartholomew finally asks Mary “to tell us how you conceived the incomprehensible, or how you bore him who cannot be carried, or how you brought forth so much greatness,” she cautions him not to ask “concerning this mystery. If I should begin to tell you, fire will issue forth out of my mouth and consume all the world.” Of course, the apostles persist, and Mary is about to answer their question when the resurrected Jesus appears and intervenes at the last minute, saying to her: “Utter not this mystery, or this day my whole creation will come to an end.”
the projections across the network. In the blend, the money has its value and the watch shows time, and this is what we are aware of.”32

Jesus’ incarnation through virgin birth is one of the many coordinated blends that people, though hardly all people, have been living in for hundreds of years. It’s not as old or universal and key to life in society and economics as the money blend. But at present, even some scholars may be unaware of the different input spaces and the projections across the network, both across input spaces and backward from the blend to the inputs. Thus in New Testament studies, Jesus’ pre-existence is liable to be projected backward from the blend as well as across inputs from Paul and John to Matthew and Luke, though the infancy narratives do not feature a pre-existent Jesus. And vice-versa: his virgin birth is liable to be projected backward from the blend as well as across inputs from the infancy narratives to Pauline and Johannine christology, though Paul and John do not feature his parthenogenesis. This is why Raymond Brown, for one, had to stress the difference between what he calls conception christology in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, and what he calls pre-existence christology, such as in Philippians, Colossians, and John in particular.33

A classic case of projection backward from the blend to the textual input, quite physically, is the variant manuscript reading of John 1.13 as if it were about the Word (singular) and his virgin birth instead of those (plural) who received him and became children of God through spiritual rebirth, probably at their baptism.34 The variant reading was widespread among proto-orthodox and then orthodox Christians anciently. It’s attested by Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Ambrose and Augustine as well as in the Letter of the Apostles and beyond that in the

34 John 1.12-13 can be connected with baptism and spiritual rebirth in John 1.33; 3.1-10.
Armenian Infancy Gospel, as I showed in the last chapter. It even made its way into a fifth-century Latin manuscript of the canonical gospels and has been supported by scholars, so compelling is life in the blend. But the reading is a textual corruption.\(^{35}\) After the ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth were harmonized, proto-orthodox and then orthodox readers and copyists projected incarnation through parthenogenesis backward from the blend to John, where the idea of virgin birth is not featured, and where arguably the Word becomes flesh as the Spirit descends upon and possesses Jesus at baptism.

The Creativity and Imaginativeness of Incarnation through Parthenogenesis

Proto-orthodox corruption of John 1.13 underscores the fact that the two ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth are not harmonized in any New Testament text. Their harmonization came almost entirely after Paul and John and Matthew and Luke were written, as the various texts of the New Testament began to circulate en masse, being read, interpreted, copied, and rewritten together. “This thought process,” as Brown puts it, was “probably already at work in the beginning of the second century in Ignatius of Antioch.”\(^{36}\) Indeed it was, with historical circumstances surrounding it. But to current readers of Ignatius and other proto-orthodox and

\(^{35}\) See Metzger 1971/1994, 168-169; Ehrman 1993/2011, 69-70, 115. As he reanimates the discipline of New Testament textual criticism, Ehrman (1993/2011, 34-36, 336-337) draws on reader-response theory (especially Stanley Fish), in his understanding of scribes as authors and of copying/reading as interpretation, which is reflected in the ironic double-entendre of his title, The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture. Meanwhile in the field of literary studies itself, Hamilton and Schneider (2002, 641, 655) “suggest that for reception theory to remain useful, it too must go cognitive now,” there being “many affinities” between reception theory (especially Wolfgang Iser) and what they call “cognitive criticism” (especially Turner, including his collaboration with Fauconnier in the formulation of blending theory). New Testament textual criticism might benefit from ‘going cognitive’ as well.

\(^{36}\) Brown 1977/1993, 141 n.27.
orthodox Christian literature, unaware as they may be of the different input spaces and the projections across the network, incarnation through parthenogenesis may not seem at all imaginative or creative.

It’s easier to recognize the imaginativeness and creativity of the Born on Third network and the Bush-Stork-Baseball-Spoon multiple blend network built over it, because these blends are not as entrenched in culture, and people have not been living in them. Fauconnier and Turner’s phrase, ‘dropped by the stork on third with a silver spoon in his mouth, thinks he hit a triple,’ is a theoretical contrivance that is unlikely to become entrenched in culture. The phrase, ‘born on third, thinks he hit a triple,’ is somewhat entrenched; it was said as early as the 1980s, though many Americans remain unfamiliar with it. Prior to that, the simpler phrase, ‘born on third,’ is traceable in print to the 1930s and 40s.\textsuperscript{37} For instance, as refrigerators were supplanting iceboxes and the ice trade was vanishing, it was said at a convention of the National Association of Ice Industries that “today there is a tendency among our civilization to want to be born on third base and come home on a sacrifice.”\textsuperscript{38} Going even further back, obviously none of these phrases could have been said before modern baseball was developed in the 1800s.

While they are not reducible to the inputs of baseball and life in American society and economics, the structure and meaning emergent in the Born on Third network and the Bush-Stork-Baseball-Spoon multiple blend network built over it do rely on the development of the sport, to say nothing of the establishment of the country. Their imaginativeness and creativity were only possible after baseball was developed. After that, the simple phrase, ‘born on third,’ is attested in the 1930s and 40s. From there, the more elaborate phrase, ‘born on third, thinks he hit

\textsuperscript{37} See Reynolds & Letkemann 2004; Popik 2012.
\textsuperscript{38} National Association of Ice Industries 1940, 265.
a triple,’ is attested in 1980s, with even more elaborate phrases attested in the 1990s and into the
2000s and 2010s. Still the pattern in the blend was left rather incomplete until Fauconnier and
Turner’s contrived, integrated phrase, ‘dropped by the stork on third with a silver spoon in his
mouth, thinks he hit a triple.’ That was some decades after attestation of the simple phrase and
the more elaborate phrases, all of it relying on the development of baseball.

In much the same way, as irreducible as it is to textual inputs, the proto-orthodox
Christian doctrine of Jesus’ incarnation through parthenogenesis relies on the development of the
initial ideas of his pre-existence and virgin birth. Pre-existence or heavenly provenance of divine
mediator figures was already there in Second Temple and early Judaism, but the idea of Jesus’
virgin birth was not developed until the last half of the first century CE when Matthew and Luke
(and their sources) introduced it. The imaginative scenario of incarnation through
parthenogenesis was not possible before that, much less could it have been lived in.

Once the initial ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth were developed, then they
could be harmonized, and the blend of incarnation through parthenogenesis could begin to be
entrenched in culture. Proto-orthodox Christians elaborated and integrated it, developing
additional ideas of incarnation through auto-parthenogenesis and aural conception as they
completed the pattern.

In surviving Christian literature, the first example of pre-existence and incarnation
through virgin birth comes from Ignatius, who leaves the pattern rather incomplete. How did the
pre-existent Jesus enter the virgin Mary’s womb? It was not for another half century that pattern
completion was advanced enough to result in examples of pre-existence and incarnation through
aural conception and auto-parthenogenesis too. After Ignatius, the pattern is also left rather
incomplete in the *Ascension of Isaiah*, where the pre-existent Jesus does, however, transform himself to look like the angels as he descends from heaven. The pattern is completed, albeit inefficiently, in the writings of Justin Martyr, where the virgin Mary conceives aurally at Gabriel’s annunciation to her, and where the pre-existent Jesus is identified with the Spirit/Power that comes upon and overshadows her and causes her to become pregnant, thus taking the place of his own would-be father. The pattern is completed most efficiently in the *Letter of the Apostles*, where the pre-existent Jesus puts on the Father’s Wisdom/Spirit/Power and transforms himself to look like the angel Gabriel as he descends from heaven. He then personally makes the announcement to Mary, impregnates her by his speech, entering her ear, heart, and womb, and there becomes flesh.

The emergent structure and meaning of Jesus’ pre-existence and incarnation through parthenogenesis were integrated by many ancient Christian minds, with elaboration going on indefinitely, even now. Each differs from the next of course, but all examples of the doctrine, reliant as they are on the development of the initial ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth in the first century, have at least the two minimum input spaces. Completing the pattern with aural conception and auto-parthenogenesis brought one or more added inputs.

To reiterate, structure and meaning within a blend have to do with its organizing frame, and all examples of incarnation through parthenogenesis can be classified as at least double-scope. The two minimum inputs of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth have their respective organizing frames. The frames are different and so clash. In the one input, that of Jesus’ pre-existence, he exists before coming into being as a human. In the other input, that of Jesus’ virgin birth, he does not pre-exist, and he comes into being already paradoxically without a father and without intercourse. Both input frames are projected to the blended space, clashes and all.
“Far from blocking the construction of the network, such clashes offer challenges to the imagination; indeed, the resulting blends can be highly creative,” again as Fauconnier and Turner state of double-scope, and I might further state of multiple-scope, networks.39 A challenge to early Christian imagination was how the pre-existent Jesus entered the womb of the virgin Mary. Fauconnier and Turner contrived a completion to the pattern in the 1992 Bush example of the Born on Third network by recruiting structure from areas of background knowledge associated with birth (the stork) and also socio-economic status (the silver spoon). Though not as a theoretical contrivance, proto-orthodox Christians did the same, recruiting structure from areas of background knowledge associated with angels and physiology (hearing, conception) in the Lukan infancy narrative.

But unlike the added Birth Stork network and the Silver Spoon network which Fauconnier and Turner did not create, the ideas of Jesus’ aural conception and auto-parthenogenesis had to be invented by Christians before they could complete the pattern. Christians invented the idea of Jesus’ aural conception in the middle of the second century, once belief in his virgin birth was developed and vaginal conception was for them no longer christologically possible.

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I have been referring to the first harmonization of the ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth by Ignatius and other proto-orthodox Christians in the early second century as the initial network with its two input spaces and blended space. But I was simplifying. This initial network is actually a multiple blend network itself with more than two inputs (see diagram 4), since the ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth are themselves blends, as is the idea of aural conception.

PRELIMINARIES IN THE CHRISTOLOGICAL THOUGHT PROCESS

The Idea of Jesus’ Pre-existence Itself a Blend

Whenever exactly the idea of Jesus’ pre-existence was developed, say, in the 40s CE, and why it was ever developed, at any rate there were several divine mediator figures before Jesus that could be said to pre-exist or else come from heaven. What is more, belief in human pre-existence, in particular ‘the soul,’ was not rare in the Greco-Roman world, at least not among pagans. I could analyze specific examples of such figures and belief, but analysis of a generalized network will suffice until I get to Paul and John specifically.

The idea of a pre-existence is part of the same generalized network as the idea of an afterlife. The network has two inputs: time and existence.

The time input has within it the past, present and future.
The existence input has within it birth or the equivalent of coming into being and existing/living, at the end of which is death or ceasing to exist.

There is matching across inputs as the present is matched to birth>life>death, and these are projected to the blend. The existence input has within it nothing for the past or future to be matched to. But if the past is projected to the blend from the time input, pre-existence emerges, that is, existence before birth>life>death in the present. And if the future is projected to the blend, after-life emerges also (see diagram 5):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Input: Time</th>
<th>Input: Existence</th>
<th>Blend of Pre-Existence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>past before</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>before? pre-existence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>present</td>
<td>birth&gt;life&gt;death</td>
<td>birth&gt;life&gt;death in the present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>future after</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>after? after-life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is a generalized network, and to offer a further generalization, ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures seem to me to have developed the idea of an after-life first, followed by the idea of a pre-existence (if they developed such an idea at all), which would be natural enough since the future tends to be more urgent than the past.

Still generalized but with Jesus as the one existing, the network has again two inputs: the time input (past, present, future) and the input of Jesus’ existence (his birth>life>death). In the blend, Jesus pre-exists before birth and is resurrected after death (see diagram 6):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Input: Time</th>
<th>Input: Jesus’ existence</th>
<th>Blend of Jesus’ Pre-Existence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>past</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Jesus pre-exists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>present</td>
<td>Jesus is born, lives, dies</td>
<td>Jesus is born, lives, dies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>future</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Jesus is resurrected</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The idea of Jesus’ resurrection was developed almost immediately after his death, if not sooner, since there was already Jewish belief in an after-life prior to his martyrdom. The idea of Jesus’ pre-existence was also developed soon after his death, though not as immediately as the idea of his resurrection. As with belief in an after-life, there was already Jewish belief in what may be
Diag. 5

past (before)  

present  

future (after)  

birth-life-death

Input: Time

Descent from heaven  

Input: Common knowledge of heavenly journeys

before? pre-existence  
descent from heaven and incarnation  
birth-life-death  

after? after-life

Input: Existence

Blend in generalized network:  
Pre-existence
Diag. 6

- Past (before)
- Present
- Future (after)
- Jesus is born, lives, dies

Input: Time
Input: Jesus' existence

Descent from heaven
Input: Common knowledge of heavenly journeys

Jesus pre-exists
descends from heaven
and is incarnated
Jesus is born, lives, dies
Jesus is resurrected

Blend in generalized network:
Jesus' pre-existence
called the pre-existence of God and God’s attributes hypostatized, of angels, and of other divine or divinized mediator figures appearing on earth. But unless these figures happened to be born as humans or otherwise undergo incarnation, it would be better to refer to their heavenly provenance instead of their pre-existence. And as for humans, belief in their pre-existence was not as prominent in Judaism as it was, for instance, in Platonic tradition. So it’s somewhat surprising to find Jews like Paul in the middle of the first century believing that the human Jesus, born from the seed of David, born from a woman, also pre-existed. Even in the second century and later, most proto-orthodox Christians who believed in Jesus’ pre-existence did not believe that humans, including themselves, pre-existed. For them, he was the exception.

Once the idea of Jesus’ pre-existence was developed within a decade or so after his death, the blend could be elaborated and the pattern could be completed. I will discuss elaboration as well as projection backward from the blend; then I will discuss pattern completion.

Elaboration and projection backward from the blend: If Jesus pre-existed, who was he and what had he been doing before his birth? He could be identified with God, God’s attributes hypostatized, an angel or some other divine mediator figure in Jewish literature.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul, for example, identifies him with the (angel/glory of the) Lord who accompanied the Israelites in the wilderness (see diagram 7). To the network Paul recruits passages from the Pentateuch, and in the process he projects the pre-existent Jesus backward to scriptural events generations in the past. Suddenly it’s the pre-existent Jesus as Lord who sent the serpents to destroy the Israelites when they tried him in the wilderness.¹

John, for another example, projects the pre-existent Jesus backward to events even further in the past, when he puts these words into the Son’s mouth (see diagram 8): “Abraham your

¹ 1 Corinthians 10.9; Exodus 17.2, 7; Numbers 21.6. See also 1 Corinthians 10.22; Deuteronomy 32.21.
Diag. 7

Israelites try Lord <Jesus>

he sends serpents

Input:
Exodus 17.2; 7;
Numbers 21.6

past (before)

present

future (after)

Jesus is born, lives, dies

Jesus pre-exists as Lord
Israelites try him
he sends serpents
descends from heaven
and is incarnated
Jesus is born, lives, dies
Jesus is resurrected

Input:
Common knowledge
of heavenly journeys

Time

Jesus’ existence

Blend:
Jesus’ pre-existence as Lord in 1 Corinthians 10.9
Diag. 8

- Jesus' God of Abraham (Abraham)
  - Input:
    - e.g. Exodus 3.13-15
    - cf. Genesis 17.17

- Descent from heaven
  - Input:
    - Common knowledge of heavenly journeys

- Jesus pre-exists as I AM
  - he is before Abram
  - his day seen by glad Abram
  - descends from heaven
  - is incarnated at baptism

- Jesus is born, lives, dies

- Jesus is resurrected

Blend:
- Jesus' pre-existence as I AM in John 8.56-58
father rejoiced that he would see my day, and he saw it and was glad.” Probably unaware that he’s projecting backward from the blend of Jesus’ pre-existence, John is, however, forced to recognize that not everyone shared his thoughts. He has ‘the Jews’ respond to Jesus: “You are not yet fifty years old and have seen Abraham?” According to them, existence starts with birth, and there is no pre-existence. So the human Jesus only could have seen the patriarch if he were his contemporary. It would be more intuitive for him to have been born at the time of Abraham than for him to pre-exist. But John thinks otherwise when he has Jesus respond in turn: “Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was born, I AM.”2 After all, according to the Johannine prologue, the divine Word was in the beginning with God and instrumental in creation.3

Alongside Paul and John, other believers in Jesus’ pre-existence continued to elaborate this blend and eventually projected their pre-existent Jesus backward to multiple events in the Hebrew Bible and Christian Old Testament. But Paul believed that when God finally sent his Son to die, he was incarnated through birth, while John arguably believed that the Son was incarnated at baptism.

