

A Sign of Contradiction: Jesus Traditions as an Axis for Dialogue

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Disagreeing to Agree

I have long been convinced that one of the greatest values of Jesus traditions lies in their capacity for clarifying our human agreements and disagreements, and for bringing them together in a meaningful way¹. In this article, I want to focus on disagreements (specifically, disagreements within and among mainstream Christian, Jewish, and Islamic “virgin birth” traditions), in an effort to show that, when it comes to talking about Jesus, “disagreeing to agree” is every bit as traditional and helpful to understanding as “agreeing to disagree.”

When Luke’s Gospel tells the story of the infant Jesus being brought to the temple in Jerusalem for his “dedication,” the day’s reverent clockwork is interrupted (and, in the narrative, quite overshadowed) by an encounter with a respected local elder named Simeon. He does not seem to be a temple official, but he is profoundly interested in the child, and he claims to know, among other dark wonders, that this Jesus is destined to be “a sign of controversy”², a storm centre that will up-end significant

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¹ For more on “diversity” as a Christian tradition and a Christian opportunity, see A. G. RICKER PARKS, “Conversatianity in the Gospel of John,” in the journal *Theandros*, at <http://www.theandros.com/convers.html>.

² ...or “a sign spoken against,” or “a sign answered,” or “a sign of contradiction” (*semeion antilegomenon* - Luke 2.34)...

segments of his society, and reveal the thoughts they usually leave hidden³.

Of course, this prophecy had already come true with a vengeance by the time it was recorded in Luke. When it comes to Jesus and his life, the documentary evidence suggests no shortage of variety of opinion. This is true even if we assume that the famous Gnostic-Christian fusions came a little later, when Gnostic fusions seem to have enjoyed a general vogue⁴. Controversy and variety of opinion were basic to early Christianity⁵, and seem, in fact, to have been the catalyst for the Gospel of Luke – the book reads like a polite but firm attempt to edit the Jesus tradition for clarity⁶.

Simeon's prophecy of "controversies" over - and/or "answers" to⁷ - Jesus' life and significance continued to come true after

³ Literally, "reveal out of many hearts (the) reasonings" (*apokaluphthon ek pollon kardion dialogismoi* - Luke 2.35)...

⁴ See K. RUDOLPH, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, N.Y., Harper and Row, 1987, p. 276-277, 297. Notice the plural "fusions." People often speak of Gnosticism as a monolithic opponent to orthodox Christianity, but it is as much a mistake to assume Gnostic unanimity as it is to assume Christian unanimity. Various Gnosticisms, and fusions such as Gnostic Judaism, were competing with Gnostic Christianity, and even within the Gnostic Christian movement we find competing texts and ideas that vary widely (See RUDOLPH, p.51, 285, etc.)

⁵ The NT letters frequently warn against false teachers, and even disagree with each other in terms of vocabulary and Hebrew Bible interpretation. Paul, for example, insists on the saving efficacy of faith - even faith without works - offering Abraham and Genesis 15:6 to illustrate the principle (Romans 3:28-4:22). James, however, uses the example of Abraham - also quoting Genesis 15:6 - to stress the saving efficacy of works, and to ridicule the idea of salvation by faith alone (2:14-24). There are, of course, many ways to harmonize these passages, but the very fact that people feel the need to try seems significant.

⁶ Luke 1.3 refers to "many" previous written accounts of Jesus' life and significance, and stresses that the author ("having researched them all thoroughly" and/or "having been involved with Christianity from the beginning") will now present the reader (Theophilus) with an "orderly" and "certain" account (1.4).

⁷ See note 1.

Luke's Gospel as well, despite its apparent effort to provide a definitive account. Many more new accounts, some of which were eventually accepted as canonical and some of which were deemed non-canonical, soon appeared to offer their interpenetrating but clearly distinct perspectives.

Even if we focus on mainstream religious traditions, and ignore the many and various "unorthodox" ideas of Christ and Christianity⁸, we find plenty of controversy for consideration. It is, for example, generally accepted that early Christianity experienced significant tension between the liberal "Hellenizers" who had little use for Jewish tradition, and the more conservative "Judaizers" who insisted upon the Jewish roots of Christian Messianism⁹. Both of these groups were at odds with the rest of the Jews, who did not want to be "Christian" at all¹⁰. In a historical process that is less well understood, the intra-Jewish polemic¹¹ around Jesus acquired an anti-Semitic/anti-Gentile

⁸ I focus here on "mainstream" or "orthodox" views of Jesus as a conscious choice. I do not do this because I believe "unorthodox" views to be uninteresting, nor because I assume them incapable of offering authentic ancient Christian material or useful Christian reflection. I focus on orthodox perspectives simply because a) they still dominate today, making the need for their adherents to understand themselves and each other much more pressing, b) their text-based and centralized nature makes them easier to address with economy and continuity, c) they have been, in perception and often in fact, famously bad at dealing generously with controversy and variety of opinion and d) in my view, everything I have to say about them also holds true for unorthodox views of Christ.

