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# The Bible, Theology, and the Virgin Birth: Continuing a Conversation?

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## Abstract

The topic of the virgin birth can provide a test case for the relation between critical biblical scholarship and creedal tradition within theological interpretation of Scripture. Divergent approaches to such interpretation are evident in Andrew Lincoln's monograph, *Born of a Virgin?* and Oliver Crisp's critique of that book in his *Analyzing Doctrine*. In this article Lincoln continues the discussion in a response to Crisp that explores some of their disagreements. It argues that Crisp misrepresents Lincoln's type of theological interpretation as dominated by a fear of anachronism, while Crisp himself unwittingly defends a version of the virgin birth that is not the traditional doctrine. Crisp's attempted theological refutations of Lincoln's proposals for a fully incarnational Christology without a literal virginal conception and for an interpretation of the later dogma in terms of its force of signaling Christ's full humanity are shown to be deficient. The exchange serves as a reminder that the result of bringing together biblical scholarship and theological skills will inevitably depend on the types of biblical and theological study involved and suggests that, in relation to the virgin birth, Crisp's version of analytic theology fails to do justice to the historical and cultural dimensions of biblical texts and creedal affirmations.

**Keywords** theological interpretation, virgin birth, Christ's humanity, anachronism, analytic theology, biblical criticism, incarnation, creed

## The Bible, Theology, and the Virgin Birth: Continuing a Conversation?

As readers of this journal well know, there is little sign of any abatement of treatments of the Bible that consider themselves theological interpretations, and yet that hermeneutical label remains a disputed one. What counts as theological interpretation? What is its nature and purpose? How far does it reckon adequately with the diverse contexts of interpreters? A basic concern continues to be the relationship between biblical scholarship and theological study, including whether the two should even be thought of as separate disciplines.<sup>1</sup> In discussion of these questions, much depends on the particular types of biblical study and of theological enterprise that are in view and on the stance they take toward the fundamental issue of how to interpret beliefs expressed in ancient modes of understanding reality in ways appropriate to our present state of knowledge. It is often in regard to treatment of specific topics that these matters are best illuminated.

When I wrote the book, *Born of a Virgin?*,<sup>2</sup> on the conception of Jesus, I considered it to be an exercise in theological interpretation, attempting to negotiate rigorous analysis of biblical texts, commitment to the Christian tradition, and discernment of the developing nature of that tradition in relation to the various stages of human knowledge, particularly anthropological and biological knowledge. In response to that attempt some have been generous in their praise and others have seen it simply as an attack on cherished beliefs in the reliability of Scripture and creed.<sup>3</sup> At one or two points in the book I employed the writings of the evangelical systematic theologian, Oliver Crisp, as a foil for my own proposals and so, not unexpectedly, he has taken the opportunity to respond in his latest book, *Analyzing Doctrine*.<sup>4</sup> He does me the honor of devoting a whole chapter on the doctrine of the virgin birth to an examination of my proposals, expressing sympathy with my "ambition to provide a second narrative that takes seriously both the biblical and theological issues that this doctrine raises. In fact, the virgin birth is a good case study of how scholars of biblical studies and theologians might find common cause."<sup>5</sup>

Crisp's sympathy for the project is appreciated, though it is somewhat surprising in the light of his previous work

1. For discussions elsewhere, see, e.g., Stephen E. Fowl, "Historical Criticism, Theological Interpretation, and the Ends of the Christian Life," and Angus Paddison, "Who and What Is Theological Interpretation For?," in *Conception, Reception, and the Spirit: Essays in Honor of Andrew T. Lincoln*, ed. J. Gordon McConville and Lloyd K. Pietersen (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 173–85 and 210–23; the issue of *Anglican Theological Review* 99 (2017): 645–762; 769–801 devoted to this topic; Darren Sarisky, *Reading the Bible Theologically* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
2. Andrew T. Lincoln, *Born of a Virgin? Reconceiving Jesus in the Bible, Tradition, and Theology* (London: SPCK; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019).
3. The latter frequently reveal a fairly superficial knowledge of the book's contents, which, in fact, are an attempt to uphold biblical authority in the light of the diverse witness of its contents and to advocate an appropriate loyalty to the major creeds.
4. Oliver D. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine: Toward a Systematic Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019).
5. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 176. An earlier more sympathetic critique by Daniel J. Treier, "Virgin Territory?," *Pro Ecclesia* 23 (2014): 373–79 also saw that the book "offers a distinctive test case for today's complex interactions between historical and so-called theological interpretation of Scripture" (373).

where he had declared, “Although . . . it is possible to set forth a robust two-natures doctrine of the Incarnation that conforms to Chalcedonian Christology in all other particulars apart from its denial of the Virgin Birth, such a doctrine does not reflect the teaching of scripture or the tradition. Consequently, such a NVB [No Virgin Birth] argument is wholly inadequate, indeed, is an unorthodox statement of how the Incarnation took place. (This is so overwhelmingly obvious that it is almost embarrassing to have to state it so baldly.)”<sup>6</sup> If for Crisp Scripture and tradition are so clear and unqualifiedly normative on this issue, then it is difficult to envisage how biblical scholars and theologians might find common cause without the former simply being required to step into line with what the latter have declared to be incontrovertible orthodoxy. Does his more recent discussion, however, signal a substantial move toward a more dialogical approach?