Now pattern completion: a certain amount of it’s almost built into the generalized network of pre-existence, given that within the existence input is birth or the equivalent of coming into being and existing/living. The idea of pre-existence makes most sense in reference to the living human body. If there is something else outside of and before the body, there is pre-existence. If not, there is none. But where does this something else come from? And how does it end up in the body, incarnated?

Paul and John each say that their pre-existent Jesus was sent from heaven. By recruiting common knowledge associated with heavenly journeys, they both add an input of heavenly

---
2 John 8.56-58.
3 John 1.1-3.
descent. In Paul the descent of Jesus is best described in the famous passage in Philippians where he empties himself, takes the form of a servant, and is born in human likeness. In John, there are multiple references to Jesus having descended from heaven, perhaps even references to prior descents of God’s Logos in the Johannine prologue, but the descent whereby the Word becomes flesh is not described directly. It’s described indirectly as the Baptist testifies that he saw the Spirit descending and remaining upon Jesus. Paul and John both add an input of heavenly descent, and indeed at least tacitly there is going to be some kind of descent from heaven in most any example of the pre-existence network (diagram 5).

With the input of descent from heaven added to the pre-existence network, the pattern is partially completed. But again, if something pre-exists the body and descends from heaven to earth, how does it end up in the body, incarnated? This is where a certain amount of pattern completion is almost built into the network, given that within the existence input is birth or the equivalent of coming into being and existing/living: the something else that pre-exists and descends from heaven is then incarnated through birth.

Incarnation of the pre-existent Jesus through birth was Paul’s belief, and it did not require him to add any further inputs to the network. But John believed in incarnation at baptism, which did require another input, namely baptismal inspiration/possession (see diagram 9). This added input even has inputs of its own (see diagram 10). Curiously enough, Paul never mentions Jesus’ baptism in any of his letters, while it’s the opening terrestrial scene in the Gospel of John and arguably the moment when the Word becomes flesh.

John, therefore, adds an input to the network of pre-existence that Paul does not. He adds the input of baptismal inspiration/possession. They each complete the pattern of pre-existence by

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4 Philippians 2.6-8.
5 John 1.32-34.
Diag. 10

Blend in generalized network:
Baptism and inspiration/possession
of Jesus the Anointed (e.g. Mark 1:1-11)
adding the input of heavenly descent. But when it comes to how the pre-existent Jesus is incarnated, they are fundamentally different. Paul’s pattern completion is relatively straightforward: Jesus descends and is incarnated through birth. John’s is more complex: Jesus descends and is incarnated at baptism, leaving a major time lapse in his pre-existence.

The Idea of Jesus’ Virgin Birth Itself a Blend

After development of the idea of Jesus’ pre-existence, it was Matthew and Luke (and their sources) who developed and introduced the idea of his parthenogenesis as a defense against reports of Mary’s early pregnancy. They did not harmonize it with the idea of his pre-existence though, despite that fact that belief in a pre-existent Jesus is attested as early as Paul. All the same, the idea of virgin birth is itself a blend.

Since Matthean and Lukan accounts of virgin birth vary, and since the idea may have been featured in their sources, analysis of a generalized network is in order here too. However, in contradistinction to the idea of a pre-existence, ancient Jewish belief in any virgin birth was scarce at best, and there was not much pagan belief in it either.\(^6\) So I have less to generalize under this subheading than I did under the previous one.

The generalized network of virgin birth has two inputs: virginity and child birth.

Within the virginity input, men and women may be apart, living together communally, perhaps betrothed or married. There is no intercourse, no conception, no birth and no child born.

Within the child birth input, a man and woman may be living together, betrothed, married, or not. There is intercourse, including the possibility of rape, there is vaginal conception, birth, and a child born with biological parents, father and mother.

\(^6\) Miraculous or otherwise unusual birth (often in the case of infertility or old age) is not the same thing as virgin birth, nor is divine sonship (with e.g. a god as the father).
In the blend, a man and woman may be living together, betrothed, married, or not, as in the child birth input. But there is no intercourse (as in the virginity input). Nonetheless there is conception somehow. And there is birth (as in the child birth input), though paradoxically it’s virgin birth. The child is born with one biological parent, the virgin mother (see diagram 11):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Input: Virginity</th>
<th>Input: Child birth</th>
<th>Blend of Virgin Birth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>men, women</td>
<td>man and woman</td>
<td>man and woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no intercourse</td>
<td>intercourse</td>
<td>no intercourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no conception</td>
<td>vaginal conception</td>
<td>conception somehow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no birth</td>
<td>birth</td>
<td>virgin birth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no child</td>
<td>child, with biological parents</td>
<td>child, with biological virgin mother</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Still generalized but with Jesus as the child born, the network again has two inputs: the virginity input (no intercourse, conception, birth, child) and the input of Jesus’ birth, within which Joseph and Mary may be betrothed, there is intercourse, vaginal conception, and birth of Jesus the biological son of Joseph and Mary. In the blend, Joseph and Mary may be betrothed. But there is no intercourse (as in the virginity input). Nonetheless Mary conceives somehow, and she gives birth (as in the input of Jesus’ birth), though paradoxically it’s virgin birth. Jesus is born with one biological parent, his virgin mother (see diagram 12):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Input: Virginity</th>
<th>Input: Jesus’ birth</th>
<th>Blend of Jesus’ Virgin Birth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>men, women</td>
<td>Joseph and Mary</td>
<td>Joseph and Mary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no intercourse</td>
<td>intercourse</td>
<td>no intercourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no conception</td>
<td>vaginal conception</td>
<td>conception somehow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no birth</td>
<td>birth</td>
<td>virgin birth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no child</td>
<td>Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary</td>
<td>Jesus, son of virgin Mary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once the idea of Jesus’ parthenogenesis was introduced in the last half of the first century, the blend could be elaborated and the pattern could be completed. As I did above, I will discuss elaboration as well as projection backward from the blend; then I will discuss pattern completion.
Diag. 12

- **Input:** Virginity

- **Left:**
  - Man and woman apart
  - No intercourse
  - No conception
  - No child

- **Right:**
  - J and M together
  - Intercourse
  - Vaginal conception
  - Birth
  - Jesus, son of J and M

- **Middle:**
  - J and M together
  - No intercourse
  - Conception somehow
  - Virgin birth
  - Jesus, son of virgin M

- **Output:**
  - Blend in generalized network:
  - Jesus' virgin birth
Elaboration and projection backward from the blend: If the Messiah was going to be born to a virgin mother, wouldn’t there be a prophecy of it? The author of the Gospel of Matthew thought so (see diagram 13). To the network he recruits a passage from Isaiah, and in the process he projects Jesus the son of the virgin Mary backward from the blended space in which she conceives and gives birth. Due to this projection backward from the blend to the added Isaianic input, the prophecy is no longer about a young woman conceiving in the eighth century BCE, it’s about the parthenogenesis of Jesus.

Alongside Matthew, other believers in Jesus’ parthenogenesis continued to elaborate this blend, but besides the prophecy in Isaiah there weren’t many passages in the Hebrew Bible and Christian Old Testament that the son of the virgin Mary could be projected backward to; there was the passage in Daniel about the rock cut out of the mountain without hands, for instance, though that was not as amenable to reinterpretation as Isaiah’s prophecy, which Christians exploited pseudepigraphically.

Now pattern completion: the structure within the blend has to do with its organizing frame, and this integration network of Jesus’ virgin birth itself can be classified as double-scope. The two inputs of virginity and Jesus’ birth each have their respective organizing frames. The frames are different and so clash. In the one input (virginity) there is no intercourse, no conception, no birth, and no child born. But in the other input (Jesus’ birth) there is all of that. Both input frames are projected to the blended space, clashes and all. These clashes are behind the problems that were introduced along with the idea of Jesus’ virgin birth: If there was no intercourse between Joseph and Mary, how could Jesus be born from the seed of David, and how did Mary conceive?
Diagram 13

- **Input:** Isaiah 7:14
- **Input:** Virginity
- **Input:** Jesus' birth
- **Input:** Angelophany regarding conception from Spirit

- **J and M betrothed**
  - no intercourse
  - conception somehow
  - virgin birth
  - Jesus, son of virgin M (fulfillment of Isaiah)

- **J and M together**
  - intercourse
  - vaginal conception
  - birth
  - Jesus, son of J and M

- **Virgin woman**
  - matched to Jesus' mother

- **Isaiah predicts**
  - of young woman (Mary) who conceives and bears a son (Jesus)
Matthew and Luke seem to have been aware only of the basic problem of conception, not the problem of Davidic lineage. They make some attempt to complete the pattern, but neither of them does so. Both evangelists (or their sources) add an input of angelophany to the network. In Matthew, the angel appears to Joseph after Mary is already pregnant (diagram 13). In Luke, the angel appears to her before she conceives (see diagram 14). In each visit, the angel is supposed to defend against reports of early pregnancy. Simultaneously he also introduces the idea of virgin birth and its problems. The angel is further supposed to solve the problem of how Mary conceived if not vaginally. In Matthew, the angel tells Joseph that Mary’s unborn child is “from the Holy Spirit.” In Luke, the angel tells her: “the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you,” the implication being perhaps that Mary will experience a theophany like the divine cloud that overshadowed the tabernacle.

With their angelic visits to Jesus’ parents, the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke, then, go some short distance towards solving the problem of how Mary conceived, but the pattern is left mostly incomplete, even in Luke where the angel appears to her before she conceives and tells her more than the Matthean angel tells Joseph. Shadows cast below by clouds overhead might be useful for thinking metaphorically about the manifestation of God on earth. But they are not very useful for thinking about how a woman conceives. Shadows are cast over people. They do not penetrate the body.

Speech does. And recruitment from background knowledge associated with the Lukan annunciation allowed Christians to complete the pattern in terms of the problem of conception. How did Mary conceive? With her ear as she listened to Gabriel speak to her. There is no idea of

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7 Matthew 1.20.
8 Luke 1.34-35; cf. Exodus 40.35.
Diag. 14

Input: Virginity

Joseph and Mary betrothed
no intercourse
conception somehow
-angel descends, tells Mary:
  • Spirit will come upon her
  • Power will overshadow her
Jesus, son of virgin Mary

Blend:
Jesus' virgin birth in Luke

Input: Jesus' birth

Joseph and Mary betrothed
no intercourse
virgin woman
-Jesus' mother

Input: J and M together
intercourse
vaginal conception
birth
Jesus, son of J and M

Input: Angelophany regarding manifestation of Spirit/Power

J and M together
intercourse
birth
virgin woman

Input: angel descends and tells Mary:
Spirit will come upon her
Power will overshadow her

*The Idea of Aural Conception Itself a Blend*

Development of the separate idea of Jesus’ pre-existence and development of the separate idea of his virgin birth were preliminaries to harmonization. Development of the idea of aural conception was not: Mary doesn’t conceive with her ear in the Letters of Ignatius, in the *Ascension of Isaiah*, or in the *Apology* of Aristides; the idea of aural conception was developed in addition to the idea of parthenogenesis and could itself be separate from the idea of Jesus’ pre-existence, as in the *Proto-Gospel of James*.

But while it was not a preliminary to harmonization of the two ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth, development of the additional idea of aural conception was a preliminary to pattern completion in the multiple blend networks that were built over the initial network of pre-existence and incarnation through parthenogenesis (a multiple blend network in its own right) by Justin Martyr and the author of the *Letter of the Apostles*. So I analyze the blend itself here.

Early Christians developed the idea of aural conception after development of the idea of Jesus’ virgin birth and once vaginal conception was no longer christologically possible for them. They, or at least some of them, had to find another opening into Mary’s body, hence the simulation in which she conceives with her ear.

The idea of a woman conceiving aurally was not only a Christian development; it was a Christian invention. There don’t seem to be any other examples of the idea before or outside of Christianity, at least not in the ancient Mediterranean world. It was thought that some animals
conceived aurally, and that people could become ‘pregnant’ with ‘concepts,’ a metaphor that persists today, such as in the alternate name of blending theory, i.e., conceptual integration. But it wasn’t thought that words spoken into the human female ear could result in actual pregnancy. Perhaps the idea had first been Jewish, developed from the story of Eve listening to the serpent in the book of Genesis, and per Jewish interpretation that the snake was Cain’s father. Far more likely, though, is that Christians projected the idea of aural conception backward to the book of Genesis as part of their own parallelism between Eve and Mary. I have not found any examples of the idea in pre-Christian or non-Christian Jewish exegesis of Genesis 3, where the serpent seduces Eve, or Genesis 4, where she conceives and gives birth to Cain.

As creative as the idea is, and as strange, throughout the history of Christianity there are numerous examples of Mary’s aural conception in Christian texts, plus representations of it in Christian art; less so Eve’s.\(^9\)

The generalized network of aural conception has two inputs: common knowledge of physiology and hearing, and common knowledge of physiology and conception.

The one input has the ear, which is an opening into the body that words enter. It also has the speaker’s word, which enters the ear, and which the listener hears/accepts.

The other input has the vagina, which is an opening into the body that seed enters. It also has the paternal seed, from which (understanding conception to be single-seed, as it was often understood) the mother conceives.

There is matching across these input spaces as ear and word are matched to vagina and seed, speaker and listener to father and mother, hearing/accepting to conception.

\(^9\) See Remigereau 1947; Constas 2003, 273-313.
From the inputs, there is projection to the blended space, so that by hearing/accepting the word spoken into her ear, the listener conceives as a mother (see diagram 15).

Aural conception can be analyzed as a metaphoric blend, e.g., listening as metaphor for conceiving, but the child conceived is literal. And though at least in part figurative, the idea is sometimes quite sexualized, even forceful. In a sixth-century hymn by Ennodius, for instance, matching between the angelic speaker’s word and the paternal seed is not just a mental operation. It’s expressed as the annunciation is described as follows:

*Cum sola Virgo degeret*  
*Concepit aure filium*  
*Stupente factum corpore:*  
*Turgescit alvus spiritu.*  
*Quod lingua jecit semen est,*  
*In carne verbum stringitur.*

Although the virgin lived alone,  
with her ear she conceived a son,  
made as her body was struck senseless:  
her womb begins to swell with the Spirit.  
What the tongue emitted is the seed;  
the word/Word is bound up in flesh.\(^{10}\)

In the middle of the second century, the word from which Mary conceives in the *Proto-Gospel of James* is not the pre-existent Word, and the word is not said to become flesh in that text. The idea of aural conception was developed as a solution to the problem of how Mary conceived if not vaginally. It was not necessarily developed as a solution to the further problem of how the pre-existent Jesus entered her womb, but it could double as a solution to that further problem compounded by the harmonization of the idea of Jesus’ virgin birth with the earlier and separate idea of his pre-existence.

\(^{10}\) See his *Carminum liber 1.19*; cited in Remigereau 1947, 136. Translation mine.
Diag. 15

ears are an opening into body that words enter

speaker’s word enters ear and listener hears/accepts it

vagina is an opening into body that seed enters

paternal seed enters vagina and mother conceives

Input: Common knowledge of physiology and bearing

Blend in generalized network: Anal conception
IGNATIUS

The first example of the initial network of pre-existence and incarnation through virgin birth in surviving Christian literature comes from Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, writing in the early second century. His writings don’t feature angelic transformation or auto-parthenogenesis or aural conception. But they do feature an important elaborated blend in which the star that guides the magi to Jesus after his birth becomes the pre-existent Jesus and in the process becomes ‘new.’

With or without knowledge of the Gospel of John, Ignatius refers to Jesus Christ as God’s Son, “who is his Word (ὁς ἐστιν αὐτοῦ λόγος) proceeded from silence, who entirely well pleased the one that sent him (τῷ πέμψαντι αὐτόν).” Ignatius knew the Gospel of Matthew if not Luke, but he only uses the Matthean infancy narrative in his letters, not the Lukan, at least not as far as it’s possible to ascertain his textual inputs.

The bishop blends together the pre-existent Son sent by the Father with the human child born to the virgin Mary, even though the two inputs thoroughly clash. As a result, he describes Jesus Christ as

- both fleshly and spiritual (σαρκικὸς τε καὶ πνευματικὸς),
- begotten and unbegotten (γεννητὸς καὶ ἀγέννητος),
- in flesh born as God (ἐν σαρκὶ γενόμενος θεός),
- in death true life (ἐν θανάτῳ ζωὴ ἱληθινή),
- both from Mary and from God (καὶ ἐκ Μαρίας καὶ ἐκ θεοῦ).