⁹ This tension seems to be reflected in the Christian canon in passages like Galatians 2:7-8, 2:11-14, 5:12, Romans 2:28-29, 1 Corinthians 7:18-19, etc., as well as in general soteriological and hermeneutical tensions of the kind described in note 5.

¹⁰ As A. REINHARTZ noted at McGill's 2003 "The Changing Face of Judaism, Christianity, and Other Greco-Roman Religions in Antiquity" conference, it's important to remember that Christianity was not one Jewish sect competing with a monolithic Judaism, but rather one of a number of Jewish sects, or (to use a term popularized by Jacob Neusner) interpenetrating "Judaisms," of which "no single group could claim hegemony until at least a generation after the first revolt, and perhaps even later."

¹¹ See the historical guesswork outlined in R. CULPEPPER, "The Gospel of John as a Threat to Jewish-Christian Relations," in J. CHARLESWORTH,

stink, as more non-Jews became Christians, and as non-Christian Judaism consolidated against these newcomers and their perceived blasphemies. The dark side of this famous socio-religious “parting of the ways” stains Western history to this day¹².

In time, of course, a third major religion branched from the community of people who claim Abraham as their father and his God as their own, bringing with it a third major view of Abraham’s descendant, Jesus. Islam, generally speaking, differentiated itself from mainstream Judaism by accepting Jesus of Nazareth as God’s Messiah¹³, and from mainstream Christianity by rejecting speculation about his divinity as blasphemous¹⁴.

The Virgin Birth: A Sign of Contradiction

So far I have been using very general language. Let me return to the Gospel of Luke, and focus on a specific controversial Jesus tradition, which seems specifically associated by Luke’s text¹⁵ to

ed., *Overcoming Fear Between Jews and Christians*, N.Y., Crossroad, 1992, p. 21-43.

¹² There are some who seem to overestimate the influence of Christian theology on anti-Semitism, such as Geza Vermes, ignoring the anti-Judaic supercessionist Christian theologians like Bultmann who nonetheless opposed the Nazis, and underestimating the significance of non-religious and non-Christian anti-Semitic state and mob massacres, from ancient Egypt to Stalinist Russia. The problem of “Christian anti-Semitism” is nonetheless very real, and the absurd “Christ-killer” accusation helped, and still helps, to feed the kind of hostile climate that fosters anti-Semitism.

¹³ Qur’an 2:87, 2:253, 3:45, 4:171, 4:157, 5:46, 23:50, 33:7, 43:57, 57:27, 61:6, 61:14

¹⁴ Qur’an 4:171, 5:17, 5:75, 9:30, 9:31, 43:57

¹⁵ It seems significant that the famous Magnificat, the poetic exclamation wrought from Mary (or, in some versions, from Elizabeth) in Luke 1:46-55, by the addition of Elizabeth’s post-menopausal conception miracle to Mary’s virgin conception miracle, echoes the song of Hannah (another woman who conceived miraculously – 1 Samuel 1:1-2:10), specifically in associating the miraculous interruption of natural reproductive processes with miraculous societal upsets in general (Luke 1:52-53; 1 Samuel 2:8).

upsets in the human order: “the virgin birth”¹⁶. Luke has the most famous formulation of this story. For some reason, though, in the Gospel of Mark – Luke’s putative primary source – the tradition is missing. The story is interesting enough, and Mark’s Gospel has no problem with the idea of miracles, so where is it? Orthodox Christian creeds seldom append the virgin birth parenthetically. They insist upon it as an essential doctrine. If, then, a writer rejects the virgin birth, doesn’t care about it, or has never heard of it, in what sense is the result a Christian Gospel? Where did Luke find the tradition, if not in Mark?

Matthew’s Gospel also includes a reference to the virgin birth tradition, but without the kind of detail and emphasis found in Luke (Matthew 1:1-25). Interestingly, Matthew also differs from Luke in tracing Jesus’ genealogy through Joseph instead of Mary, though the “begat” language is abruptly dropped at the end, and Joseph is carefully described as “the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus.” To add to the interesting puzzle, Matthew’s Gospel was traditionally the only one accepted by the Ebionite Christians, many of whom rejected the virgin birth tradition. If their Gospel of Matthew was the one we know¹⁷, how did they read it?¹⁸

¹⁶ Please note that I am merely tracing the rough outlines of various mainstream religious reactions to the virgin birth tradition. I take no position on the value or veracity of the tradition, or on any of the given reactions to it.