That discussion constitutes ch. 8 in a collection of Crisp’s essays that is part of his developing project in Analytic Theology, an approach to systematic theology of which he has become a leading exponent.<sup>7</sup> Some of the distinctives of this approach are its employment of the skills, resources, and virtues of analytic philosophy in articulating the central themes of traditional Christian theology. Although Crisp himself aspires that this be more positively expressed in terms of utilizing the tools and methods of analytic philosophy “for the purposes of constructive Christian theology, paying attention to the Christian tradition and development of doctrine,”<sup>8</sup> in the essay on the virgin birth, analytic theology is primarily deployed to defend what Crisp holds to be the traditional dogma and to rebut what he calls my revisionist account.<sup>9</sup> At any rate, the skills of analytic philosophy entailed in the exercise are meant to include clarity, simplicity, and brevity in writing, rigor in argument, and exposure of the logical form of different views. In this respect, the essay does not start promisingly. Instead of eschewing generalizations in favor of specificity by engaging my particular approach to the topic, Crisp employs broad brush strokes, derived from an essay by David Steinmetz,<sup>10</sup> about historical biblical critics being so concerned to avoid anachronism that they are reluctant to do what traditional exegetes have always done and to understand earlier stages in the light of later developments. What is important for Steinmetz is the quality of the “second narrative” that all interpreters of historical texts have to write in order to provide coherence for the diverse evidence within the first narrative of those texts. Crisp returns to these categories at the end of the chapter in his recommendation that, as a biblical scholar with theological interests, I should be less concerned with anachronism and more with the quality of my second narrative whose deficiencies he believes he has exposed.<sup>11</sup> These categories entail what is at best a very dated view of biblical scholarship as historical criticism that dismisses later interpretation as anachronistic in favor of some putative original meaning. An openness to multiple meanings and the prevalence of reception history, some of whose practitioners see its reception as the only significance of the text available, are simply two of the indications that the field cannot be caricatured as dominated by an aversion to anachronism. In any case, it should have been apparent from the approach pursued in the book that the categories Crisp has borrowed do not apply to my own scholarship and that I do not simply see later developments as anachronisms. On my view, one can distinguish between best attempts to discover how a text would have been understood in its earliest contexts and how it came to be understood in later contexts without needing to dismiss either aspect. Indeed one can appreciate that a later context frequently allows insights to emerge from an earlier text. Later interpretation often consciously utilised methods designed precisely to mediate between those earlier and later contexts and to produce fuller signification. Part of the task of theological interpretation is surely to be able to recognize both the discontinuity and the continuity between the first readers of Scripture and ourselves, to see the significance of the historical distance without making it absolute.

## **The Traditional Doctrine of the Virgin Birth and Crisp’s Revisionist Version**

More important than this opening misrepresentation is that Crisp’s own second narrative appears to be flawed at its foundation. He begins the main part of his essay by setting out his account of what he calls “the traditional doctrine of

6. Oliver D. Crisp, *God Incarnate: Explorations in Christology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 101–2.

7. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 157–78. I am grateful to Crisp for allowing me to see an earlier version of the chapter, first given as a paper at the Logos Conference, University of St. Andrews, June 2017.

8. See the discussion in Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 15–32.

9. He later acknowledges that this chapter was defensive rather than constructive in nature, see *Analyzing Doctrine*, 247.

10. David C. Steinmetz, “Uncovering a Second Narrative: Detective Fiction and the Construction of Historical Method,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 54–65. Steinmetz primarily employs the notion of a second narrative in relation to reading stories, particularly detective fiction, in the light of their endings. The fragmentary, sprawling twists and turns of the first narrative are resolved when at the end the principal investigator supplies a second narrative explaining what was really occurring in the course of the first narrative. The object of Steinmetz’s attack is an historical criticism that insists that a text has only one meaning that is recoverable by its methods.

11. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 178.

the virgin birth” (abbreviated to TVB). At first he claims that the traditional doctrine is simply the relevant part of the Nicene Creed. His second narrative about its assertions of Christ’s coming down from heaven, becoming incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and becoming man, however, is that “his human nature is said to be generated by means of a miracle.”<sup>12</sup> This is not the traditional doctrine of the virgin birth, as we shall see, but is Crisp’s revisionist version, influenced by present-day attempts to restate the doctrine in a way compatible with biological knowledge. As Crisp puts it, “In contemporary biological terms, the major theological issue facing defenders of the TVB is the generation of new genetic material, specifically the Y chromosomes requisite to the production of a human male.” On Crisp’s view, the TVB entails that “this ‘missing’ genetic material was provided by the Holy Spirit,” and on how it is introduced “the dogmatic tradition is silent.”<sup>13</sup> There is, of course, a very good reason why the tradition was silent about how the generation of Christ’s human nature took place without a male gamete. This was not an issue that could have occurred to anyone before the development of modern biology! All that was necessary for Christ’s human nature, for the ancients, would have been supplied by the female. The heat of the male seed simply provided the activating principle.<sup>14</sup> The significance of the virgin birth for those who maintained this account of Christ’s birth was that it gave Christ a divine rather than human origin, not that it miraculously generated what was necessary for his human nature. What Crisp is in fact defending is not the TVB but a revisionist contemporary version of it.