For Ignatius, he’s “the invisible one (τὸν ἄδρατον)” as well as “the one who was visible for us (τὸν δὲ ἡμᾶς ὄρατον);” he’s “the one who cannot be touched (τὸν ἀψηλάφητον), the impassible

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12 For a discussion of which New Testament texts were known to Ignatius, see Foster 2005. There may be a paraphrase of Luke 24.39 in Smyrnæans 3, suggesting that he could have known Luke, but Ignatius does not use the Lukan story of virgin birth.
one (τὸν ἀπαθῆ),” as well as “the one who was passible for us (τὸν δι’ ἡμᾶς παθητόν), the one who endured in every way for us.”

The input of pre-existent Son has a transcendent being that is spiritual, unbegotten, life, from God, invisible, and impassible. The other input has a human/body that is fleshly, begotten, death, from Mary, visible, and passible. Blended together, the two are compressed into one identity as the pre-existent Son descends from heaven to earth and is incarnated through parthenogenesis. After the Word proceeds from silence, the spiritual, invisible, and impassible Savior becomes fleshly, visible, and passible. In the blend, the unbegotten is born.

Underlying this paradoxical language are clashes between the two inputs of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth. Having proceeded from silence, the spiritual, invisible, and impassible one becomes fleshly, visible, and passible in the blend. The unbegotten is born. But how is the pre-existent Jesus supposed to descend from heaven and enter the virgin Mary’s womb?

Ignatius sets up the integration network – actually he insists on it, in opposition to those who believed that Jesus was never born – and he runs the blend to a certain extent. But he does not explain how the unbegotten could have been born. In terms of blending theory, he does not complete the pattern.

The bishop does suggest a solution to the problem of how Jesus could be born from the seed of David without a father by suggesting that Mary herself was a Davidid. But even that suggestion introduces as many problems as it solves, and Ignatius does not say how the Davidic seed was transmitted maternally. Even if he had, that would not explain how the pre-existent Son was incarnated, how the unbegotten was born.

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He leaves the pattern incomplete at both the level of the smaller blend (virgin birth in Matthew) and the level of the multiple blend network of incarnation through parthenogenesis. By his account, Jesus was conceived “from the seed of David on the one hand” and born “from Mary,” though Ignatius does not say how; Jesus was also conceived from “the Holy Spirit on the other hand (ἐκ ... πνεύματος δὲ ἁγίου),” and born “from God (ἐκ θεοῦ).” So the spiritual Jesus is supposed to have been conceived from the Spirit.

Jesus is conceived from the Holy Spirit already in Matthew. But for Ignatius it has new meaning. In Matthew there is no pre-existent Son sent by the Father. When the angel appears to Joseph and tells him not to fear taking Mary as his wife, the Matthean phrase “from the Holy Spirit (ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου)” is supposed solve the problem of how Mary conceived a child without a father, not how she conceived a pre-existent divine being. But for Ignatius, Jesus pre-exists as the divine Word, which the bishop projects from another input, perhaps the Gospel of John. Whatever the source, in this multiple blend network there is emergent structure and meaning, and conception from the Holy Spirit is how the unbegotten is born. The “spiritual (πνευματικός),” invisible, and impassible Jesus was conceived “from ... the Holy Spirit (ἐκ ... πνεύματος ... ἁγίου).”

There is still the problem of how the unbegotten was born in a body, though. How did the pre-existent Son get inside Mary’s womb and end up incarnate? How did the spiritual, invisible, and impassible one become fleshly, visible, and passible? To say that the spiritual was conceived from the Holy Spirit would be empty, just as it would be empty to say that Death personified is the reason why there are dead things.

16 Matthew 1.18, 20.
Ignatius comes closest to completing the pattern in this passage, where he elaborates the blend of incarnation through parthenogenesis and recruits additional structure and meaning from the Matthean story of the magi’s visit, even though they visit Jesus months after the birth. Here is a synopsis of Matthew and Ignatius:

Matthew

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking,

‘Where (ποῦ) is he who was born king of the Jews?

For we observed his star (τὸν ἄστερα) at its rising,

and have come to pay him homage.’

When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed (ἐταράχθη), and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where (ποῦ) the Messiah was to be born.

They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star appeared (τοῦ φανομένου

Ignatius

The virginity of Mary and her giving birth escaped the notice of the ruler of this world; so too did the death of the Lord – three mysteries of a cry which were accomplished in the silence of God.

How then did he appear to the aeons (ποῦ οὖν ἐφανερώθη τοῖς αἰώνιοι)?

A star (ἀστήρ) in the sky shone brighter than all the stars. Its light was indescribable and its novelty (ἡ καινότης) created astonishment. All the other stars, along with the sun and the moon, became a chorus to that star, and its light surpassed them all.

And there was a disturbance (ταραχή τε ἢν)

as to whence (πόθεν) the novelty unlike them (ἡ καινότης ἡ ἄνωμοις αὐτὸς).

Hence all magic was undone, and every binding of iniquity vanished. Ignorance was pulled down, and the old kingdom was utterly destroyed when God appeared in a human way (θεοὶ ἀνθρωπίνως φανερομένου) for the novelty
Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. 

For his elaborated blend, Ignatius recruits information from the visit of the magi in Matthew chapter 2, where there are the adoring magi and the star and the infant Jesus and his mother and the disturbed King Herod (see diagram 16).

Ignatius also recruits information from the folk belief that heaven is a royal court, with its celestial king, attendants and other subordinates. The folk belief is a metaphor that Ignatius reverses. Instead of understanding the heavens as a royal court, Ignatius understands Herod’s court in Matthew as the heavens (see diagram 17).

So in Ignatius’ elaborated blend, the adoring magi seem to become part of the astral chorus. The disturbed King Herod becomes the cosmic ruler of this world. And the star is identified with the new king, Jesus, who is born and obtains rule. The star is identified not only with the infant Jesus from the magi’s visit in Matthew chapter 2 but also with the pre-existent Jesus who descends from heaven to earth. Thus the inquiries of the magi and Herod about the

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18 Matthew 2.1-12.
Jesus pre-exists and is incarnated
Jesus is born, lives, dies
Jesus is resurrected

Pre-existent Jesus matched to Jesus, son of virgin Mary

J and M together no intercourse somehow
virgin birth
Jesus, son of virgin M

J and M together
pre-existent Jesus matched to Jesus

Jesus pre-exists
descends from heaven
and is incarnated
through parthenogenesis
Joseph and Mary betrothed
no intercourse
conception somehow
virgin birth
Jesus, son of virgin Mary

Ignatius, Ephesians 19.1-3

Ignorant Herod
new king Jesus
star, magi disturbance

Input: Matthew 2:1-12

Input: Jesus’ pre-existence

Input: Jesus’ virgin birth
Diag. 17

Jesus pre-exists descends from heaven and is incarnated
Jesus is born, lives, dies
Jesus is resurrected

Input: Jesus' pre-existence

pre-existent Jesus matched to Jesus, son of virgin Mary

Input: Jesus' virgin birth

J and M together no intercourse conception somehow
virgin birth
Jesus, son of virgin M

Ignatius, Ephesians 19:1-3
king and Messiah in Matthew become inquiries about the appearance and origin of the new star, which is also the pre-existent Jesus to be incarnated through an unprecedented parthenogenesis.

In Matthew the magi see the star, travel to Jerusalem, and ask: “Where is he who was born king of the Jews (ποῦ ἐστιν ὁ τεχθεὶς βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων)?” The star indicates that Jesus has been born as king, and it even leads the magi to where the infant Jesus is. But in Matthew, the star is not Jesus, nor does the visit of the magi happen simultaneous to his birth; it happens afterwards. Herod is ignorant of the birth as well as the star. When he finds out about this new ruler, according to Matthew, King Herod is “disturbed (ἐταράχθη), and all Jerusalem with him.” He asks the chief-priests and scribes “where the Messiah was to be born (ποῦ ὁ χριστὸς γεννᾶται).” They say Bethlehem, the city of David, and from the magi Herod then learns “the time when the star appeared (τὸν χρόνον τοῦ φαινομένου ἀστέρος).”

In his elaborated blend, Ignatius himself rephrases the first inquiry of the magi rhetorically: “How (πῶς) then did he,” that is, the pre-existent Jesus, “appear to the aeons?” The ruler of this world, like Matthew’s Herod, does not know, but Ignatius, like the magi, knows about a star. The star is new, and when the old stars find out about it, according to Ignatius’s elaborated blend there is “a disturbance (ταραχῇ) as to whence (πόθεν) the novelty unlike them (ἡ καινότης ἡ ἀνόμοιος αὐτοῖς).” This disturbance is projected to the elaborated blend by recruitment from the Matthean story of the magi’s visit, in which Herod is disturbed (ἐταράχθη) and asks where (ποῦ) the Messiah is born. In the elaborated blend, Herod’s inquiry about the birth of a human child is rephrased as an inquiry about the provenance of the new star.

As for the appearance of the star (τοῦ φαινομένου ἀστέρος) in Matthew, in the elaborated blend it’s now the appearance of the pre-existent Jesus in stellar form. It’s no longer merely an

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20 Matthew 2.2-7.
astral indication to the magi that the child Jesus has already been born. The pre-existent Jesus appears (ἐφανερώθη) to the aeons as a star (ἀστήρ), and he appears in a human way (θεοῦ ἀνθρωπίνως φανερουμένου).

This means that in the elaborated blend, the virgin Mary implicitly conceives and gives birth to a star that has descended from heaven. Ignatius recruits the star from the story of the magi’s visit in Matthew in order to try to complete the pattern of incarnation through parthenogenesis. Stars are things that travel across the heavens, and after its appearance, the star from the story of the magi’s visit does move in the direction of the infant Jesus and his mother, according to Matthew chapter 2. So the movement of the star can be matched to the descent of the pre-existent Jesus on a heavenly journey to earth. But that match requires compression of time and space. In Matthew, the star appears around the time of Jesus’ birth and then leads the magi to him and his mother many months later and somewhere other than where he was born. In the elaborated blend, however, this movement of the star in the direction of the virgin Mary occurs more or less at the same time Jesus is conceived. As the star descends to earth and moves towards Mary, Jesus has not been born yet because the star is the pre-existent Jesus.

The novelty of the star belongs to the emergent structure and meaning of the elaborated blend, not to Matthew. The star is new because it’s identified with the pre-existent Jesus whose incarnation through parthenogenesis is unprecedented according to Ignatius, and indeed before the bishop harmonized the two ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth, there was no precedent for the proto-orthodox doctrine.

The star is not only new in the opposite sense of old; it’s also unlike the other stars. But in Matthew’s story of the magi’s visit, the star is not described as new, nor does virgin birth factor into their inquiry about the latest king or into Herod’s inquiry about the Messiah. In
Matthew, Herod is ignorant of Jesus’ birth as well as the appearance of the star. In the elaborated blend, it’s the ruler of this world that’s ignorant, ignorant of how the invisible and impassible one appeared in visible astral form as he traveled through the heavens and then appeared in passible human form when he reached earth and was born to the virgin Mary.

After Ignatius, his innovative new star became entrenched within ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary culture. And as it did, the novelty of it has consistently been projected backwards to the Matthean input (see diagram 18), just as Jesus’ pre-existence and his virgin birth have been projected backward from the proto-orthodox doctrine to New Testament texts where those ideas are not found together. In commentaries and sermons on the magi’s visit, such as by Augustine, the star is said to be new, whereas there is nothing about a new star in the Gospel of Matthew itself.²¹

Despite Ignatius’ innovation in this elaborated blend and the success of his new star, the pattern remains incomplete. Souls and stars were associated in the ancient Mediterranean world, even pre-existent souls and stars, for those who believed that the human soul pre-existed. The bishop does not say that the virgin Mary conceived a star here, or that the star was Jesus’ pre-existent soul, though it may be implied. Even if it is, how did a star or a pre-existent soul enter

²¹ See Powell 2001, 167. There is a much more recent example of this projection backwards from the blend to the inputs in the Christmas song entitled Mary’s Boy Child, popularized by Harry Belafonte and many other vocalists from the 1950s to the present. In it are these lines:

Long time ago in Bethlehem, so the Holy Bible say,  
Mary’s boy child Jesus Christ, was born on Christmas Day.

...  
While shepherds watched their flocks by night,  
they saw a bright new shining star,  
they heard a choir sing a song, the music seemed to come from afar.  
The Bible does indeed say many things. It says something about shepherds in the Gospel of Luke. And it says something about a star in the Gospel of Matthew. But it doesn’t say anything about the novelty of the star. The star only became new in the creative thought of a second-century bishop.
Diag. 18

Jesus pre-exists
descends from heaven
and is incarnated
Jesus is born, lives, dies
Jesus is resurrected

pre-existent Jesus
matched to
Jesus, son of virgin Mary

J and M together
no intercourse
conception somehow
virgin birth
Jesus, son of virgin Mary

Ignatius, Ephesians 19:1-3

blend:
Matthew 2:1-12

Heaven as royal court

ignorant Herod
new king Jesus
<new> star, magi disturbance

Celestial king
et cetera

ignorant Herod/ruler of aeon
disturbance over new king/star
revolution in heavenly court
appearing in human way
and is incarnated
through parthenogenesis
Joseph and Mary betrothed
no intercourse
conception somehow
virgin birth
Jesus, son of virgin Mary

Input:
Jesus' pre-existence

Input:
Jesus' virgin birth

Input:
Matthew 2:1-12

Input:
Heaven as royal court
the virgin Mary’s womb? Human ensoulment of the fetus before birth or else of the child after birth was problematic enough in the Greco-Roman world without introducing the idea of parthenogenesis and its problems.

ASCENSION OF ISAIAH
The next example of the initial network that I will analyze comes from the *Ascension of Isaiah*, which may have been written at about the same time Ignatius was writing or else a few decades later. It features incognito descent of the pre-existent Jesus who transforms himself to look like an angel. But it does not feature auto-parthenogenesis or aural conception; the Gospel of Matthew is used instead of the Gospel of Luke as the textual input for virgin birth, and so the annunciation by Gabriel to Mary is not projected to the blend in here.

The prophet Isaiah, in this pseudepigraphon, is supposed to be telling King Hezekiah, the prophet’s son Josab, and an audience of other prophets, about the vision he has just seen of the future descent, incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord. The entire text, then, is an elaboration and imaginative Christian scenario.

In vision, Isaiah is led on a journey from earth to the firmament and on up through the seven heavens. When they reach the seventh heaven at the top, the angel that is guiding Isaiah tells him why Abel and Enoch and the rest of the righteous dead wear “their robes of above,” having been “stripped of (their) robes of the flesh,” but are not yet enthroned or crowned. It has to do with the future descent and incarnation of the pre-existent Jesus:

> And he said to me, ‘They do not receive the crowns and thrones of glory ... until the Beloved descends in the form in which you will see him descend. The Lord will indeed descend into the world in the last days, (he) who is to be called Christ after he has

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22 On the descent and disguises of the pre-existent Jesus in this text, including the issue of ‘docetism,’ see Hannah 1999a; 1999b, 197-202.
descended and become like you in form, and they will think that he is flesh and a man [i.e. not pre-existent or divine]. And the god of that world will stretch out [his hand against the Son], and they will lay their hands upon him and hang him upon a tree, not knowing who he is. And thus his descent, as you will see, will be concealed even from the heavens so that it will not be known who he is.\textsuperscript{23}

This descent that Isaiah will see is different from the appearance of God/Jesus as a star in Ignatius. Ignatius had claimed that the cosmic ruler was ignorant of the virgin birth as well as the crucifixion; but when the new star outshone the rest, it caused a disturbance, Ignatius also claimed, making it hard understand how the ruler of this world could then have been ignorant of the mystery of the Lord’s death. In the \textit{Ascension of Isaiah}, however, the ignorance of the god of this world and his angelic colleagues is taken more seriously.

As Isaiah will see, the pre-existent Jesus does not appear as a new bright star but transforms himself to look like an angel during his descent to earth so that he goes completely unnoticed. The Lord is only recognized by the lower angels upon his ascent back through the firmament and heavens in his divine form after his death on the cross and his resurrection. Then the angels sadly wonder, as the Christian author assumed that Jews eventually would: “How did our Lord descend upon us, and we did not notice the glory which was upon him, which we (now) see .... How did our Lord remain hidden from us as he descended, and we did not notice?”\textsuperscript{24} The ignorance of the god of this world, his angelic colleagues and of the people who have Jesus crucified in the \textit{Ascension of Isaiah} go hand in hand.\textsuperscript{25}

Before Isaiah sees the descent of the Lord not only to earth but also into Sheol after the crucifixion, he hears God the Father commission the Son as follows:

\begin{footnotes}
\item[25] At the close of the text, \textit{Ascension of Isaiah} 11.39-40 (Knibb 1983/2011, 176), the prophet makes Hezekiah “swear that he would not tell this to the people of Israel, and that he would not allow any man to copy these words. And then they shall read them,” then, that is, “apparently ‘in the last generation’” mentioned in 11.38, as Knibb notes.
\end{footnotes}
And I heard the voice of the Most High, the Father of my Lord, as he said to my Lord Christ, who will be called Jesus, ‘Go out and descend through all the heavens. You shall descend through the firmament and through that world as far as the angel who (is) in Sheol, but you shall not go as far as Perdition. And you shall make your likeness like that of all who (are) in the five heavens, and you shall take care to make your form like that of the angels of the firmament and also (like that) of the angels who (are) in Sheol. And none of the angels of that world shall know that you (are) Lord with me of the seven heavens and of their angels.’