¹⁷ This question is too complicated even to *ask* here properly, mostly because our understanding of the Ebionites depends upon scattered “accounts which are in themselves often very vague and in their entirety make possible a whole kaleidoscope of interpretations.” W. SCHNEEMELCHER, ed. (R. M. WILSON, English ed.,) *New Testament Apocrypha Volume One*, Louisville, James Clarke and Co./Westminster, 1991, p.135.

¹⁸ Did the Ebionites use Matthew’s version because it could be read as the story of a miraculous or particularly ordained birth (such as Isaac’s, Samuel’s, or Samson’s), but not necessarily a virgin birth, since only some Ebionites apparently accepted the tradition (Origen, *Contra Cels.* 5:61V; Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3:27)? If they used Matthew in this way, was the ambiguity they found there accidental or intentional? It is often stressed that Matthew quotes the LXX version of Isaiah 7:14, which describes a “virgin” (*parthenos*) conceiving, in contradistinction to the MT’s “young woman” (*almah*). The LXX, though, uses *parthenos* in a wide sense, which includes both “young

Finally, John's Gospel joins Mark, in silence. Why? When describing God as the eternal Word "becoming flesh" (John 1:14) a throwaway sentence about the famously miraculous nature of the event would not be out of place, and when writing about Christianity and Christians as born of God's will, and not of a human father or the power of a man (John 1:13), the virgin birth tradition could come in handy as a colourful and concrete example. Does John's silence have anything to do with the Gospel's deep Jewish roots¹⁹, and/or John the disciple's apparent popularity with some Ebionites²⁰?

Why do we find a similar deafening silence in the Pauline letters²¹ on the subject? When writing rabbinic arguments concerning Jesus as a second Adam²², one might be expected to refer to the virgin birth tradition. Jesus the second Adam's parthenogenesis would then be a deuterio-Genesis, since this second model man (*ish*) is brought from a woman (*ish-ah*) by the Holy Spirit, just as the first model man (*adam*) was brought from the earth (*adam-ah*), and enlivened by God's Spirit. These are hopelessly speculative examples, but the main point remains:

woman" and "virgin" (Genesis 24:16; 34:2-3), and other ancient sources also use *parthenos* in this non-medical way (Homer's *Iliad* 2.514; Aristophanes' *Clouds* 530, etc.). Does Matthew? If so, is it an intentional attempt to make room for dissenters like the Ebionites? Or perhaps the Ebionites had a different Matthew altogether? Epiphanius accuses them of cutting out Matthew 1's genealogy (*Haer.* 30.14.3), but he also writes of a sister sect the Nazoreans with a complete Matthew in Hebrew (*Haer.* 29.9.4), and he is not known for the accuracy of his refutations of "heretics."

¹⁹ According to CHARLESWORTH, "the Gospel of John is now widely and wisely judged to be the most Jewish of the Gospels." ("Reinterpreting John," *Biblical Review* (1993), p.19. See also CHARLESWORTH, *The Beloved Disciple*, Valley Forge, Trinity, 1995, p.15.

²⁰ "Epiphanius notes that in the Gospel according to the Ebionites, John (is) listed first (when naming the disciples)..." S. KEALY, *John's Gospel and the History of Biblical Interpretation, Book 1*, Lewiston, Mellen Biblical Press, 2002, p. 32.

²¹ ...both those attributed reliably to Paul, and those working within the Pauline tradition...

²² *ho eschatos Adam* - 1 Corinthians 15:45. See also Romans 5:12-18, 1 Corinthians 15:20-23, 45-49.

The letters never refer to the virgin birth tradition at all, even when it might fit the topic (Gal 4.4, for example), or help the argument. In fact, none of the New Testament letters do, even in passing. It is interesting that so many Christian people and groups insist on the virgin birth as an essential doctrine, while these biblical books exist to suggest that Christian theology can and did flourish, at times, without it.