Crisp believes he has blunted the force of this criticism by conceding that his second narrative with its biological construal is “entirely speculative,” and yet this does not matter because “the dogma of the virgin birth is consistent with more than one biological story about how the virginal conception of Christ came about.” And so it is also immaterial “what the ancients thought . . . about the miraculous generation of Christ’s human nature in particular.”<sup>15</sup> This attempt to make the virgin birth a timeless proposition uninfluenced by the thought-world in which it originated still misses the point. So unconsciously influenced by contemporary assumptions about conception are Crisp and some other defenders of the virgin birth<sup>16</sup> that they think it has always been about the miraculous production of Christ’s human nature rather than a claim about his divine status. I thought I had made this point clearly in the book,<sup>17</sup> but let me try again. Here is the ancient belief: God ensures the birth of Christ as divine by supplying through the Holy Spirit the divine life principle that enables the human substance supplied by Mary to be born as the God-man (Miracle One). Here is the modern version, that of Crisp and others: God through the Holy Spirit generates Christ’s fully human nature by supplementing the human elements supplied by Mary with a substitute for the necessary male input, thereby enabling what she conceives to be God incarnate (Miracle Two). These are simply not the same miracle that has two biological explanations. They are two different understandings of the significance of a virgin birth that entail two different miracles—the first in which God supplies the divine life principle and the second, only imaginable in this way because of contemporary biological knowledge, in which God (also) supplies what is necessary for Jesus’s full humanity. Only the first was what was believed by some early Christians in the branch of patristic tradition that led to the formulation of the creed. For them, the miracle of the virginal conception underlined Jesus’s unique relationship to the divine. That he was born of a woman already established his relationship to humanity.

In case anyone doubts my account and whether Crisp could be mistaken, I shall underline it in two ways. In the book, I showed—what would be uncontroversial for biblical scholars who see the gospel genre as that of ancient biography—that the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke correspond very closely to what one finds about the birth and early life of other subjects. In such ancient biographies, births in which a deity substituted for the involvement of a human male functioned as ways of indicating the greatness of the individuals and attributing to them divine origin. The role of the virgin in Matthew and Luke is not to indicate that God was necessary in the generating of Jesus’s humanity but to emphasize that what she conceived was related to the divine as “God with us” (Matthew) or “Son of God” (Luke).<sup>18</sup>

Later Christians who believed in a virginal conception were also very clear that its significance was not the

12. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 160.

13. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 161 and n. 14.

14. On this, see further Lincoln, *Born of a Virgin?*, 253–65, and “How Babies Were Made in Jesus’ Time,” *BAR* 40.6 (2014): 42–49.

15. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 162.

16. E.g., Treier, “Virgin Territory?” who simply assumes this revisionist interpretation of the virgin birth.

17. See esp. Lincoln, *Born of a Virgin?*, 258–63.

18. For a fine analysis of the assumptions shared by Plutarch in regard to Plato’s conception and Luke in regard to Jesus’s, see M. David Litwa, *Jesus Deus: The Early Christian Depiction of Jesus as a Mediterranean God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 37–67, emphasizing that divine generation was “part of a larger pattern of attributing divinity to someone in Mediterranean culture,” where “typically it was works not birth that proved deity,” and therefore divine conception “was viewed as secondary, as something typically *read back* into the lives of great men.” Though “secondary to divine works, it was not for this reason insignificant. . . . Only the greatest men and philosophers received such an honor” of being ascribed divine status (65–66).



generation of Jesus's human nature but the marking of his divine origin and nature. As the earliest of these, Ignatius, expressed this in Eph. 7, the one Physician was "both made and not made . . . both of Mary and of God."<sup>19</sup> Christ's created human nature was from Mary, and from God came his uncreated divine nature. Simply being born from a human mother guaranteed Christ's full humanity. The assumptions about Christ's divine conception from Mary are spelled out at Chalcedon. Pope Leo's letter introducing the Chalcedonian Definition states that Christ is "God, by the fact that all things were made through him, and nothing was made without him, man, by the fact that he was made of a woman, made under the law. The birth of flesh reveals human nature; birth from a virgin is a proof of divine power . . . For it is from us that he gets a humanity which is less than the Father; it is from the Father that he gets a divinity which is equal to the Father."<sup>20</sup>

The Definition itself asserts that Christ is "begotten before the ages from the Father as regards his divinity, and in the last days the same for us and for our salvation from Mary, the virgin God-bearer as regards his humanity; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, acknowledged in two natures which undergo no confusion, no change, no division, no separation."<sup>21</sup> For those for whom Chalcedon's categories constitute christological orthodoxy, it could not be clearer that the incarnate Word has his humanity through Mary and his divinity from the Father, and that to claim that the divine was needed to supplement what Mary supplied for the generation of his humanity is to fall into the heresy of mixing or confusing the two natures.

Sometime after this, the Athanasian Creed also spells out the same assumptions within which belief in the virgin birth functioned. "He is God from the Father's substance, begotten before time; and He is man from His mother's substance, born in time. . . . He is one, however, not by the transformation of His divinity into flesh, but by the taking up of His humanity into God; one certainly not by confusion of substance, but by oneness of person."<sup>22</sup> Christ's humanity that is taken up into God is a full humanity because of his mother's substance, not a partial humanity that needed to be supplemented by God supplying what was missing. One could, of course, make this point from far more sources, but what has already been observed should be enough to indicate that Crisp is working with neither a traditional nor an orthodox definition of the virginal conception and its significance.