The angel guiding Isaiah had told him that the descent of the Lord “will be concealed even from the heavens so that it will not be known who he is.” But at that point Isaiah’s guide did not say how it would be concealed. In this passage the Father tells the Son that “none of the angels ... shall know” because he is to transform himself to look like them.

Isaiah then sees the pre-existent Jesus descend, and it becomes clear that angelic transformation only takes place starting in the fifth heaven. It does not take place in the upper heavens of the seventh or sixth:

And thus I saw when my Lord went out from the seventh heaven into the sixth heaven. And the angel who had led me from this world was with me, and he said to me, ‘Understand, Isaiah, and look, that you may see the transformation and descent of the Lord.’ And I looked, and when the angels who (were) in the sixth heaven saw him, they praised him and glorified him, for he had not been transformed into the form of the angels there; they praised him, and I also sang praises with them. And I saw when he descended into the fifth heaven, that in the fifth heaven he made his form like that of the angels there, and they did not praise him, for his form was like theirs.

The prophet continues to narrate the angelic transformation of Jesus upon descent in the remaining lower heavens and in the firmament. In each one Jesus goes unnoticed and without praise from the angels, “for his form was like their form.” The angels above recognize and worship him as would the Christian author writing this text in the name of the prophet Isaiah; the inferior angels don’t, as many Jews didn’t.

Angelic transformation in this text is not used to solve the problem of how a divine pre-existent being is incarnated through virgin birth, such as it is in the *Letter of the Apostles*, where the Word transforms himself to look like the angel Gabriel and personally makes the announcement to Mary, impregnating her by his speech. Instead angelic transformation in the *Ascension of Isaiah* is used to account for the ignorance of the god of this world and his angelic colleagues who do not recognize the Lord to be more than one of them, and so do not praise him, just as the people on earth do not recognize Jesus to be more than flesh, more than human, and so end up having him crucified. Thus the theme of incognito descent extends throughout Isaiah’s entire vision: Jesus is disguised as an angel in the lower heavens and firmament; he’s disguised as a human on earth.

Isaiah’s guide had told him that the Lord will descend and “become like you in form, and they will think that he is flesh and a man.” So Isaiah in turn tells King Hezekiah and others that the identity of the Son will not be known during Jesus’ lifetime, from his birth to his crucifixion. For the story of parthenogenesis, the Gospel of Matthew is used, with its citation of the Isaianic prophecy of ‘virgin’ birth. In this Christian pseudepigraphon, Isaiah finishes telling his vision of the descent and incarnation of Jesus as follows:

> And after this I looked, and the angel who spoke to me and led me said to me, ‘Understand, Isaiah, son of Amoz, because for this purpose was I sent from the Lord. And I saw a woman of the family of David the prophet whose name (was) Mary, and she (was) a virgin and was betrothed to a man whose name (was) Joseph, a carpenter, and he also (was) of the seed and family of the righteous David of Bethlehem in Judah. And he came into his lot. And when she was betrothed, she was found to be pregnant, and Joseph the carpenter wished to divorce her. But the angel of the Spirit appeared in this world, and after this Joseph did not divorce Mary; but he did not reveal this matter to anyone. And he did not approach Mary, but he kept her as a holy virgin, although she was pregnant. And he did not live with her for two months.’

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Besides suggesting a solution to the problem of how Jesus could be born from the seed of David without a father in the Davidic line, the Christian author is blending the idea of Jesus’ pre-existence (one input) with the idea of his virgin birth in Matthew (another input). The pre-existent Jesus is matched to Jesus son of the virgin Mary, and in the blend he’s incarnated through parthenogenesis. Not only is this proto-orthodox doctrine not found in the writings of the eighth-century BCE prophet Isaiah (or the writings of Deutero- or Trito-Isaiah), it’s not found in the Gospel of Matthew either; Jesus doesn’t pre-exist there. His pre-existence is being projected backward from the blend (as well as across inputs) to the Matthean input for virgin birth, and from there even further backward to the Isaianic prophecy cited by Matthew.

Jesus was transforming himself to look like an angel as he descended incognito through the lower heavens, but that was not so that he could appear as an angel on earth; on earth he’s disguised as a human. So while there is angelic transformation in the text, it’s not about Christ incarnate in this passage, and it’s not added as an input to the network of incarnation through virgin birth. In Matthew, only Joseph is visited by an angel, and only after Mary has already conceived. Thus in the blend here, the Lord’s angelic transformation upon descent from heaven is not matched to that angelic appearance. The pre-existent Jesus is not the angel that appears to Joseph to reassure him about taking Mary as his wife; it’s “the angel of the Spirit.” Nor is the appearance of the angel involved in Jesus’ conception. He’s already inside Mary’s womb when the angel appears to Joseph. The problems of how Mary conceived if not vaginally and how the pre-existent Jesus entered her womb are not solved. That much of the pattern is left incomplete, as it was in the letters of Ignatius, who also used the Matthean infancy narrative, not the Lukan.

If the Lukan account of the virgin birth had been used, aural conception would have been possible in the blend, because in Luke as opposed to Matthew an angel visits Mary before she
conceives. What is more, if the Lukan account of the virgin birth had been used, the angelic transformation of the Lord in the pseudepigraphon could have been matched to the visit of the angel Gabriel to Mary, and Isaiah could have prophesied auto-parthenogenesis instead of simple virgin birth. But again in this text, angelic transformation is used to account for the ignorance of the god of this world, his angelic colleagues, and the people on earth who do not recognize Jesus.

For all its details about his heavenly journey, the *Ascension of Isaiah* is rather uninformative when it comes to the events between the Lord’s arrival in the firmament and his entrance into Mary’s womb. When it comes to the events of (non-)delivery and (non-)birth, however, the pseudepigraphon is indeed informative. But Jesus’ exit from the womb is just as mysterious as his entrance. In Matthew, the story of Jesus’ birth is told in passing; the angel visits Joseph, who takes Mary as his wife and avoids sex with her until after her son is born. In the pseudepigraphon, Isaiah foretells the story of Jesus’ birth directly and at some length. Not only does Joseph keep Mary “as a holy virgin,” the evidence of her virginity would seem to remain despite the delivery and birth of her son:

> And after two months of days, while Joseph was in the house, and Mary his wife, but both alone, it came about, when they were alone, that Mary then looked with her eyes and saw a small infant, and she was astounded. And after her astonishment had worn off, her womb was found as (it was) at first, before she had conceived. And when her husband, Joseph, said to her, ‘What has made you astounded?’ his eyes were opened, and he saw the infant and praised the Lord, because the Lord had come in his lot. And a voice came to them, ‘Do not tell the vision to anyone.’ But the story about the infant was spread abroad in Bethlehem. Some said, ‘She did not give birth; the midwife did not go up (to her), and we did not hear (any) cries of pain.’ And they were all blinded concerning him; they all knew about him, but they did not know from where he was (cf. John?). And they took him to Nazareth in Galilee. And I saw, O Hezekiah and Josab my son, and say to the other prophets also who are standing by, that it was hidden from all the heavens and all the princes and every god of this world.  

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29 Matthew 1.24-25.
An unusual conception and pregnancy end with an unusual (non-)delivery and (non-)birth; the Lord enters and exits Mary’s womb somehow, in neither case the way that would be physiologically expected. He descends to earth, and she simply “was found to be pregnant” with him, even though no component of him entered the womb via sexual reproduction. Some months later, she looks, and suddenly there is the infant Jesus outside of her. Mary is said to have conceived him, but the rumor is that “she did not give birth.” Jesus is delivered as if by some process of dematerial- and rematerialization. One moment he’s in the womb, and the next moment Mary is looking at him. His mother does not resemble a woman that has just given birth. She did not have a midwife, nor did anyone “hear (any) cries of pain.” Apparently Jesus did not pass through the birth canal, any more than his conception was vaginal.

The pre-existent Lord is a shape-shifting master of disguise in the *Ascension of Isaiah*. Having transformed himself to look like the angels in the lower heavens and firmament, on earth he becomes like humans in form, and they “think that he is flesh and a man,” according to Isaiah’s guide. Isaiah sees that Joseph, perhaps Mary also, recognizes and praises the Lord, as the angels in the sixth heaven do. But the people are “blinded,” not knowing where he’s from, just as the descent and incarnation of the Lord was “hidden from all the heavens and all the princes and every god of this world.”

Once in human form, to maintain appearances, as Isaiah further sees in vision, Jesus “sucked the breast like an infant, as was customary, that he might not be recognized.” This may not point to a philosophical tenant that divine beings are impassible and far removed from human needs, so much as it points to the recurrent theme of incognito descent. If the Lord had not fed as any other infant, then the god of this world, his angelic associates, and the people on earth could not have been ignorant of who he was and where he came from, which ignorance is taken for
Isaiah foretells that as any other crucified man would, the Lord will die, suffering and in pain. Altogether, what Isaiah prophesies is “the coming of the Beloved from the seventh heaven, and his transformation and his descent, and the form into which he must be transformed, (namely) the form of a man, and the persecution with which he would be persecuted, and the torments with which the children of Israel must torment him ... and that before the sabbath he must be crucified on a tree.”

There is certainly tension between the Lord’s shape-shifting – from pre-existent Son, to angel, to human – and his humanity and death on the cross. The author may not have been cognizant of the tension, and it’s not diffused. Concerned rather with the ignorance of the god of this world, his angelic associates, and the people on earth who did not recognize the Lord, the Christian author of the *Ascension of Isaiah* seems to be unaware of what it might imply about the reality of the crucifixion for Jesus to be a human in disguise.

ARISTIDES

The next example of the initial network comes from the *Apology* of Aristides, which may have been written in the 120s but seems to have been reworked, only surviving in Syriac translation.

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and a later Greek adaptation.\textsuperscript{33} It does not feature angelic transformation upon descent from heaven, auto-parthenogenesis, or aural conception. Aristides may have used the Gospel of Luke as the textual input for virgin birth, but he doesn’t use the appearance of the angel to Mary. He mentions incarnation through virgin birth briefly in his \textit{Apology}.

Not only does he mention it briefly, Aristides paraphrases the gospel/s so thoroughly that it may not be possible to ascertain the textual inputs he’s projecting to the blend. And even though he’s writing an apologia, Aristides isn’t defensive about the doctrine of incarnation through virgin birth; he makes his christological statement in almost creedal fashion:

The Christians, then, reckon the beginning of their religion from Jesus Christ, who is named the Son of God Most High (ܒܪܗ ܕܐܠܗܐ ܡܥܠܝܐ; and it is said that God descended from heaven (ܕܢܚܬܐ ܐܠܗܐ ܡܢ ܫܢܝܐ, and from a Hebrew virgin (ܘܡܢ ܒܬܘܠܬܐ ܥܒܪܝܬܐ) he took and clothed himself with flesh (ܫܩܠ ܘܠܒܫܒܘܪܐ), and in a human daughter there dwelled (ܥܢܪ) the Son of God. This is taught from that gospel (ܡܢ ܣܒܪܬܐ ܗܝ) which a little while ago was spoken among them as being preached; wherein if you also will read, you will comprehend the power that is upon it.\textsuperscript{34}

Lack of defense here is all the more noticeable given that Aristides addresses his \textit{Apology} to second-century pagans. They would have found the idea of God’s descent from heaven to a small village in Palestine most implausible, as well as the idea of God becoming human inside a womb, whether of a virgin woman or not; they would have found these ideas most implausible, that is, if they were anything like the pagan philosopher Celsus.\textsuperscript{35} Aristides is also said to have been a philosopher, and it may be extrapolated from his negative theology that he had some

\textsuperscript{33} Pouderon et al. 2003, 32-37 argue for a traditional date of 124-125 CE, while also taking into account what they consider hypothetical redaction and a later date mid-century.


\textsuperscript{35} Apud Origen, \textit{Contra Celsum} 1.28, 39; 4.2-3, 5-7, 14, 18, 23; 5.2; 6.8, 72-73.
philosophical training, yet he relates incarnation of the pre-existent Jesus through virgin birth as entirely unproblematic.\footnote{36}

Because the full text of his *Apology* only survives in Syriac translation represented by one manuscript from the sixth or seventh century, and based on similarities to eastern creeds of the fourth century, it has been argued that this christological passage is part of an interpolation. But the entire passage need not have been interpolated.\footnote{37}

There are Greek papyrus fragments of the text, though they do not preserve the passage. The *Apology* in Greek was, however, adapted for use in the Christian novel *Barlaam and Josaphat*, also written in Greek and often attributed to John Damascene (eighth century) or an even later author. There the passage is arranged in a different place from where it’s found in the Syriac version and in fragments of an Armenian version.\footnote{38}

In Greek manuscripts of *Barlaam and Josaphat*, the content of the passage itself is also different. It reads:

And the Christians trace their lineage from the Lord Jesus Christ. He is confessed in the Holy Spirit as Son of the Most High God (\(\upsilon\iota\omicron\omicron\upsilon\sigma\tau\omicron\omicron\ tau\upsilon\sigma\eta\omicron\upsilon\omicron\upsilon\upsilon\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\tau\omicron\upsilon\)) He descended from heaven (\(\Delta\rho\pi\tau\omicron\sigma\upsilon\varsigma\alpha\nu\rho\nu\sigma\omicron\upsilon\kappa\tau\alpha\tau\beta\alpha\varsigma\)) for the salvation of humans and was born from the Holy

\footnote{36}{He’s referred to as “Aristides the philosopher” in the Syriac and Armenian versions of the text; see Pouderon et al. 2003, 317. According to Jerome, *De viris illustribus* 20, he was a philosopher who converted to Christianity. For an argument that the *Apology of Aristides* and the Nag Hammadi tractate *Eugnostos* share a common source in their descriptions of the ineffable God, see van den Broek 1996, 21-41.}

\footnote{37}{See O’Ceallaigh 1958, 237-242; and van den Broek 1996, 25 n.8, who lists additional similarities to eastern creeds of the fourth century. O’Ceallaigh concludes that the *Apology* was not written by Aristides but a Jewish author, and that it was only Christianized in the fourth century. While van den Broek does not rule out the possibility that Aristides appropriated an originally Jewish work, in his estimation, though, “it is quite conceivable that a fourth-century reader felt himself compelled to adjust Aristides’ poor christological statements to the orthodox standards of his own time.” Given the manuscript tradition of the text, reconstructing what those statements might have been prior to adjustment is difficult, but their existence in the second century is indeed plausible enough.}

\footnote{38}{For the papyrological tradition, for the Greek version as adapted in *Barlaam and Josaphat*, for the Syriac version, and for the Armenian fragments, see Pouderon et al. 2003, 107-141.}
Virgin (καὶ ἐκ παρθένου ἀγίας γεννηθεὶς) without being sown and without corruption (ἄσπόρως τε καὶ ἀφθόρως). He took upon himself flesh (σάρκα ἀνέλαβε) and appeared to humans (καὶ ἀνεφάνη ἄνθρωποις), in order that he might call them back from their polytheistic wandering ... And if you read it, O King, from the writing that among Christians is called holy and gospel (ἐκ τῆς ... ἀγίας καὶ εὐαγγελικῆς γραφῆς), you may come to know the fame of his advent.³⁹

One of the differences between the Syriac translation and the Greek adaptation is that in the former Jesus is said to have “clothed himself with flesh (ܠܒ ܫܒܘܪܐ)” and “dwelled (ܥܢܪ)” in Mary, whereas in the latter these metaphors are not used. But both versions of the passage feature the basic blend of incarnation through parthenogenesis.

While not obvious signs of literary dependence, some phrases in the passage may point towards New Testament gospels as inputs selectively projected to the blend. For instance, the phrase “Son of God Host High (Syriac: ܒܪܗ ܕܐܠܗܐ ܡܥܠܝܐ Greek: υἱὸσ τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ υψίστου)” is found in the annunciation by Gabriel to Mary in the Gospel of Luke, where he tells her that her child will be called Son of the Most High (υἱὸσ υψίστου).⁴⁰ As for the phase “God/he descended from heaven (Syriac: ܢܚܬ ܐܠܗܐ ܡܢ ܫܢܝܐ Greek: ἱπʼ οὐρανοῦ καταβὰσ),” the pre-existent Jesus is also said to have descended from heaven (ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβάσ) in the Gospel of John.⁴¹ So Aristides could be blending John and Luke, as in the Letter of the Apostles, with new structure emerging in the blend. John has pre-existence but no virgin birth; Luke vice-versa. In the blend there is the emergent structure of the pre-existent Jesus incarnated through parthenogenesis.