Non-Christian Judaism is not known for virgin birth traditions surrounding Jesus, unless one counts the few dark ancient references that appear to be (or were later co-opted to serve as) accusations of illegitimacy.²³ Modern non-Christian Judaism has no virgin birth traditions at all. Has it always been this way, though? What, for example, are we to make of the “virgin birth” of Melchizedek²⁴, or that of the Jewish-Gnostic “Illuminator?” (*Apocalypse of Adam* 7:9-13). Even if we assume that these stories are adopting a Christian idea²⁵, who were the Christians who identified enough with Jewish tradition to want to spread it, and what made them think they could get away with passing it off as Jewish²⁶? Apparently, their experience of non-Christian Judaism had wider borders than ours.

Islam is traditionally very friendly to the tradition, but the Qur’an itself is cautious. Like the Gospel of John, it treats the tradition as a sensitive rising noble might deal with an embarrassingly

²³ See BOYARIN’s summary on “Son of Panthera (the Roman Soldier)” as a mocking reaction to “Son of a virgin (*parthenou*),” in *Dying for God*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 154-155.

²⁴ In an alternate ending to 2 Enoch, Melchizedek is conceived without male participation (though his mother is not a virgin). See CHARLESWORTH, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and the New Testament*, N.Y., Cambridge University Press, 1985, p.85.

²⁵ This assumption is not well-founded - See CHARLESWORTH, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and the New Testament*, p. 85 and 175 for Melchizedek, and CHARLESWORTH, ed., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Vol.2*, Garden City, Doubleday, 1985, p.707-709 for “the Illuminator.”

²⁶ Is the story related to Hebrews 7:3 and/or Hellenistic Synagogal Prayer 12:62-63 (CHARLESWORTH, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Vol.2*, p. 693) and/or lost Jewish or Jewish-Christian virgin birth traditions?

interesting cousin. It publicly and deliberately makes room at the table for its relative, but is not overly friendly itself. The Qur'an clearly intends to suggest that Jesus' mother Mary was a virgin (3:45, 19:34, 21:91, etc.), but never comes out and uses the word. As with Matthew, the question arises: Is this deliberate? Were there some early Muslims who were not willing to accept the tradition? Certainly, some Muslim scholars today argue that the Qur'an does not teach the virgin birth tradition²⁷. Was the language used in the Qur'an meant to make room for such internal variety of opinion? It has been suggested that the Ebionites were connected with the origin of Islam²⁸. Did Qur'anic Islam inherit the Jewish-Christian tradition's ambivalence toward the virgin birth doctrine?

Agreeing to Disagree

It is amazing that so much variety of opinion can exist within religions, sometimes even causing "rivals" like Muslims and Catholics to agree more with each other than they do with others within their own traditions. The controversy over Jesus is, of course, much wider than the virgin birth story, though, and it continues today – one scholar counted 60,000 biographies of Jesus (and that was in the 1960s)²⁹ ! This is potentially confusing, but probably very healthy. It seems to me that agreeing and disagreeing about Jesus is instructive, and can be constructive. This diversity and engagement of dialogue (both intra-religious and inter-religious) may be the greatest opportunity afforded by the slow death of the Constantinian State-Church, with the artificial unity it tried to impose by force. In a pluralistic world, Jesus can (like the cross that symbolizes him) provide an axis for the convergences and divergences of dialogue to be drawn, and thus "reveal the reasonings of many hearts."

²⁷ Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Tawfiq Sidqi, Ghulam Parwez, etc.

²⁸ This opinion is attributed to D. UHLHORN, "and others," by the Catholic Encyclopedia at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05242c.htm>.

²⁹ H. ANDERSON, quoted in CHARLESWORTH and W. P. WEAVER, eds., *Images of Jesus Today*, Valley Forge, Trinity, 1994, p.1f.

A SIGN OF CONTRADICTION...

ABSTRACT: Simeon the elder, when introduced to the baby Jesus, predicted that the child would become a “sign” of contradiction and controversy. As the present volume attests, Simeon’s prophecy came true! This paper presents a general review of one such controversy (that of the “virgin birth” tradition) in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; and suggests that such controversies around the meaning of Jesus and his life constitute an often-ignored resource: an opportunity to connect meaningfully, and to discover useful and revealing agreements and disagreements.

RÉSUMÉ: Le vieillard Siméon, quand lui fut présenté l’enfant Jésus, prédit qu’il serait un signe suscitant la contradiction et la controverse... ce qu’atteste le thème du présent volume! Cet article offre un compte-rendu général d’une de ces controverses, soit celle de la conception virginale de Jésus, selon le judaïsme, le christianisme et l’islam. Il suggère que de telles controverses entourant la signification de Jésus et de sa vie peuvent être une ressource ignorée : une occasion de créer des liens signifiants, et de découvrir des accords et des désaccords utiles et révélateurs au dialogue interreligieux.