In one sense the discussion need go no further because Crisp has already unwittingly conceded one of the most substantial aspects of the case made in my book. Our contemporary biological understanding creates devastating problems for belief in the traditional account of the virgin birth. Crisp's attempt to set out the traditional doctrine already assumes this modern biological dilemma and therefore has had to change the nature of the miracle from that which the tradition held it to be. Nevertheless, it is worth noting the two reasons he gives for why his own revisionist account should be believed. First, his revised definition of the TVB is to be accepted because the latter is a doctrine that is also dogma and therefore part of the conceptual core of the faith. He concedes that it is theoretically possible for a dogma not to be part of the core of the faith but, even if that were to be the case, asserts that the TVB is still part of the confessional deposit of the church catholic and therefore should not be discarded.<sup>23</sup> What remains surprising about this reasoning is its failure to allow any significant difference in their dogmatic status between the incarnation and the virgin birth as a narrative expression of a belief in incarnation and to allow that both the force and understanding of confessional statements inevitably change over time. If dogmas are confessional statements, then, even as part of official church teaching, there remains a provisionality about them. It is part of the task of theology in the life of the church to continue to assess their adequacy in regard to summarising Scripture's witness, their coherence in relation to the central message of the Christian gospel and their relation to the present state of human knowledge and to judge whether they need to be reinterpreted or rearticulated. Crisp will have none of this and so, secondly, his definition of the TVB is to be affirmed simply because this dogma is "in point of fact" how the incarnation happened and is a fitting sign of the generation of Christ's human nature.<sup>24</sup> This ignores the complexity of talk about facts in both present-day and ancient historiography, especially in relation to ancient birth narratives.<sup>25</sup> It is also doubly ironic. We have already indicated that, on its own Chalcedonian assumptions, Crisp's revised version of the virginal conception is entirely theologically unfitting because it has God supplying a missing element of Jesus's humanity, but now his own statement of why it is fitting ignores this and actually points to what was its origin and function for its first adherents—"It is a

19. The accurate translation of the Greek text, as found in, e.g., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1887). Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 157, begins his chapter with an epigraph that is a paraphrasing poetic version of this reference and obscures this basic point.

20. See Papal Encyclicals Online, Council of Chalcedon—451 A.D., <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/Councils/ecum04.htm>.

21. See Papal Encyclicals Online, Council of Chalcedon—451 A.D., <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/Councils/ecum04.htm>.

22. J. N. D. Kelly, *The Athanasian Creed* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 17–20.

23. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 163.

24. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 162–63.

25. Lincoln, *Born of a Virgin?*, 243–49.

sign that indicates this particular individual is marked out in the purposes of God (as happened in a similar fashion with John the Baptist and other Old Testament characters like Isaac)”!<sup>26</sup> Of course, in the case of these characters there is no hint of the male seed being replaced when they were conceived. The closer similarity is with the political and philosophical figures in ancient biographies in whose conception the human male is not involved in order to mark out their special connection with the divine.

### **Crisp’s Critique of My No-Virgin-Birth Account of the Incarnation**

After his revisionist definition of the virgin birth, Crisp next turns to a depiction of my treatment of the New Testament materials. Here he chooses not to spend time on details of my account of their diversity but is content to register his lack of willingness to go along with the contention that the birth narratives and the early confessional statement about Jesus as the seed of David contain two different views about Jesus’s conception. Instead Crisp wishes to insist on taking the birth accounts of ancient biographies as literal historical descriptions but statements that connect Jesus with male seed as non-literal or metaphorical. He appears to think that I treat the no-virgin birth (NVB) material in the New Testament as a doctrine (“this NVB doctrine”) and that it is limited to Christ’s human nature being “generated via the sexual union of Joseph and Mary.”<sup>27</sup> He recognizes that another view is discussed but describes this as the story of Panthera, in regard to which I find the story of Jesus as the biological son of Joseph a more likely explanation. What has not been grasped here is that one element in the *canonical* diversity is material that suggests Jesus was conceived illegitimately—Mark 6:3 and, on one reading of it, the Matthean birth narrative. This is not the Panthera story, which was a later Jewish polemical version of the illegitimacy tradition reflected in Mark 6. This misreading appears to be part of a bigger failure to grasp the clear distinction in my treatment between discussion of canonical accounts and the attempt to provide the best historical explanation for the diversity of these accounts.<sup>28</sup> On my view, the latter attempt will always be in terms of probabilities and carries a quite different weight in theological interpretation than the former. In other words, a major element of my case is simply demonstrating diversity about the conception of Jesus within the New Testament. Once this is recognized, historical investigation of the relation among the traditions and which is likely to be earliest becomes and remains important but its conclusions will be in terms of probabilities and are not to be thought of as doctrine. The doctrine is incarnation—God became human, the Word took on flesh—not any historical explanation of how it came about. In fact, if I were to rewrite any part of the book, it would be the chapter on historical investigation behind the texts, since I am now inclined to see that the illegitimacy tradition may well lay claim to being a better historical explanation.<sup>29</sup> But the point is that all that is needed for this aspect of my theological proposal is not agreement with the details of the historical explanation but simply openness to see that within the canon there are virginal conception accounts, discussion of Jesus as the seed of David through Joseph, and material about Jesus’s illegitimacy.