If Aristides knew Luke and the annunciation, however, in his Apology he does not project to the blend Gabriel’s visit itself, nor does he explain how God or the Son of God entered the womb; aural conception apparently did not occur to him. Aristides does complete the pattern

⁴⁰ Luke 1.32.
⁴¹ John 3.13; see also 1.32-33; 6.33, 38, 41-42, 50-51, 58.
some, though, with two metaphors, the metaphor of embodiment as vestment and the metaphor of womb as residence. In the Syriac translation Jesus is said to have “clothed himself with flesh (ܠܒܫ ܒܤܪܐ)” and “dwelled (ܥܢܪ)” in Mary.

In terms of the first metaphor, the common knowledge from which the novel pattern is partially completed is the area of textiles and vestment. Metaphorically the soul or inner self wears flesh like the body wears clothing. Regardless of any virgin birth, then, the generation of a body can be referred to as weaving and the uterus as a loom. Aristides does not elaborate the blend such that Mary is said to weave the body of the Son of God explicitly, but other Christians did. In the Apology, Jesus just descends from heaven, takes flesh from the virgin and clothes himself with it, as if the corporeal vestment were readymade and did not have to be woven.

While Mary’s uterus is only implicitly a loom, according to the second metaphor it’s a residence in which the pre-existent Jesus dwells or lives, clothed with flesh. In this blend of incarnation through virgin birth, entrance into the womb is not explained. There is no aural conception, much less auto-parthenogenesis, as there is in the Letter of the Apostles. The mode of conception is other than aural or else left unspecified, as in the letters Ignatius and the Ascension of Isaiah. But Aristides does say that Jesus entered or at least that he dwelled in Mary, which is something that is not said in Ignatius or the Ascension of Isaiah; there it’s merely implied.

Aristides says that Jesus entered the womb, though he says so metaphorically. The womb has an entrance and exit. In the blend, however, no component of Jesus can enter in the way that might be physiologically expected or else it would not be virgin birth. Nevertheless Jesus must

42 Death is then an undressing and/or change of clothes. In the Ascension of Isaiah 9.6-9 (Knibb 1983/2011, 170), for instance, as quoted previously, the righteous dead wear “their robes of above,” having been “stripped of (their) robes of the flesh.”

43 For weaving symbolism and the imagery of Mary’s loom/uterus in Christian literature from the Protevangelium Jacobi to Proclus of Constantinople and him in particular, see Constas 2003, 315-358.
enter the womb in order to be incarnated. Aural conception apparently did not occur to Aristides, even though he seems to paraphrase some of Gabriel’s words to Mary. So he uses the metaphor of uterus as residence. Like the womb, a residence has an entrance and exit. But unlike pregnancy, entering a residence and dwelling there does not involve vaginal conception.

With these metaphors, Aristides is not saying that Jesus descended from heaven, put on some clothes and found a temporary place to live. The metaphors are used to affirm the doctrine of Incarnation through virgin birth, however it’s supposed to have happened, and at any rate euphemistically sidestepping talk of sexual reproduction. It was not obvious to Aristides how it happened. According to conceptual metaphor theory, the complex or unknown doctrine is being understood here in terms of clothing and dwelling, which are familiar. And according to blending theory, this is because pre-existence and incarnation through parthenogenesis are beyond human scale and outside the realm of human experience. Divine beings, pre-existing in heaven, are not seen to enter the wombs of virgin women on earth and then come out with a body of flesh. Aristides did not know how the pre-existent Jesus was incarnated. But he knew how clothes are worn and how dwellings are entered and lived in. So he uses the known to describe the unknown.

Setting virgin birth to one side for a moment, it may not necessarily have been clear to Aristides much less to Ignatius or the Christian author of the *Ascension of Isaiah* how any pre-existent being would enter the womb. Even in the case of those who believed that the human soul pre-exists, there was more than one belief among pagans, Jews, and Christians as to how soul meets body, not to mention when. For instance, the soul could be transmitted to the embryo via the paternal seed at conception. It might also enter the body later from the outside, like the breath of God passing in through the mouth or like a bird flying into a house through the window.44

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44 See e.g. Congourdeau 2007; Wilberding 2011.
There is some similarity between Jesus’ dwelling in the womb as he would a residence and the soul that flies into the body like a bird would through the window of a house. Both metaphors describe the unknown as known. But there is no indication that Aristides believed in the pre-existence of the human soul, neither does he mention Jesus’ soul per se in the christological passage. Furthermore he uses the metaphor of womb as residence, not embodiment as residence. Aristides’ statement is not that Jesus dwelled in a body, that is, in his own flesh; where Jesus lived was in Mary’s womb. When he was incarnated, he did not enter his own body and take up residence in it; he put it on as he would a vestment.

Now for the Greek adaption of the Apology: the metaphors of embodiment as vestment and residence are not used. Instead Jesus descends from heaven and is said to have been “born from the Holy Virgin (ἐκ παρθένου ἁγίας γεννηθεὶς) without being sown (ἀσπόρως),” and to have “taken upon himself flesh (σὰρχα ἀνέλαβε)” rather than clothe himself with it. This implies that Jesus entered Mary’s womb, but it’s not stated how, not even metaphorically. The metaphor here is the ubiquitous agricultural one of sexual reproduction as sowing seed in a field, and it’s negated. Jesus was born from the Holy Virgin, but he was not sown in Mary’s field/womb by any father. How he entered the womb is left completely unspecified in any positive terms.

Unfortunately, given the manuscript history of the text, reconstructing what Aristides wrote in the christological passage of his Apology is difficult. The Syriac translation and Greek adaptation are not the same. It cannot be decided easily whether he used the metaphors of embodiment as vestment and uterus as residence, or the agricultural metaphor of sexual reproduction.

\footnote{Again it could be noted that Justin Martyr, another Christian philosopher and apologist, stopped believing in the Platonic soul and started believing in more biblical models of human psychology and anthropology when he converted to Christianity.}
reproduction as sowing seed in a field, negated. Perhaps the Syriac translation is closer to what Aristides wrote than the Greek adaptation is.

Whatever metaphors he used, his *Apology* features the blend of pre-existence and incarnation through virgin birth. The pre-existent Jesus descends from heaven, and somehow Mary becomes pregnant with him. There is no aural conception let alone auto-parthenogenesis in the passage, even though Aristides could be blending John and Luke. He leaves the pattern incomplete when it comes to entering not to mention exiting the womb, as it is left incomplete in the letters of Ignatius and the *Ascension of Isaiah*.

The metaphors used in the Syriac translation and Greek adaptation aren’t what make Aristides’ blend an imaginative scenario. He recommends that his pagan audience learn about the proto-orthodox doctrine of incarnation “from that gospel (ܡܢ ܣܒܪܬܐ ܗܝ) which a little while ago was spoken among them as being preached,” that is, according to the Syriac translation, or “from the writing that among Christians is called holy and gospel (ἐκ τῆς ... ἁγίας καὶ εὐαγγελικῆς γραφῆς),” according the Greek adaptation. Pagans are to learn about it from ‘the gospel’ as they read. But the proto-orthodox doctrine is not found in any of the written gospels, at least not in any of the gospels that were eventually canonized. The Gospel of John has incarnation of the pre-existent Jesus, arguably at baptism, while the Gospels of Matthew and Luke have virgin birth but no pre-existence, and the Gospel of Mark has neither.

None of the canonical gospels features a pre-existent Jesus who is incarnated through parthenogenesis. Neither do Paul’s letters or any other New Testament text. That new structure and meaning only emerged as the two inputs of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth were projected to the blend. Aristides equated the blend and the gospel, spoken and written, because he lived in the blend.
JUSTIN MARTYR

The first example of Incarnation through auto-parthenogenesis comes from the writings of Justin Martyr in the middle of the second century, as does the first example of Incarnation through virgin birth and aural conception. His is writings are the earliest to have survived and the most readily datable, anyway. Justin may not necessarily have known the Gospel of John, but he blends Logos theology with the Luke infancy narrative as well as the Matthean. When he paraphrases and quotes from Luke and Matthew, he refers to them as the ‘memoirs of the apostles,’ and they are often themselves harmonized.46

Justin was both an apologist and a philosopher, as Aristides is said to have been. But whereas Aristides had not been defensive about the christological statement in his Apology, Justin defends the proto-orthodox doctrine both in his own apologies addressed to pagans and in his dialogue with the Hellenized and semi-fictitious Jew Trypho; in his disputes with Jews, Justin wrote philosophical dialogue, not a Christian Old Testament pseudepigraphon, as did the author the Ascension of Isaiah.

The martyr acknowledges problems, such as with virgin birth, and he endeavors to solve them. In his First Apology, Justin says that “the Logos ... was born without sexual intercourse (ἄνευ ἐπιμιξίας) as Jesus Christ our teacher,” and Justin admits to his pagan audience that is was “in a peculiar way contrary to the manner of ordinary birth (ἰδίως παρὰ κοινὴν γένεσιν),” though

46 It has been argued that Justin had a written gospel harmony of the synoptics if not John, and that Tatian’s Diatessaron is dependent on it. See Peterson 1990; 1994, 1, 27-29, 346-348. On Justin and his bible in general, see Skarsaune 2007b, 67, who does not go as far: “Nothing indicates that we have to do with anything like a full-fledged Gospel harmony like Tatian’s Diatessaron. At best, Justin’s compendium or compendia are small beginnings of that ambitious project.” For a sustained argument that Justin knew the Gospel of John, and that it was among his ‘memoirs of the apostles,’ see Hill 2007.
he maintains that it was no more bizarre than what is found in Greek and Roman myth.\textsuperscript{47} In the 
\textit{Dialogue with Trypho}, Justin likewise understands that to his interlocutor his christological 
statements sound quite impious (βλάςφημα).\textsuperscript{48} Moreover he has Trypho say that the Word’s 
incarnation at all, and through parthenogenesis besides, is “something strange (παράδοξος) and 
entirely impossible of ever being proven (ποτε καὶ μὴ δυνάμενος ὡς ἀποδειχθῆναι) ... not only 
strange (παράδοξον) but also foolish (μωρὸν).”\textsuperscript{49} It’s “an unbelievable (ἀπιστοῦ) and near 
impossible (ἀδύνατον σχεδὸν) thing.”\textsuperscript{50}

God is not born on earth and does not become human, obviously. Yet this is what Justin 
claims. The second God “took form (μορφωθέντος) and became a human being (καὶ ἀνθρώπου 
γενομένου) and was called Jesus Christ.”\textsuperscript{51} He became a human being “for our sakes (ὑπὲρ 
ἡμῶν)” and “for the sake of the human race (ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἄνθρωπείου γένους).”\textsuperscript{52} He became “a 
sharer in our sufferings (τῶν παθῶν τῶν ἡμετέρων συμμέτοχος).”\textsuperscript{53} He was born a human being 
“with appetites and suffering like us (ὁμοιοπαθῆς ἡμῖν) since he had flesh (ςάρκα ἔχων).”\textsuperscript{54} He 
“truly (ἀληθῶς) became a human being taking part in suffering (ἀντιληπτικὸς παθῶν)” and was 
“passible (παθητός).”\textsuperscript{55} While Jesus never uses the terminology of John 1.14, “And the Word

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Dialogus cum Tryphone} 68.1. Text: Bobichon 2003, 1:368-369. Translation mine.
\textsuperscript{51} \textit{First Apology} 5.4. Text and translation: Minns & Parvis 2009, 90-91.
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{First Apology} 50.1; 63.10. Text and translation: Minns & Parvis 2009, 204-205, 246-247.
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Dialogus cum Tryphone} 48.3. Text: Bobichon 2003, 1:304-305. Translation mine.
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Dialogus cum Tryphone} 98.1, 99.2, 100.2. Text: Bobichon 2003, 1:448-449, 452-455. 
Translation mine. See also \textit{Second Apology} 10.8; \textit{Dialogus cum Tryphone} 57.3.
became flesh (σάρξ ἐγένετο),” he does say that the pre-existent Jesus as Logos et cetera was made flesh (σαρκοποιηθεῖς).56

Becoming human was hardly the only transformation that the pre-existent Jesus had undergone, however, so the incarnation should not be suspect. The Word descended to earth repeatedly throughout the Christian Old Testament, from the closing of the door on Noah’s ark, to the confusion of tongues at the tower of Babel, to the theophanies and angelophanies seen by the patriarchs and prophets.57 Over the ages, Justin’s Lord “sometimes appeared (ποτὲ φανεῖς) in the form of fire (ἐν ἰδέᾳ πυρὸς) and sometimes in an incorporeal image (ποτὲ δὲ καὶ ἐν εἰκόνι ἁσωμάτῳ).” He “appeared (ἐφάνη) through the form of fire (διὰ τῆς τοῦ πυρὸς μορφῆς) and an incorporeal image (εἰκόνος ἁσωμάτου) to Moses and to the other prophets.” He “appeared (φανεῖς) in the form of a man (ἐν ἰδέᾳ ἀνθρώπου) to Abraham and wrestled in human form (ἐν ἰδέᾳ ἀνθρώπου) with Jacob.” He “became fire (πῦρ ... γέγονε) when he talked to Moses from the bush.” He “appeared by his power (δυνάμει φαινόμενος) as man and angel (ὡς ἀνήρ καὶ ἔγγελος), and in the glory of fire (ἐν πυρὸς δόξῃ) as in the bush.”58

So the pre-existent Jesus has a history of polymorphic shape-shifting, in other words, and this shape-shifting ability makes incarnation through parthenogenesis credible for Justin:

If, then, we know that God has appeared (πεφανερώσθαι τὸν θεὸν ἑκείνων) in so many forms (ἐν τοσαύταις μορφαίς) to Abraham, Jacob, and Moses, how can we doubt and refuse to believe that, according to the will of the Universal Father, he was able

57 Ark and tower: Dialogus cum Tryphone 127.1. Appearances to patriarchs, especially Abraham and Jacob, and to prophets, especially Moses and Joshua: e.g. First Apology 62.3-63.10; Dialogus cum Tryphone 58.3-13; 59.1-3; 61.1; 113.4; 126.1-127.1.
(δεδυνήσθαι) to be born a human being also (καὶ ἄνθρωπον αὐτὸν ... γεννηθῆναι) through a virgin (διὰ παρθένου)?

There are important differences between the shape-shifting in Justin’s writings and the shape-shifting in the Ascension of Isaiah. In Justin’s writings it’s polymorphic, not limited to angelic transformation. Furthermore even though the Word had appeared as an angel before in the Christian Old Testament, Justin does not mention anything about the pre-existent Jesus transforming himself to look like an angel as he descended from heaven and was about to be conceived by the virgin Mary. In fact Justin does not narrate that descent much at all compared to the Ascension of Isaiah. His writings do not feature incognito descent of the pre-existent Jesus journeying from heaven to heaven en route to Nazareth and/or Bethlehem. Jesus’ shape-shifting ability is not a means of disguise here, as it is in the Ascension of Isaiah; Justin is not trying to account for the ignorance of the god of this world and his angelic colleagues who failed to recognize Jesus. Justin is leveraging theophanies and angelophanies from Jewish scripture in order to create space for Christian faith in the Logos’ unprecedented and unbelievable incarnation through virgin birth, even though established exegetical traditions and interpretation of those same theophanies and angelophanies would challenge the corporeality of any appearance of God or angels as human.

After having transformed himself variously to look like fire, an incorporeal image, a human, a man, and an angel in the Christian Old Testament, the Word might easily have appeared again as a human without being born or undergoing incarnation in any way. Never before had he undergone human birth, let alone parthenogenesis, when he descended from heaven and appeared to Abraham in the form of a man, or wrestled with Jacob in human form. Those descents were without conception, pregnancy, birth, childhood ....

Justin does not understand the Logos’ semi-final descent as another such fleshless theophany or angelophany, however. He has Jesus undergo incarnation through virgin birth, even auto-parthenogenesis. I discussed the following passage from the *First Apology* already as part of my historical-critical overview of conceptions of Jesus. Here I will analyze it in terms of blending theory, which will allow me to get at more detail:

But lest some people, not understanding the aforementioned prophecy, should charge against us the things we charge against the poets, who said that Zeus came to women for the sake of sexual gratification, let us try to elucidate the words. So the phrase, ‘Behold the virgin will conceive [Isaiah 7.14 / Matthew 1.23],’ signifies that the virgin conceived even though she was not copulated with; for if she had been copulated with by anyone whatsoever, she would have no longer been a virgin. But God’s Power (δύναμις θεοῦ) came upon the virgin and overshadowed her and caused her to become pregnant, despite being a virgin [Luke 1.34-35].

Indeed the angel of God sent at that time to this virgin announced the good news to her, saying [Luke 1.26-28]: ‘Behold, you will conceive in your womb [Luke 1.31] from the Holy Spirit (ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου) [Matthew 1.20], and you will call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins [Matthew 1.21],’ as those who recorded everything concerning our savior Jesus Christ taught. We have come to believe them because also through the aforementioned Isaiah the prophetic Spirit said that this would happen, as we indicated before.

Now it is right to understand the Spirit (τὸ πνεῦμα) and the Power from God (τὴν δύναμιν τῆς θεοῦ) as none other than the Word (οὐδὲν ἄλλο ... ἢ τὸν λόγον), who is even God’s firstborn (πρωτότοκος τῷ θεῷ), Moses the aforementioned prophet disclosed. And this (τοῦτο) came upon the virgin and overshadowed her and caused her to become pregnant, not through copulation but through Power (διὰ δύναμεως).\(^{60}\)

Justin paraphrases and quotes from Luke as well as Matthew, referring to the ‘memoirs of the apostles,’ or more exactly to the memoirists themselves. He’s paraphrasing and quoting from the annunciation in Luke 1.26-38 and from the birth of Jesus in Matthew 1.18-25, to be specific. Both of these gospel passages are framed by the appearance of an angel in their respective gospels. In Luke, the angel appears and speaks to Mary; in Matthew the angel appears and speaks to Joseph. In both, the angel appears and speaks about virgin birth. Justin blends together.

He then further blends them with his Logos theology, and it’s in this further blend that there

\(^{60}\) *First Apology* 33.3-6. Text and translation: Minns & Parvis 2009, 172-175.
emerges the structure and meaning of incarnation through auto-parthenogenesis. Before the multiple blend network can be analyzed, the Luke-Matthew blend itself requires some study.

The Luke-Matthew blend has an organizing frame projected to it from Luke. In the blend, the angel appears and speaks to Mary, as in Luke; he does not appear and speak to Joseph, as in Matthew.\textsuperscript{61} Still, in the blend, the words of the angel spoken to Mary are harmonized with some of the words spoken to Joseph. They are harmonized along with another element of the Matthean passage as well, the Isaianic prophecy in Matthew 1.23, which is also framed by the angel’s appearance in Matthew even if it’s not something the angel speaks.\textsuperscript{62}

While the two gospel passages clash, an urge for harmonization would be natural here, since both are framed by the appearance of an angel who speaks about virgin birth. Clashes between the gospel passages include more than the difference between Mary and Joseph. They also include the difference between past and future.

There is the clash between the tenses of the conception. In Luke, the angel tells Mary that she will conceive, \textit{in the future}: “behold, you \textit{will} conceive in your womb.” In Matthew, the angel tells Joseph that Mary has conceived from the Holy Spirit, \textit{in the past}: “for the child that \textit{was} begotten in her is from the Holy Spirit.” In Justin’s Luke-Matthew blend, the angel tells Mary that she will conceive, in the future, as in Luke; he also tells her that she will conceive from the Holy Spirit, as in Matthew, though not in the past: “Behold, you will conceive in your womb from the Holy Spirit.”

\textsuperscript{61} For another harmonization of the virgin birth stories along with the visit of the magi, see Justin’s Matthew-Luke blend, with Matthew as its organizing frame, in \textit{Dialogus cum Tryphone} 84, where the angel appears and speaks to Joseph. It seems improbable that these two harmonizations could both be from a single written gospel harmony, and in all likelihood neither of them is. Justin is blending the gospels together as he goes.

\textsuperscript{62} In the \textit{History of the Blessed Virgin Mary} (Budge 1899/1976, 20-21, 25-26), extant in Syriac translation/composition from the fourth century or later, the angel Gabriel appears to Mary and recites Isaiah 7.14; he then appears to Joseph and recites the Isaianic prophecy again.
Another is the clash between who will name Mary’s son, and why the name Jesus. In Luke, the angel tells Mary what *she* will name her son, but the angel does not tell her why: “you will call his name Jesus.” In Matthew, the angel tells Joseph what *he* will name Mary’s son, and the angel tells him why: “you will call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” In Justin’s Luke-Matthew blend, the angel tells Mary what she will name her son, as in Luke; he also tells her why, as the angel tells Joseph in Matthew: “you will call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Because the organizing frame of the Luke-Matthew blend is projected from Luke, with the angel appearing to Mary, not Joseph, and with the angel speaking to her about conception in the future, not the past, the Isaianic prophecy from Matthew is used differently in the blend. Framed by the appearance of the angel to Joseph in Matthew, the Isaianic prophecy refers to Mary’s conception there in the past. But in the blend, it’s used to refer to Mary’s conception here in the future. And the appearance of the angel to Joseph, which frames the Isaianic prophecy in Matthew, is not mentioned in the blend at all.

Justin paraphrases and quotes from the ‘memoirs of the apostles,’ then, and he cites Isaiah 7.14 / Matthew 1.23 as prophetic proof of the angel’s words to Mary about her conception from the Holy Spirit, in the future, the naming of her son Jesus, and why. “We have come to believe them,” that is, the memoirists, Justin informs the pagan audience of his *Apology*, “because also through the aforementioned Isaiah the prophetic Spirit said that this would happen, as we indicated before.” In terms of blending theory, Justin, like the Matthean author previously, is projecting backward from the blend of virgin birth to the added input of the Isaianic prophecy.

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63 See also *First Apology* 33.7-8 (Minns & Parvis 2009, 174-175): “The name ‘Jesus’ in the Hebrew language means, in Greek, ‘savior.’ That, too, is why the angel said to the virgin: ‘And you will call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” Luke 1.31 and Matthew 1.21 are also harmonized in *Protevangelium Jacobi* 11.3.
But that is not all: because Justin is harmonizing the two infancy narratives together, he’s not only projecting Matthean virgin birth backwards to Isaiah but also Lukan virgin birth.

In Luke, the angel not only tells Mary that she will conceive; he tells how she will do so. It’s more than the angel tells Joseph in Matthew. In Matthew, the angel tells him not to fear taking Mary as his wife, “for the child that was begotten in her is from the Holy Spirit.” In Luke, the angel tells Mary, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the Power of the Highest will overshadow you. And so the holy child that is begotten will be called the Son of God.” In the Luke-Matthew blend, with Luke as its organizing frame, Justin understands this to be an explanation of how Mary conceived according to the Isaianic prophecy from Matthew: “So the phrase, ‘Behold the virgin will conceive,’ signifies that the virgin conceived even though she was not copulated with; for if she had been copulated with by anyone whatsoever, she would have no longer been a virgin,” Justin comments, transitioning from Isaiah/Matthew to Luke. “But God’s Power (δύναμις θεοῦ) came upon the virgin and overshadowed her and caused her to become pregnant, despite being a virgin.”

Justin uses these words of the angel from Luke, but they take new meaning as he further blends the ‘memoirs of the apostles’ with his Logos theology. The martyr identifies this Spirit/Power with the pre-existent Jesus:

Now it is right to understand the Spirit (τὸ πνεῦμα) and the Power from God (τὴν δύναμιν τὴν παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ) as none other than the Word (οὐδὲν ἄλλο ... ἕ τὸν λόγον), who is even God’s firstborn (πρωτότοκος τῷ θεῷ), Moses the aforementioned prophet disclosed. And this (τοῦτο) came upon the virgin and overshadowed her and caused her to become pregnant, not through copulation (οὐ διὰ συνουσίας) but through Power (διὰ δυνάμεως).  

In Luke, when the angel tells Mary how she will conceive as a virgin, he’s not telling her about the incarnation of the divine Word. He’s telling her how she will conceive a human child, an

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extraordinary one to be sure and perhaps even divine from conception, still not pre-existent and not the Logos. But in Justin’s further blend, virgin birth of a human child becomes incarnation of the pre-existent Word, and the child takes the place of his own would-be father besides.65

Incarnation through auto-parthenogenesis is attested for the first time in early Christian literature here in Justin’s writings. He may have known the Gospel of John, but if he did, it is not one of his inputs in this blend; he cites Moses, not John, for his Logos theology. This type of auto-parthenogenesis does not have to do with any additional inputs or recruitment to the blend. It has to do with the mental operation of matching between inputs: the pre-existent Jesus as God’s Word is matched to Jesus son of the virgin Mary; furthermore he’s matched to the Spirit and Power of God that Gabriel tells Mary will come upon and overshadow her (see diagram 19). It is this further matching between God’s Word and Spirit and Power that allows for the emergent structure and meaning of auto-parthenogenesis in the blend.

In Luke, when the angel explains to Mary how she will conceive despite not knowing a man, the agricultural metaphor elsewhere in the Lukan infancy narrative is replaced by another: the metaphor of theophany as overshadowing. This metaphor has precedent in Exodus, where the cloud overshadows (LXX: ἐπεσκίαζεν) the tabernacle while it is filled with the Glory of the Lord.66 In Luke, God’s Holy Spirit comes upon Mary, his power overshadows (ἐπιςκιάσει) her, and a holy child is begotten. Jesus is that child of course, but he does not pre-exist as God’s Spirit/Power much less as his Word. In Justin’s blend, however, Jesus does pre-exist. He’s the second God who was manifest as the cloud that overshadowed the tabernacle and manifest as the

65 Cf. Goodenough 1923/1968, 182: “Justin’s own theory of the incarnation ... was that the Logos came down and entered into the womb of Mary, acting as His own agent of incarnation. Accordingly Justin insists that the Spirit and the Power mentioned in the traditional [Lukan] account of the Incarnation was the Logos.”
66 Exodus 40.35.
Multiple blend, partially and inefficiently integrated:  
Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 33.3-6.
Glory that filled it. Justin uses the Lukan replacement metaphor of theophany as overshadowing, but with it he does not fully complete the pattern of incarnation through auto-parthenogenesis in this blend from his Apology. A shadow cast below by a cloud above might be useful for thinking about the manifestation of God on earth. It is not useful for thinking about how a divine pre-existent being descends from heaven and enters a virgin’s womb, though. Shadows move, and they are even cast over people, but they do not enter inside them.

While the Lukan replacement metaphor leaves Justin’s pattern incomplete, common knowledge for completing it was there to be recruited in Luke, where the angel appears and speaks to Mary, and so on. It was common knowledge that angels speak the word of God, that speech is heard with the ears, and that ears are an opening into the body.

And in another blend, this time in his Dialogue with Trypho, Justin recruits information from these areas of common knowledge to complete the pattern, with Mary conceiving aurally:

And as we find it written in the memoirs of his apostles that he is the Son of God, and as we say that he is the Son, we have understood that he existed (ὄντα), and that before all creatures (πρὸ πάντων ποιημάτων) he proceeded (προελθόντα) from the Father by his Power and Will, he who is addressed as Wisdom ... in the words of the prophets; and [sc. we have understood] that he became a human being through the virgin, so that in the way in which (διὰ Ἡς ὁδοῦ) the disobedience (παρακοῆ) from the serpent began, in this way (διὰ ταύτης τῆς ὁδοῦ) also it might be destroyed.

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67 Dialogus cum Tryphone 127.1-5, especially 3; paraphrasing Exodus 40.34-35 LXX.
68 Though aural conception is not featured in the passage that I have been analyzing, elsewhere in the same text Justin does refer to it in connection with the eucharist. First Apology 66.2 (Minns & Parvis 2009, 256-257): “For we do not receive these things as common bread or common drink. But in the same way as Jesus Christ our Savior was made flesh through a word of God (διὰ λόγου θεοῦ σαρκισθείς) and had flesh and blood for our salvation (καὶ σάρκα καὶ αἷμα ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας ἡμῶν ἐσχεν),” Justin says, “thus we have been taught that the food which has been eucharized through a prayer of the word that comes from him is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh – from which food our blood and flesh are nourished by metabolic process.”
For although Eve was a virgin and undefiled, she conceived (συλλαβοῦσα) the word from the serpent (τὸν λόγον τὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ ὄψεως), and she gave birth to disobedience (παρακοή) and death. The virgin Mary, on the other hand, received (λαβοῦσα) faith and joy as the angel Gabriel announced to her the good tidings that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon her, and that the Power of the Highest would overshadow her, and that therefore the holy child begotten from her would be the Son of God [Luke 1.35], and she answered: ‘Let it be with me according to your saying (κατὰ τὸ ῥῆμά σου) [Luke 1.38].’ And in this way (διὰ ταύτης) he was begotten, concerning whom we have shown that so many passages of scripture were spoken. And through him God destroys (καταλύει) both the serpent and those angels and humans who came to resemble it (τὸν τε ὄφιν καὶ τοὺς ὁμοιωθέντας ἀγγέλους καὶ ἀνθρώπους), but he produces an escape (ἀπαλλαγὴν) from death for those (τοῖς) who repent of their sins and believe in him.69

This is a multiple blend network at least twice over because of the added input of aural conception (see diagram 20) and because of the reverse parallel between Eve and Mary with even more added inputs from Genesis chapters 3-6 and their interpretation.

As one of the inputs Justin uses an exegetical tradition something like what is preserved in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, where Eve is sexually seduced by the serpent who is actually a nefarious angel. The exegetical tradition is itself a blend, having Genesis 3-5 as an input, plus Genesis 6, as will be seen. By placing Eve and Mary in reverse parallel, Justin further blends the exegetical tradition with his own blend of incarnation through (auto-)parthenogenesis and aural conception. (Auto- is in parentheses here because in this passage from the Dialogue with Trypho, the pre-existent Jesus does not take the place of his own would-be father; that is in the passage from Justin’s First Apology. In the diagram I have combined them, assuming that Justin did.)

Besides the parallel being reversed, there are major clashes here between Eve’s conception and Mary’s. Some of these clashes are implied contrafactuals. Both Eve and Mary are impregnated by speech in the blend, but in input of Genesis exegetical tradition the serpent sexually seduces Eve. The parallel between Eve and Mary, then, implies that Jesus’ mother

Diag. 20

The Word matched to spoken word

Joseph and Mary betrothed
no intercourse
conception: word!
- Gabriel descends, tells Mary:
  - Spirit will come upon her
  - Power will overshadow her
  - Virgin birth
  - Jesus, son of virgin Mary

G and M matched to s and l (parallel)

Jesus pre-exists as Word
descends from heaven and is incarnated
Jesus is born, lives, dies
Jesus is resurrected

Pre-existent Jesus matched to Spirit/Power
and to Jesus, son of v. M:

Input:
Jesus' pre-existence as Word (in e.g. John)

Input:
Jesus' virgin birth in Luke

Jesus pre-exists as Word
descends from heaven and is incarnated
through auto-parthenogenesis
-Joseph and Mary betrothed
-no intercourse
-and aural conception
-Gabriel descends, tells Mary:
  - Spirit will come upon her
  - Power will overshadow her
  - Word/Word enters her ear
  - She hears/accepts it, conceives
  - Virgin birth
  - Jesus, son of virgin Mary

Multiple blend, fully but inefficiently integrated:
Justin Martyr, Dialogus cum Tryphone 100.4-6
might have been seduced, and that the Gabriel might be his father not to mention evil. Since that would be contrafactual, from Justin’s perspective, he projects aural conception backwards from the blend to the Genesis exegetical tradition he’s using, so that the first woman now conceives aurally as a virgin too. This is the earliest example of Eve’s aural conception, at least that I have been able to find. It seems that Christian interpreters were the first to read Genesis this way, and they did so after having developed the idea that the virgin Mary conceived Jesus with her ear.

According to Genesis 3–5, the serpent spoke (LXX: εἶπεν) to Eve, telling her that she and her husband would not die if they ate the fruit. After she and Adam had eaten, God cursed the serpent, putting enmity between it and Eve, and between its seed and her seed, telling the serpent that her seed would strike its head, and that it would strike his heel.70 Later Eve bore Cain and Abel. Following the first fratricide, she then bore Seth, in the image and in the likeness of Adam. These stories are used as an input in the Genesis exegetical tradition that in turn Justin uses in his Eve-Mary multiple blend network. Justin himself was an interpreter of scripture, but the Genesis exegetical tradition that he uses would not have been entirely his own. Christians and many more Jews before him were reading Genesis. Pre-Christian Jewish interpretations are preserved in Aramaic targums, for instance.