This brief section of Crisp’s chapter is enough to reveal that the way we read the New Testament texts plays a major role in the differences in our theological interpretation. I do not need to rehearse in response any of the detailed discussion of that material in over half my book that is integral to its later theological exploration.<sup>30</sup> Since Crisp reserves his main criticisms of my interpretation to what he deems to be six key areas of its theological upshot, this aspect of interpretation will of necessity constitute the bulk of this essay and expose the differences in the type of theological reflection we bring to the task. I shall respond to these criticisms in the order in which he lists them and employ his headings.

26. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 163.

27. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 164.

28. Chapter 6 of *Born of a Virgin?*, 125–67, is devoted to the latter task. Treier, “Virgin Territory?,” 375, also fails to grasp this distinction when he thinks that my claim about the diversity of the New Testament material “rests on a certain tradition-historical approach.” Tradition-historical judgments are involved in discussing the history behind the texts, but the diversity is at the *canonical* level.

29. See the strong arguments for this explanation in David R. Catchpole, “Born of a Virgin? The Conversation Continues,” in McConville and Pietersen, *Conception, Reception, and the Spirit*, 157–72.

30. Lincoln, *Born of a Virgin?*, 21–167. That discussion assumes and interacts with the sort of work on the infancy narratives as Scripture of a scholar such as Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1998). In Brown’s accessible popular treatment, *An Adult Christ at Christmas* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1978), “adult” signals both an ability to treat the narratives critically and to recognize that they are more about proclaiming the adult Christ of resurrection faith than providing a straightforward depiction of the baby Jesus of history.

## *The Question of the Genre and History of the Birth Narratives*

This is surely only a theological problem for those, such as Crisp, who think that scriptural authority entails the factual inerrancy of biblical narratives. Showing that Matthew's and Luke's birth narratives, like other ancient biographies, contain legendary content designed to illustrate the significance attached to their subjects' later lives, is perfectly compatible with the view of Scripture whereby its documents are witnesses to divine revelation in the linguistic and literary conventions of their writers' times. It is strange, then, that Crisp complains that Lincoln "does not provide the reader with a clear account of how his treatment of the text is consistent with a view of it as Scripture."<sup>31</sup> Crisp may not agree with the account, but I do provide precisely what he asks for in an extended section entitled "Scriptural truth and critical/post-critical reading."<sup>32</sup> I think that discussion is clear, but Crisp provides a mistaken account of it in which he attributes to me the views of J. G. Machen, which I am describing and critiquing.<sup>33</sup> It should be evident that the view that "No ground can be given to those who maintain that, whether the account is reliable history or not, it still would be expressing a truth about Christ" is the opposite of my own and part of my depiction of Machen's. On the basis of this misreading, he says of my argument, "it is difficult to resist the conclusion that he is speaking out of both sides of his mouth on this matter."<sup>34</sup> A more careful analysis would have prevented him from reaching any such uncharitable conclusion.

Crisp's further point under this heading involves the application of analytical tools to the wrong sort of material. To my proposal that Luke's writings, like those of some other ancient biographers, contain two different accounts of Jesus's conception, he retorts, "Unless Lincoln thinks that ancient writers had no problem with denying the law of the excluded middle, according to which either a proposition is true or its negation is true, then it is difficult to see how his claim can be an accurate account of the biblical material."<sup>35</sup> My book contains the evidence that ancient writers could include contradictory narratives of a subject's birth and that what might be a problem for analytic philosophy in regard to propositions was not one for ancient biographers in regard to storytelling.<sup>36</sup> But, again, my case does not depend on any particular part of the analysis of Luke but rather on the broader point about genre, namely that the birth narratives conform to the same sort of conventions about the origins of great figures found in ancient biography with its mix of tradition and legendary material.

Crisp's further strange comment at the end of this section should not go unremarked. He thinks it unlikely that the early church failed to see that there are traces of an NVB account in Luke or elsewhere in the New Testament and that this is "certainly less likely than the prospect that after two thousand years of church history, Lincoln has uncovered what so many before him have missed."<sup>37</sup> Presumably, he means that my actual uncovering of what everyone else has missed is even less likely? But, as I showed in ch. 7 of the book, not only did the diverse accounts continue to be held but also some in the early church recognized the diversity in the tradition, as their attempts to harmonize it clearly reveal. And, of course, over the last two hundred years of church history, many scholars before me have pointed out the phenomena that I have attempted to draw together.

## *Whether the Virgin Birth is a Necessary Means for Incarnation*

Here Crisp concedes, at least theoretically, a distinction in status between what he calls the doctrine of the VB and the doctrine of the incarnation and agrees with me that the latter does not require the former, which, for him, is fitting but not necessary. One would think that his recognition that the virgin birth is not necessary for incarnation might be an important one. This distinction, however, plays no part at all in the discussion, because for him both continue to have equal status as dogmas. However, he goes on, "But since all sides can agree that a virgin birth is not necessary for the incarnation, it is not clear what (if any) advantage this line of reasoning gives him."<sup>38</sup> Crisp may take this view that the virgin birth is not necessary for incarnation, but I can assure him that there are many defenders of the so-called TVB

31. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 166 and again on 167–68 n. 30.

32. Lincoln, *Born of a Virgin?*, 240–52.

33. Lincoln, *Born of a Virgin?*, 245–46.

34. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 167.

35. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 167.

36. The presence of contradictory materials in Luke is a well-known phenomenon. For a positive assessment of the role of some of the contradictory voices, see Raj Nadella, *Dialogue Not Dogma: Many Voices in the Gospel of Luke* (London: T&T Clark, 2011).

37. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 167.

38. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 168

who do not agree with him at this point, and I have cited some of them in the book. He does not appreciate that persuading those less enlightened than himself to think through this matter therefore constituted an important part of my task. For those who have come to realize that there is a problem in maintaining the VB in the light of contemporary biology and who see the issues brought up by a critical study of the New Testament, it becomes very important indeed to know that rethinking these matters need not require giving up on a belief in the incarnation.

### ***Problems with the Metaphysical Assumptions Underpinning the Traditional Doctrine***

Crisp again agrees with me that there are a number of different ways of thinking about the metaphysics of the incarnation that can be considered relatively adequate. What concerns him, however, about my discussion is “that he seems to be unaware that his comments betray a rather superficial understanding of the TVB, as well as a rather odd view about the metaphysics of human persons. This is all the more surprising given the fact that a stated aim of Lincoln’s project is to take account of the theological as well as historical issues pertaining to the TVB.”<sup>39</sup> The superficial understanding here appears to be that of Crisp in relation to my actual argument. He fails to recognize that I have already listed some of the problems many contemporary theologians have with Chalcedon’s language of persons and natures before stating that what is needed is an approach that “without necessarily being restricted to its particular categories and formulations, follows Chalcedon’s attempt to safeguard the mystery of Christ being both fully human and fully divine.”<sup>40</sup> Refusing to concede that Chalcedon’s talk of persons and natures contains problematic assumptions for contemporary thinking, Crisp judges as unorthodox and implying Nestorianism my contention that, whatever else needs to be said of him, it makes little sense to present-day students not to treat Jesus of Nazareth as a human person. He makes this judgment because for him the only claim consistent with orthodoxy is that Christ is “a divine person with a human nature.”<sup>41</sup> But that simply begs the whole question under discussion—whether Chalcedon’s actual categories constitute the only criteria for evaluating the orthodoxy of a contemporary Christology.

Having made this hasty judgment, Crisp then backs off and appears to realize that my discussion does not so much indicate “a rather cloudy understanding of the two natures doctrine of Chalcedonian Christology” as thinking that “the two natures doctrine is numbered among the ‘problematic ancient assumptions.’”<sup>42</sup> He now also concedes that, rather than having a superficial understanding, I belong among “numerous modern theologians who are suspicious of the two natures doctrine or even reject it.” If this realization had dawned on him earlier in this section of his argument, it would have saved him from a premature and faulty evaluation of my discussion. Having come to this realization, Crisp does not seem to know what to do with it. “But it is difficult to know how to argue against Lincoln’s position at this point, because it seems to depend largely on a preference for a different way of approaching the incarnation—including not just the virgin birth but also the two natures doctrine of classical Christology, along with its language of substance, nature, and persons, and the traditional metaphysical assumptions that lie behind these concepts.” Indeed! He can only conclude, rather lamely, “Labeling some undesirable theological notion a ‘problematic ancient assumption,’ provides those with a stake in these matters no reason to abandon the assumptions in question.”<sup>43</sup> But the function of my discussion is not so much to persuade someone to give up a classical Chalcedonian Christology, if they have found satisfactory ways of overcoming its metaphysical problems, as to indicate to those who are rethinking the virginal conception the christological issues entailed and to suggest there may be better ways of addressing these than preserving strict traditional “one person, two natures” categories.

Any glimpses of understanding the nature of my argument are lost by the time that Crisp sums up this point. There he claims that it “trades on what might charitably be termed an underdeveloped grasp of the metaphysics of the incarnation, coupled with a sympathy for the sort of classical liberal Christology set forth by the likes of Schleiermacher” with his view that Christ was simply more “God-conscious” than other humans.<sup>44</sup> I remain baffled by this less than charitable accusation. I make very clear in the book that the chapter on Schleiermacher is not an endorsement of his Christology but that his work provides an excellent illustration of how and why the virgin birth became a problem for a biblical and theological scholar after the enlightenment.<sup>45</sup> My own later discussion of how a virgin birth impinges on Christology is quite different in its solution to that of Schleiermacher and I am sure theologians

39. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 169.

40. Lincoln, *Born of a Virgin?*, 274.

41. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 169.

42. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 169.

43. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 170.

44. *Analyzing Doctrine*, 175 and n. 51.

45. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 169 n. 36 appeared to have understood the latter point.



of the likes of Gunton, Lash, and Tanner from whose work my discussion benefited would be equally surprised to have been labeled as too sympathetic to classical liberalism.

### ***The Question of Biological Continuity with Humanity***

Here Crisp attempts to defend his view that, although according to his version of the TVB, God has to supply the necessary Y chromosome, Jesus could still be considered in solidarity with the rest of humanity because the genetic material supplied by his mother would be sufficient to meet the threshold condition for being considered human. Crisp's view here falls somewhere between the actual TVB and its modern revision. Whereas the ancient view held that Mary fully supplied what was necessary for Jesus's humanity, Crisp's suggestion that, though not fully sufficient, Mary's genes might provide some sort of threshold presupposes modern genetic biology. He then makes a further argument for his revisionist version of the TVB, "[I]n the case of the TVB threshold condition, both the Virgin's ovum and the missing genetic material supplied by miracle are ultimately the product of the same divine agent." So now the argument is that both parts of Jesus's humanity, including the Y chromosome, have been supplied by God, though by different means, and this is the God who is responsible for the creation of humanity in the first place.<sup>46</sup> There is no dispute that on the basis of the presuppositions of Crisp's revisionist version of a miracle that supplies missing genes, the result could still be human. But if ultimate creation by God is sufficient to determine humanity, why does Crisp need a threshold argument for Mary's contribution at all? That argument only comes into play once the presuppositions of the original TVB have been abandoned. Even on his revisionist version, however, my original objection holds.<sup>47</sup> The resulting human product cannot be said to be either *in solidarity* or *in continuity* with the rest of the human race, because unlike all humans who had preceded him, this one had bypassed the normal evolutionary processes of coming into being and required a special interventionist creation in which God treats male DNA differently from female and produces it separately.