_Targum Pseudo-Jonathan_, along with other Jewish and early Christian literature, depicts the serpent as “Sammael the angel of death.”71 In this targum, God curses the serpent, as in Genesis, but goes on to mention the Law, a remedy, and the messianic age:

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70 Genesis 3.1-4, 14-15.
71 _Targum Pseudo-Jonathan_ to Genesis 3.6. Translation: Maher 1992, 26. In the Christian Gnostic/Ophite/Sethian retelling of Genesis summarized by Irenaeus (Adversus haereses 1.30.9), the serpent is named Michael and Samael, the son of Ialdabaoth. In the _Apocryphon of John_ (NHC II,1 11.16-18), Ialdabaoth himself is named Saklas and Samael. Genesis exegetical traditions are often parodied in classic Gnostic myth; for instance, the biblical creator God,
And I will put enmity between you and the woman, between the offspring of your children and the offspring of her children. And when the children of the woman keep the commandments of the Law, they will take aim and strike you on your head. But when they forsake the commandments of the Law you will take aim and wound them on their heels. For them, however, there will be a remedy; but for you there will be no remedy; and they are to make peace in the end, in the days of the King Messiah.\footnote{Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Genesis 3.15. Translation: Maher 1992, 27-28.}

Foremost among the children of the serpent in this targum is Cain, whom the first woman “had conceived from Sammael,” while “from Adam her husband she bore his twin sister and Abel.”\footnote{Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Genesis 4.1. Translation: Maher 1992, 31.}

As for Seth,

When Adam had lived a hundred and thirty years, he begot Seth, who resembled his image and likeness. For before that, Eve had borne Cain, who was not from him and who did not resemble him. Abel was killed by Cain, and Cain was banished, and his descendants are not recorded in the book of the genealogy of Adam. But afterwards he begot one who resembled him and he called his name Seth.\footnote{Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Genesis 5.3. Translation: Maher 1992, 36.}

Thus first woman was seduced by the serpent who was actually the angel of death. Cain did not resemble Adam because the serpent was Cain’s father. Presumably Cain and his descendants would have resembled Sammael. In addition to physical appearance, the son of the angel of death turns out to be the original murderer.

Eve’s sons with her husband were Abel and Seth. Between the offspring of the serpent’s children with Eve and the offspring of her children with her husband Adam, God put enmity. Her children overcome the serpent by observing the Law. They fall prey to the angel of death when they do not keep the commandments. There is a remedy for them, but not for Sammael. In the messianic age, it seems that there will be peace instead of enmity between the offspring of the serpent, through Cain, and the offspring of Eve, through Seth.

Ialdabaoth, is a fool (Saklas) and blind (Samael). The exegetical traditions themselves obviously would have come before any parody of them.
Such interpretations are older than *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, which may only date to the fourth century CE.\textsuperscript{75} Justin must have been familiar with an exegetical tradition something like what is preserved in this targum. He knows that the first woman conceived from the serpent. He also knows that humans have come to resemble (ὁμοιωθέντας) the serpent. He even knows of a remedy or escape (ἀπαλλαγήν) from death for those (τοῖς) who repent in the messianic age.\textsuperscript{76}

Though he was from Flavia Neapolis and could self-identify as a Samaritan, Justin need not have had direct access to Aramaic targums or much Jewish lore in Palestine. He could have accessed Genesis exegetical traditions by way of Christianity. For example, in 1 John humans are separated into two morally defined groups, the children of God and the children of the devil (τὰ τέκνα τοῦ διαβόλου), starting with Cain who was from the evil one (ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ ἤν) and killed his brother. Any subsequent sinner is from the devil (ἐκ τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστίν), because the devil has sinned from the beginning, that is, when he seduced Eve. Hence the pre-existent Son of God was manifest, in order that he might destroy (λύςῃ) the works of the devil.\textsuperscript{77} Justin need not have had direct access to 1 John either. But the Genesis exegetical tradition that he uses in his Eve-Mary blend is similar, in that for him Christ incarnate brings about the destruction of disobedience; through the pre-existent Son, “God destroys (καταλύει) both the serpent and those

\textsuperscript{75} Maher (1992, 11-12) accepts the view that *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* is dependent on *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* and postdates the Islamic conquest, while he recognizes that it “certainly contains ancient traditions.” For a critique of this view and for a date in the fourth or fifth century, the targum again preserving interpretations from as early as the Second Temple period, see Hayward 2010, 109-278.

\textsuperscript{76} *Dialogus cum Tryphone* 100.5-6. Text: Bobichon 2003, 1:454-457.

\textsuperscript{77} 1 John 3.7-12. The Genesis exegetical tradition in these verses is discussed in Lieu 1993.
angels and humans who came to resemble it, but he produces an escape from death for those who repent of their sins and believe in him.”

However Justin learned to read Genesis here, and as similar as it is to the exegetical tradition preserved in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, his interpretation also differs. In the targum, Cain resembles the serpent because the serpent is his father. But in Justin’s reading of Genesis 3-5, Cain is not mentioned, and those who have come to resemble the serpent are not said to be his literal offspring. They are angels and humans who have sinned as the serpent did.

Referring to Genesis 6, in his Second Apology, Justin writes that the angels God had stationed over humans “transgressed this appointed order, succumbed to intercourse with women, and begot children who are the so-called daemons. They then went on to enslave the human race to themselves .... And they sowed amongst human beings murders, wars, adulteries, licentiousness, and every kind of evil.” Justin warns his pagan audience against this enslavement, admitting that before Christ was manifest “we rejoiced in fornications, but now we only embrace temperance.” Deceived, therefore, humans sin as the fallen angels did when they transgressed and had illicit sex. This is how angels and humans have come to resemble the serpent who seduced Eve. Justin is linking interpretations of Genesis 3-5 and Genesis 6.

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78 Dialogus cum Tryphone 100.4, 6. Text: Bobichon 2003, 1:454-457. Translation: Falls 1948, 304-305. See also Dialogus cum Tryphone 45.4, which Skarsaune (2007b, 75, 187 n.102) notes as a “possible allusion” to 1 John 3.8, but “far from certain.”

79 Justin does mention Cain once elsewhere, in Dialogus cum Tryphone 99.3.


82 Other Christians were also linking interpretations of Genesis 3-5 and Genesis 6 within a few decades of Justin. Per Irenaeus’ summary of a classic Gnostic myth parodying Genesis (Adversus haereses 1.30), the biblical creator Ialdabaoth is the father of the serpent Michael/Samael. The creator’s several angels beget more angels from Eve. The creator himself would have done the same if permitted. In the Apocryphon of John (NHC II,1), Ialdabaoth is Saklas/Samael. He defiles Eve and begets angels known as Cain and Abel. After Adam begets Seth, the creator sends angels to impregnate the women of Genesis 6 and thereby enslave humanity, thus
It was rather common among Jewish interpreters to read chapter 6 as the fall of the angels and their corruption of humanity. But around the time of Justin Martyr, some Jews moved away from this interpretation and would not identify “the sons of God” as angels. From the Second Temple period, Genesis 6 is read and rewritten in *1 Enoch* as follows: “And when the sons of men had multiplied, in those does, beautiful and comely daughters were born to them. And the watchers, the sons of heaven, saw them and desired them.” Two hundred fallen angels then impregnate the women and corrupt humanity. Among their leaders are Semyaz or Semyaza and Azaz’el. They are still there in *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*: “Shamhazai and Azael fell from heaven and were on the earth in those days.” But in the targum, the ‘sons of God’ are read as “sons of the great ones,” and the fall of the angels, as described in detail in *1 Enoch*, is highly abbreviated.

In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin’s Jewish interlocutor also moves away from the reading of Genesis 6 as the fall of the angels. Justin has him become upset and say: “The words of God are indeed holy, but your interpretations are not only artificial, as is evident from those you have given, but evidently even blasphemous, for you affirm that the angels have sinned and have fallen away from God.” So Justin marshals evidence in support of his reading. He points to the “bad angels” mentioned in Isaiah, “Satan” mentioned in Zachariah, “the devil” mentioned in Job. Finally he points to the serpent: “And in the beginning of the book of Genesis, Moses writes that the serpent deceived Eve, and was thereupon cursed.”

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The minimum implication from this is that the serpent rebelled before the angels did, thus Trypho should not be shocked by their fall. Further implications are that the serpent is actually an angel who seduced the first woman, as the sons of God impregnated the women in Genesis 6. Justin does not exactly say so. But it was certainly part of Genesis exegetical tradition, as preserved in *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, where Sammael the angel of death is the father of Cain. Justin must have known as much.

In his Eve-Mary blend, Justin does not mention the serpent’s paternity of Cain, conveniently enough, because of what it would suggest about Jesus and who his father was. As one of the inputs in this multiple blend network, Justin links interpretations of Genesis 3-5 and Genesis 6, so that that fallen angels and corrupted humans come to resemble the serpent, and so that through the pre-existent Jesus, God destroys the serpent, the fallen angels and corrupted humans if they do not repent of their sins and believe in him. It was by sinning as the serpent did that angels and humans came to resemble it. The sin of the fallen angels was illicit sex, and the sin of corrupted humans was, as Justin admits to his pagan audience, fornication, among other things. In this blend from his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin does not say that the sin of the serpent was sexually seducing Eve, because he wants to avoid what that would imply about Mary and her conception of Jesus.

As Justin builds this multiple blend network, he sets up mental spaces, including the input space of incarnation through virgin birth, which has Mary in it, and the input space of Genesis exegetical traditions, which has Eve in it. The input spaces are themselves blends with their own inputs, such Luke 1 and Genesis 3-6 respectively. Having set up these mental spaces, Justin matches across them, as Mary is matched to Eve, etc.
From the input spaces he also projects to the hyper-blended space. The projection is selective in that Justin does not project everything from the input spaces; for instance, from the input space of Genesis exegetical tradition he does not project the serpent’s seduction of Eve or the birth of Cain. While projecting to the blend, Justin also locates shared structures, primarily the structure of the serpent/angel speaking to Eve and the angel Gabriel speaking to Mary. He also recruits new structure to the input spaces and the blended space; he recruits it from Luke and the common knowledge that angels speak the word of God, that speech is heard with the ears, and that the ears are an opening into the body. So doing, Justin is able to complete the pattern in the input space of incarnation through virgin birth, with Mary conceiving Jesus aurally. This new structure of aural conception is recruited to the blended space which has Eve and Mary in reverse parallel, at the same time as it is projected backwards to the input space of Genesis exegetical tradition. Thus in that input space, the first woman now conceives aurally as a virgin, and in the blended space, both Eve and Mary are impregnated by speech.

In surviving Christian literature that is readily datable, Justin’s writings are the first to attest this parallel between Eve and the virgin Mary. Before the parallel was established, Jews and Christians had little cause to think that Eve was impregnated by speech. Cain was begotten in the way that would be physiologically expected, whether his father was Adam or the serpent. The idea of Cain’s virgin birth was not part of Genesis exegetical tradition, so Jews and Christians did not recruit from common knowledge to complete the pattern with the first woman conceiving him aurally. Aural conception is part of the novel structure and meaning that emerged when Christians solved the problem of how Mary conceived if not vaginally, and when proto-orthodox Christians tried to solved the problem of the pre-existent Jesus entered her womb.

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87 Paul may come close to suggesting it in 2 Corinthians 11.1-4, where the parallel is between Eve and the Corinthians as Christ’s bride, not between Eve and the virgin Mary though.
THE LETTER OF THE APOSTLES

The next example of Incarnation through auto-parthenogenesis and aural conception, and the last example of the proto-orthodox doctrine that I will be analyzing, comes from the *Letter of the Apostles*. In this multiple blend network, the pattern is completed: integration is full and efficient. As textual inputs, the Gospel of John and the Gospel of Luke are used. There are added inputs of angelic transformation and aural conception.

When the divine Word was about to descend from heaven to earth and become flesh, he transformed himself to look like the angel Gabriel and personally made the announcement to Mary, impregnating her by speech. So says the risen Jesus in this revelation dialogue recorded by the male apostles as a letter.

First the Logos explains his angelic transformation:

When I was to come down from the Father of all and pass by the heavens, I put on the Wisdom of the Father (αἰτὶ ὁρὸς ὑγροφία ἤνεκα), and I put on the Power of his might (αἰτὶ ὁρὸς ἡταχνίμας ἰπφῖχιν) [cf. Luke 1.35]. I was in the heavens, and I passed by the archangels and the angels in their likeness (ὡς ὅτι εἶχον ἐναντίους ...). For I became all things in everything so that I might fulfill the Father’s plan of salvation, the glorious work of him who sent me, and return to him.

Having revealed that he transformed himself to look like an angel as he descended through the heavens, the risen Jesus proceeds to reveal what happened at the annunciation.

He begins by invoking the apostles’ shared knowledge: “For you know <don’t you> that the angel Gabriel brought the good news to Mary [Luke 1.26-38]?” To which they respond in the affirmative. Then he further prompts the apostles to blend this shared knowledge with what he has just revealed to them. He has them match his transformation as an angel to the appearance of the angel Gabriel.
Something startling and new emerges. He says: “Do you not remember that I told you, a little while ago, that among the angels I became an angel ...?” The apostles say: “Yes, O Lord.”

With his angelic transformation now matched to Gabriel’s appearance, thus he continues:

So on that day, when I took the form of the angel Gabriel (εταξα τωρφη γαβριηλ παγελοκ), I appeared to Mary, and I spoke to her (αμη ειναιε); her heart received me, and she believed. I molded myself (αρηες ειναιε), I entered her womb (αυον αρηες), and I became flesh (αρηον εικας) [John 1.14]; because for myself I alone was servant to Mary (επει ναρκανε ναι ευαγκονος γα ναρκ), in a perceptible likeness of an angel (γη ευαγονιες πενε παγελοκ).  

The great revelation here is incarnation through auto-parthenogenesis and aural conception. There are four inputs in this multiple blend network (see diagram 21). One of the inputs is the preliminary revelation that the Word transformed himself to look like an angel as he descended from heaven to earth. It happens to presuppose already the Gospel of John as another input. The account of the annunciation by Gabriel to Mary in the Gospel of Luke is one more. And aural conception is yet another.

From each of these inputs there is projection to the blend. Jesus pre-exists as the Johannine Word (one input: John), transforms himself to look like an angel during his heavenly descent (another input), namely the angel Gabriel, then he makes the annunciation to Mary (one more input: Luke), enters through her ear (yet another input), and becomes flesh (John again) as he is to be born of a virgin (Luke again).

There is structure and meaning in the blend that exist in none of the input spaces. Incarnation through auto-parthenogenesis and aural conception only emerges in the blend, through the mental operations of projection and pattern completion.

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Diagram 21

Jesus pre-exists as Word and is incarnated
- Jesus is born, lives, dies
- Jesus is resurrected

Input: Jesus’ pre-existence as Word (in e.g. John)

Being matched to pre-exist. Jesus

Pre-existent Jesus matched to Spirit/Power and to Jesus, son of v. M

Joseph and Mary betrothed
- G and M matched to s and I
- Gabriel descends, tells Mary:
  - Spirit will come upon her
  - Power will overshadow her virgin birth
  - Jesus, son of virgin Mary

Input: Jesus’ virgin birth in Luke

Being matched to Gabriel

The Word matched to spoken word

Angel matched to Gabriel

Input: Angelic transformation

Jesus pre-exists as Word descends from heaven and is transformed to look like Gabriel and is incarnated through auto-parthenogenesis
- Joseph and Mary betrothed
- no intercourse
- aural conception
- as Gabriel, he tells Mary:
  - Spirit will come upon her
  - Power will overshadow her
- word/Word enters her ear
- she hears/accepts it, conceives
- virgin birth
- Jesus, son of virgin Mary

Input: Speaker’s word enters ear and listener hears/accepts it, as mother she conceives

Multiple blend, fully and efficiently integrated:
Epistola Apostolorum 13.1-2
In John, the Logos does not transform himself into an angel upon descent, and there is no annunciation to Mary let alone any infancy narrative or reference to virgin birth; while in Luke, there is nothing about a pre-existent Logos who descends from heaven and becomes flesh. They are not found together in either of the textual inputs. Rather the divine Word is projected from one input, and Jesus son of the virgin Mary is projected from one more input; and they are integrated in the blend.

The unique structure and meaning in the blend also emerge through the recruitment of common knowledge to complete the novel pattern. For instance, it was common knowledge to those familiar with Jewish and Christian scripture that angels speak the word of God. It was also common knowledge that speech is heard with the ears. And so on. The new pattern is completed as information from several areas of common knowledge is recruited and matched together. Jesus pre-existed as God’s Word. He transformed himself to look like an angel. Angels speak the word of God. Speech is heard with the ears. Ears are an opening into the body. A woman conceives through an opening into her body, as the paternal seed enters the vagina. A listener hears/accepts through an opening into the body, as the speaker’s word enters the ear.

After prompting the disciples to run the blend, the risen Jesus does not need to delineate his incarnation through auto-parthenogenesis and aural conception, because completing the pattern and running the blend are done largely unconsciously and nearly instantaneously. Thus once he reveals his transformation from Logos to angel, it is not necessary for him to tell the disciples that angels speak the word of God or to ask them to associate God’s Word and the word of God spoken by angels. He simply reveals his angelic transformation and invokes their shared knowledge of the announcement made by the angel Gabriel to Mary. At that point, he does not even have to mention there being any openings into the human body in order for the disciples to
understand that when he says he entered Mary’s womb and became flesh, he passed through her ear as the Word/word. But to be certain to avoid misunderstanding, such as that the angel Gabriel played the paternal role and loquaciously inseminated Mary, or that Jesus was fathered by anyone else, his euphemistic expression about being servant to himself is more than sufficient.

The angelic transformation in this text is different from that in the *Ascension of Isaiah*. There it had to do with the ignorance of the god of this world and his angelic colleagues who didn’t recognize the Lord to be more than one of them, and so didn’t praise him, just as the people on earth didn’t recognize Jesus to be more than flesh, more than human, and so ended up having him crucified. And in the *Ascension of Isaiah*, the textual input for virgin birth was Matthew not Luke. So Jesus couldn’t have appeared to Mary there in the form of the angel Gabriel even if he wanted to. He could only appear to Joseph after Mary was already pregnant. But in the *Letter of the Apostles*, the Gospel of Luke is used, and angelic transformation is matched to the appearance of Gabriel so that the pre-existent Jesus can take the place of his own would-be father.

Also different here is the kind of auto-parthenogenesis. It’s different from the kind in the writings of Justin Martyr because it’s not achieved by the same mental operation, and because it involves one heavenly descent instead of two. In Justin’s multiple blend network, auto-parthenogenesis was achieved by the mental operation of matching between inputs: the pre-existent Jesus as Word was matched to the Spirit and Power that come upon and overshadow Mary according to the angel’s annunciation in Luke. But in the *Letter of the Apostles*, it is achieved by the mental operation of recruitment: an input of angelic transformation is added and the pre-existent Jesus appears to Mary in the form of Gabriel. In Justin’s network, there were two descents, one of the angel Gabriel during his annunciation to Mary, followed by another descent
of the pre-existent Jesus as the Word/Spirit/Power of God that come upon and overshadow Mary
and cause her to become pregnant. But in the Letter of the Apostles, there is only one descent of
the Word transformed to look like the angel Gabriel.

As for the Spirit and Power of God, in this efficiently integrated blend the Word is
clothed with them in heaven before descending to earth so that when he appears to the virgin
Mary, simultaneously she’s come upon and overshadowed by God’s Spirit and Power.
CONCLUSION

Summary

In the Introduction, I situated my study with respect to scholarship on heavenly journeys in ancient Mediterranean literature and on the development of early christology. In the CHAPTERS of PART ONE I provided a historical-critical overview of the various conceptions of Jesus in the first and second centuries CE, the proto-orthodox doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis, among others. Then focusing on the proto-orthodox doctrine, in the CHAPTERS of PART TWO, I applied blending theory from cognitive linguistics in order to explain how it emerged.

The idea of Jesus’ pre-existence was developed circa 30-50 CE, and it did not necessarily differentiate believers in him from other Jews. The idea of his virgin birth was developed circa 70-90 CE as a defense against reports of Mary’s early pregnancy. Parthenogenesis was itself novel within Second Temple and early Judaism, and its harmonization with the previously developed idea of Jesus’ pre-existence differentiated proto-orthodox Christians from Jews. It also differentiated them from other Christian groups. Historical-critical methods cannot get at the details of this harmonizing thought process.

Blending theory explains how the two separate ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth were harmonized and how the doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis emerged: blended spaces have emergent structure and meaning that are not reducible to input spaces. Incarnation through parthenogenesis is not reducible to the ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and
virgin birth, any more than it is reducible to Paul and John, Matthew and Luke, Jewish or pagan literature. It was a new idea that emerged from the blending of two separate ideas in the second century and has since been taken for granted as it became proto-orthodox and then orthodox Christian doctrine.

Proto-orthodox Christians did more than blend the pre-existent Jesus together with Jesus son of the virgin Mary. They also projected their doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis backwards from the blend to New Testament texts. These were different texts written by different people in different places at different times for different reasons. Some of their authors believed that Jesus pre-existed, and others believed that he was born to the virgin Mary, but none of them believed both. No New Testament author was a proto-orthodox Christian.

When the authors of Matthew and Luke introduced the idea of Jesus’ virgin birth as a defense against reports of Mary’s early pregnancy, they also introduced two problems, the problem of how Jesus could be born from the seed of David without a father in the Davidic line, and the problem of how Mary conceived if not vaginally. While Jesus does not pre-exist in Matthew and Luke, for those who believed in his pre-existence, as did proto-orthodox Christians, the latter problem was compounded because the pre-existent Jesus had to enter the virgin Mary’s womb somehow. Imaginative reading of the annunciation in Luke allowed for a solution to the problem: Mary conceived aurally as she listened to Gabriel speak the word/Word of God to her. But such an imaginative reading might lead to a misunderstanding about angelic paternity. Hence some proto-orthodox Christians had the pre-existent Jesus descend from heaven and take the place of his own would-be father. The thought process was evolutionary, dynamic and creative.
From Earliest Harmonization to Full and Efficient Pattern Completion

The network of pre-existence and incarnation through parthenogenesis, then, was initially built in the early second century by Ignatius, the author the *Ascension of Isaiah*, and Aristides, as the input spaces of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth were set up and a number of mental operations began to be performed, such as pattern completion. The initial network was “trying to achieve equilibrium,” as Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner state in their definitive formulation of blending theory.¹ Of course it was not the network itself but proto-orthodox Christians who were trying to achieve that equilibrium. Multiple blend networks were built over the initial network by Justin Martyr and the author of the *Letter of the Apostles*. Full yet inefficient integration was achieved in the middle of the second century in Justin’s writings, where aural conception and auto-parthenogenesis are attested together, but where there are two heavenly descents, one of the angel Gabriel followed by another of the pre-existent Jesus. Full and efficient integration was achieved towards the end of the second century in the *Letter of the Apostles*, where there is a single descent of the pre-existent Jesus who is transformed to look like the angel Gabriel.

Whether inefficient or efficient, full integration of the blend remained rare, however.² Just as Fauconnier and Turner’s Bush-Stork-Baseball-Spoon multiple blend network built over

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¹ Fauconnier & Turner 2002, 44.
² A later third or fourth century example of auto-parthenogenesis comes from *Pistis Sophia* 1.8, where the pre-existent Jesus transforms himself to look like the angel Gabriel and impregnates Mary, as in the *Letter of the Apostles*. But in this text, Jesus isn’t the only one who pre-exists, and the pre-existent Jesus is also involved in the pregnancies of Elisabeth as well as the mothers of the twelve disciples. As for the virgin Mary, her aural conception of Jesus is more implicit than in the *Letter of the Apostles*. Nor is it clear whether virgin birth, to the exclusion of baptism, is emphasized as the moment of the incarnation in the *Pistis Sophia*, which is a lengthy and composite work. For brief discussion of angelic transformation in the passages in each text, see Hannah 1999b, 196-197. A later sixth century example of auto-parthenogenesis comes from the
the Born on Third network is unlikely to become entrenched in culture, incarnation through aural conception and auto-parthenogenesis together did not become so. But aural conception did, even if there are no major creedal statements about Mary’s ear. Tertullian believed in incarnation through aural conception, for example, and it became a somewhat standard way to solve the problem of how the pre-existent Jesus entered the virgin Mary’s womb. Examples of incarnation through virgin birth and aural conception come from Christian antiquity, throughout the middle ages, and into modernity. Such as in this poem from the 1400s or 1500s:

Gaude, virgo singularis,  
Virgo mater unica,  
Mater veri salutaris,  
Salus mundi publica.  
Tu de coelo salutaris,  
Tu per aurem gravidaris  
Et in cella modica  
Magnum Deum hospitaris  
Quem nec coeli, terrae, marie  
Tota capit fabrica.

Rejoice, o matchless virgin,  
unique virgin mother,  
salutary mother of truth,  
general salvation of the world.  
You are greeted from heaven,  
you are impregnated through your ear  
and in your modest quarters  
you accommodate a vast God  
for whom neither of heaven, earth, or sea  
is the entire workshop large enough.3

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marginal notes on P.Gen.4.270 edited by Schubert and Norelli (2010); further discussion in Clivaz 2011.

3 Cited in Remigereau 1947, 139. Translation mine.
Why the Doctrine of Incarnation through Parthenogenesis Was Culturally Successful

Blending theory is invaluable for getting past the limits of historical-critical methods and at the details of how the two separate ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth were harmonized. But it cannot explain why: Why were the two ideas ever harmonized at all? And furthermore, why did incarnation through parthenogenesis and not some other christology become entrenched within culture as proto-orthodox and then orthodox Christian doctrine?

The reasons were many, I’m sure.

*Historical Circumstances.* The separate ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and virgin birth were themselves developed for reasons, separate reasons. Scholarship is uncertain as to why the ideas were developed, but the one idea demands an explanation more than the other, since virgin births were virtually unknown in Second Temple and early Judaism; whereas several divine mediator figures before Jesus could be said to pre-exist, none of which were incarnated through parthenogenesis, however. Why virgin birth then?

There is no academic consensus, though a number of potential explanations have been put forward. They range from acceptance of Jesus’ parthenogenesis as simple fact; to the possibility of an early pregnancy or even adultery or rape; to the influence of Jewish tradition about the miraculous or otherwise unusual births of Noah or Moses, for example; to the influence of pagan myths about the nativities of demi-gods, founders and rulers of the state, plus some philosophers. No single explanation has to be sufficient, and rarely have they been deployed strictly individually. I argue that as influential as Jewish tradition was on the Matthean and Lukan infancy narratives, the idea of Jesus’ parthenogenesis was not developed due to this influence. Nor due to the influence of pagan myths alone. Arguably the idea of his virgin birth
was developed first of all and in large part because of reports of Mary’s early pregnancy, reports that Matthew and Luke could not ignore or deny.

Without these embarrassing reports, the idea of Jesus’ virgin birth would not have been developed, and in turn it would not have been harmonized with the previously developed idea of his pre-existence. Somewhat ironically, the Matthean and Lukan claims of virgin birth enabled further and unfounded reports. From Joseph’s judgment of Mary as an adulteress in Matthew came reports of illegitimacy in Celsus, rabbinic material, and the *Toledoth Yeshu*. On the other hand, from Gabriel’s appearance to Mary in Luke came suspicions that Jesus’ father was an angel. If they could not ignore or deny them, proto-orthodox Christians either had to admit such reports and confirm such suspicions or continue to claim parthenogenesis.

Another historical circumstance was the simple fact that by the second century various things had been written about Jesus in various texts by various authors. The need for some consistency resulted in pressure to select which texts would be used, and it resulted in pressure to harmonize the different gospels and other texts that were finally canonized as the New Testament. How could Mark begin with Jesus’ baptism, Matthew and Luke with his conception and birth to the virgin Mary, and John with his pre-existence as the divine Word? Furthermore why wasn’t his parthenogenesis mentioned in Mark or John (or before that in Paul)? And why wasn’t his pre-existence mentioned in the synoptic gospels? Proto-orthodox Christians could either select a few New Testament texts with less variation between them and thus perhaps avoid much of the pressure to harmonize (as did e.g. Marcionites, Irenaeus’ Ebionites), or they could select more New Testament texts and try to harmonize the pre-existent Jesus with Jesus son of the virgin Mary, amidst myriad other varieties. Justin Martyr harmonized the synoptic gospels, which he further harmonized with his Logos theology. His onetime student Tatian harmonized
what would become the four canonical gospels in the Diatessaron. And Irenaeus already had a four-gospel canon in the late second century.

Of course there was also the major historical circumstance of christological controversy, which involved debate over not only Jesus and who he was but also debate over human salvation and resurrection as well as the significance of the eucharist and martyrdom. For proto-orthodox Christians, Jesus had to pre-exist so as to be more that David or Solomon or anyone else. He also had to suffer because otherwise the eucharist would have no meaning for proto-orthodox Christians, and their own martyrdoms would be meaningless too. What is more, he had to be resurrected in a body if Christians were going to hope for the same. Hence the pre-existent Jesus had to be incarnated. To suffer death and then rise again corporeally, he needed a body.

With time, and under several further historical circumstances of the third and fourth centuries, proto-orthodox Christians did frankly win the competition for orthodoxy, making their christology orthodox doctrine.

*Minimal Counterintuitiveness and Mnemonic Advantage.* All of these historical circumstances were likely among the many reasons why the doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis became entrenched within culture. But under the circumstance of christological controversy, incarnation through birth, as described by Paul, would have worked just as well as incarnation through virgin birth. If a passible body was what was required, even incarnation at baptism, as described by the Johannine gospel author, could have served proto-orthodox purposes. So it’s back to: why incarnation through virgin birth? why parthenogenesis?

For a final explanation, not at all the final explanation, and certainly not the only explanation, I turn to the theory of minimal counterintuitiveness. It was formulated by Pascal Boyer, Justin Barrett, and other cognitive researchers starting in the 1990s, which was also the
time that blending theory was formulated, but scholars operating with each of the theories have
generally not been in dialogue. The theory of minimal counterintuitiveness holds that ideas are
more likely to be remembered and successfully transmitted if they violate some expectations, as
opposed to ideas that violate no expectations or too many of them.

Cognitive scholarship has been inconsistent in terms of exactly how many violations
make an idea minimally counterintuitive as opposed to intuitive or maximally counterintuitive.
There is also the issue of whether the violated expectations are innate expectations and therefore
entirely cross-cultural or rather expectations that are at least somewhat contextually and
culturally specific. Specificity of context and culture seem highly probably to me. And I share
the opinion that in the field of cognitive science of religion many scholars have attempted to
explain too much with the theory. But I do think it has some explanatory power.

In a recent empirical study, for example, Mary Harmon-Vukić, Afzal Upal and Kelly
Sheehan defined minimal counterintuitiveness in terms of one or two violated expectations (one:
low MCI; two: high MCI). They took a context-specific approach and demonstrated that subjects
in a series of reading-time and memory-recall experiments consistently remembered better what
they had read if it was minimally counterintuitive, as opposed to intuitive (no expectations
violated), maximally counterintuitive (three or more expectations violated), or nonsensical.
According to Harmon-Vukić, Upal & Sheehan, this was because minimally counterintuitive
ideas in reading “require additional processing, but not so much extra effort as to pose significant
challenges to readers.” In other words, to have a mnemonic advantage, an idea must be
inconsistent enough with the context in which it is transmitted and received that it provokes
thought. It can’t be too inconsistent with the context, however; the inconsistency must be

4 See the extensive overview and critique of the theory by Purzycki & Willard (2013).
5 Harmon-Vukić, Upal & Sheehan 2013, 133.
resolvable. And an idea that violates three or more contextually specific expectations is too inconsistent. It does not have the mnemonic advantage of an idea that only violates one or two expectations. And neither do intuitive ideas.

Tentatively applied to my study, the theory suggests that the proto-orthodox doctrine of Incarnation through parthenogenesis may have been favored to win even before the competition for orthodoxy was decided between different Christian groups and their christologies. This is not at all to say that historical circumstances were irrelevant, or even that incarnation through virgin birth became entrenched in culture exclusively due to mnemonic advantage. But minimal counterintuitiveness was perhaps an important factor.

In the ancient Mediterranean world, the idea of pre-existence didn’t have to violate expectations about human beings, though it would within any context in which the human spirit/soul was generally not believed to pre-exist, such as within the context of Second Temple and early Judaism. The idea of virgin birth would have violated expectations about human reproduction in most any context then as now.

So the harmonization of the two ideas of Jesus’ pre-existence and parthenogenesis would have violated at least one expectation, possibly two, depending on the context in which the new idea of his pre-existence and incarnation through virgin birth was transmitted and received.

That would make the proto-orthodox doctrine minimally counterintuitive, according to a definition in terms of one or two violated expectations. And according to the theory, it would have had been more likely to be remembered and presumably transmitted than ideas about Jesus that were intuitive or maximally counterintuitive. It violates no expectations about human beings for Jesus of Nazareth to be born through the biological process of sexual reproduction, whereas it violates too many expectations about humanity for him to descend from heaven and appear on
earth as though in a body yet without being born. Incarnation through parthenogenesis may have had a mnemonic advantage over these and other christologies due to cognitive constraints. Even the fully integrated blends of pre-existence and incarnation through auto-parthenogenesis as well as aural conception would have violated too many expectations, since humans don’t transform themselves to look like angels and they don’t take the place of their would-be fathers.


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