### ***The Changing Function of a Virginal Conception—From Underlining to Undermining the Doctrine of the Incarnation***

Here Crisp basically repeats his argument about the threshold condition, and again his failure to see his own view as a revisionist account of the virginal conception hampers his analysis of my case. He thinks that I suggest the TVB was a problem for Chalcedon because it "introduced a confusion of humanity and divinity—the very thing the council wished to avoid."<sup>48</sup> Of course, this was no problem at all for Chalcedon,<sup>49</sup> precisely because Chalcedon, as we have seen, did not share Crisp's view that the TVB involved God supplying something missing in Christ's humanity. It is Crisp's revisionist account of the TVB that would fall foul of Chalcedon's stipulations. Again Crisp slips back into his earlier assumption that I would, with him, simply accept Chalcedonian categories as the norm and, on that basis, judges that I must be confused when I talk of the incarnate Word as one subject because that, according to Crisp, must entail the two-natures doctrine. This is not, however, the case. Any formulation of how the incarnate Christ is both human and divine (even those formulations that do not do so in terms of natures) needs to insist that we are talking about one subject or agent. Of less significance is Crisp's worry that my talk of the Word's choosing to be identified with Jesus's human life is not consistent with Chalcedon's two-natures doctrine because it might imply that the Second Person of the Trinity merely approved or endorsed Jesus's life. Again, this forgets that I am not concerned to stay strictly with Chalcedonian two-natures usage and does not realize that "identifying with" is much stronger than "giving approval to." More importantly, this quibble ignores the earlier part of my discussion that places identification language within the context of assumption language or the equivalent of the hypostatic union, affirming that Jesus's "entire being is assumed by and subsists in the Word, the Second Person of the Trinity."<sup>50</sup>

### ***"Critical Loyalty" to the Church's Creedal Tradition***

Surprisingly, Crisp finds "perhaps the most contentious" part of my case to be the suggestion that, in saying the creed, one can affirm what the language of "born of the virgin Mary" was meant to convey, namely, that Christ was fully human, without having to believe that literally no human male was involved in the conception. My suggestion, of course, reflects a stance that has been endorsed by several reports of the Church of England's Doctrine Commission

46. Treier, "Virgin Territory?," 375 employs a similar argument.

47. Lincoln, *Born of a Virgin?*, e.g., 260–61.

48. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 172.

49. As already pointed out in *Born of a Virgin?*, 280.

50. Earlier cited by Crisp himself (172) from *Born of a Virgin?*, 280.

that go back to 1938.<sup>51</sup> This is not a matter of picking and choosing which parts of the Nicene Creed to believe, as Crisp misrepresents my view, but of reinterpreting its creedal statements for a new context in continuity with its original thrust. Instead, however, Crisp thinks that the purpose of the creeds is precisely to ensure that Christians believe the very same thing, do not have a mistaken view, and hold to the right form of doctrine.<sup>52</sup> This is surely a purpose that is impossible to achieve. Creedal statements are not timeless or immutable. They came about in a particular culture and language and are received in another particular culture and language, so that, even when the same terms in translation are used by later confessors, there can be no guarantee that their significance is the same as it was for their original formulators. Crisp is prepared to recognize that to some extent political and power issues surrounded creedal Crisp, formulations but, rightly, thinks that these need not say anything about their truth value.<sup>53</sup> What he does not wish to recognize is that their formulations are culturally contingent, their language and concepts historically conditioned, and that this affects how they are understood. Are present day reciters of the Nicene Creed not allowed to take other statements about Christ coming down from heaven or ascending into heaven in a non-literal fashion and see them as employing ancient cosmological mythology to express belief in incarnation and being raised into the life of God? Or what about the statement in the Apostles' Creed that, despite some modern versions, has Christ descending into hell? Taken straightforwardly, this is an historical event in a universe that has a spatial hell. If, as Crisp holds, creeds are there to make sure we believe the same thing, then what of the person who does not believe in a three-storey universe into whose lowest part Christ actually descended? Is this person barred from saying the creed because any reinterpretation given to this ancient formulation would be disingenuous? Even if, inconsistently, Crisp allows, as most recent Christians have held, that this creedal statement is to be taken metaphorically, then is it indicating that Christ in his death identified with the most extreme of human suffering or that Christ's death signifies a proclamation of victory over all hostile powers or one of the other explanations offered in the theological tradition? This creedal article appears incapable of ensuring that all its reciters mean the same thing, but that should not be considered a bar to those within the whole spectrum of views on its force making their confession with integrity.

But Crisp is not happy with such a sentiment and considers the criteria I suggest for discerning the viability of reinterpreting doctrines or creedal statements far too vague, wanting me instead to set out definite conditions that would enable us "to decide the right way to understand" a doctrine.<sup>54</sup> There are, of course, no infallible criteria for judging whether and how a tradition needs a new articulation of a particular belief, and this is not the way the consensus of the faithful operates in such matters. I do think, however, that the criteria I propose, borrowed with acknowledgment from the late Colin Gunton,<sup>55</sup> are sufficient to enable a judgment about which is the *better* or more coherent view of the virginal conception. The argument of the book about critical loyalty to the creed is not interested in ruling out understandings of "born of a virgin" other than the one I propose but in indicating something of the range of views that can be included and still count as a valid articulation of the creed's view that Christ is both God and human.

## A Continuing Conversation?

The end of Crisp's chapter returns to his charge that throughout my book I am too concerned about anachronism, claiming that I seem "motivated by worries that the virgin birth is a kind of theological embarrassment we could do without," and that this is itself an anachronism because if the biblical writers and patristic theologians "felt no such embarrassment, why should theologians today?"<sup>56</sup> This reveals a continued failure to grasp one of the major points in my book. In it I showed precisely why those biblical writers and theologians of the patristic period who espoused a virginal conception felt no embarrassment about it and why, with our very different notions of biology and procreation, it now has that potential for us. Even if, because of his revisionist version of the TVB, Crisp disagrees with this, he ought to be able to see that his parting shot completely misses its target.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, distinguishing between now and then is often crucial for the task of theology, and being a little more aware of anachronism might have helped Crisp to see that his revisionist account is by no means the traditional view of the virginal conception.

51. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 174 n. 50, believes these reports do not sit well with article 2 of the Articles of Religion. Referring us back to this article at least has the merit of reminding us that Crisp's version of the virginal conception is already a modernist revision. Article 2 is clear that the Son who is divine took human nature from the Virgin Mary's womb and this human nature was her substance. The Word's substance was divine and it became joined together with Mary's substance, the human. Nowhere is there or could there have been any notion that the divine helped to supply the humanity that was somehow lacking because there was no male input!

52. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 174.

53. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 175.

54. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 175.

55. See Lincoln, *Born of a Virgin?*, 295–96.

56. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 178.

Clearly Crisp and I are frequently talking past each other. A major factor in this situation is our different views of the historical conditionedness of Scripture and dogma and how this affects interpretation of their contents, the nature of their authority, and, therefore, their role in a constructive contemporary theology. My approach to theological interpretation of Scripture seeks to maintain a focus on what the texts say about the triune God in relation to the church and the world, taking into account the nature of theological language and its expressions in particular times and settings, while reading such texts critically in the light of their literary, historical, and theological dimensions. It conceives of the nature of biblical texts as both God's Word and fully human documents where these two attributes are not in competition. Despite recognizing that progress in discussion of this and other topics should involve "a dialogical and collaborative attempt" to bring together the disciplines of biblical studies and theology,<sup>58</sup> Crisp has not really adapted his views at all in interaction with my discussion. His presuppositions appear to allow no room for acknowledging the implications of genre criticism, historical investigation, and diversity within the canon. They allow no room for a hermeneutical move in regard to creedal statements, such that "born of a virgin" is seen as subordinate to "became man," and the former is affirmed not as a straightforward historical description but, in accord with its original force, as a means of stressing that this subject whose full humanity was taken for granted had a divine origin. This puts further conversation under such constraints as to make what he calls "constructive progress"<sup>59</sup> highly unlikely.

There is no escaping that the result of biblical scholars and theologians hoping to cooperate in interpreting Scripture theologically will depend on the type of biblical scholar and the type of theologian involved. Crisp does acknowledge that there are other systematic theologians who would concur with my christological proposals.<sup>60</sup> He, however, is a distinctive type of theologian, an analytic theologian on whose agenda the historical and cultural situatedness of Scripture and creed does not feature prominently. If analyzing one's differences is an important part of conversation, then perhaps this exchange counts as continuing the conversation. The conversation of which my book was intended to be a part did not, however, have Crisp in view as the main party I hoped to either help or persuade. I had in view primarily those who had enough knowledge of critical studies of the New Testament to recognize that there were serious questions about how to interpret the birth narratives and those who had begun to sense that there were issues around how belief in a virgin birth impinged on Christ's full humanity. For these and other potential readers continuing this part of the overall conversation may have been worthwhile, if only to indicate that any suggestion that Crisp's discussion had now dealt with *Born of a Virgin?* so that the latter could be safely ignored is certainly ungrounded. On the contrary, the nature and scope of its arguments still need, I believe, to be explored and engaged in their own right.

57. The concluding rhetoric in Treier, "Virgin Territory?," 379 similarly misses its target. He asserts, "The theological question Lincoln never asks on his postcritical quest . . . is whether or why God would have allowed the entirety of Christendom to get fundamentally off track on a vital doctrine for almost two thousand years (and counting)." This theological question does not arise because the book does not suggest that Christendom has got a vital doctrine completely wrong. It distinguishes between the vital doctrine, the incarnation of Christ, and one of the modes of its articulation, the virginal conception, and its point of view is that for much of its history, Christendom did not get fundamentally off track because a virginal conception was understood as actually upholding Christ's full humanity over against a docetic Christology. It is only in the light of more recent biological knowledge that the church's understanding of the creedal statement about the virgin Mary needs reinterpretation if it is not to be in danger of being led off track in regard to the vital doctrine of Christ's incarnation.

58. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 176–77.

59. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 176.

60. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 169–70 n. 36.

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