Andrew T. Lincoln

Born of a Virgin? Reconceiving Jesus in the Bible, Tradition, and Theology


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Andrew Lincoln wrote Born of a Virgin? because he finds that many scholars and churchgoers come from entrenched positions about the topic of “virgin birth.” He finds this impasse an impediment to meaningful discussion in the academy and church, as well as detrimental to the growth of individual Christians and the teaching ministry of the church (12). On the one hand, some insist that literal belief in the virgin birth of Jesus is a requirement for Christian faith. On the other hand, others think that modern knowledge of genetics must nullify such beliefs. Somewhere in the middle are people who want to take seriously the biblical witness and creedal statements of the church, while at the same time consider thoughtfully alternative biblical and historical witnesses, as well as modern scientific evidence. Lincoln counts himself among this middle group, which includes what he describes as intelligent, rational Christians. This book is Lincoln’s attempt to address issues of the virgin birth for scholars, teachers, students, and lay people who are weary of the impasse and who experience unreasonable ecclesial or academic pressures to take a stand, when there is, in fact, room for discussion and new insight (see interview with the author: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etxQOmUiWus).
In chapter 1 Lincoln explains his intention to honor both critical and creedal approaches to the topic of the virgin birth. He proposes a “postcritical” treatment that builds on scholarly criticism and appropriates it in a “fresh way” (17).

Chapter 2 is a study of the New Testament evidence that proves that not all the canonical witnesses affirmed or even considered a virgin birth for Jesus. Among the earliest is the apostle Paul, who does not seem to know a tradition that Jesus’s origin took the form of a miraculous conception. For example, Lincoln points out that Rom 1:3-4 states that Jesus is of the “seed of David, according to the flesh” (suggesting Joseph’s contribution to conception; see also Acts 2:30), and that Jesus was “designated the Son of God” through the Spirit. The Gospel of Mark also appears to have no knowledge of a miraculous birth, and the Gospel of John describes Jesus’s divine origins in a manner that omits a virginal conception.

In chapter 3 Lincoln questions why the virgin birth has become so prominent an issue for the church, given that the resurrection is by far the more important witness about the purpose and nature of Jesus as the Christ. Lincoln argues that the first followers of Jesus came to faith postresurrection, so that any speculation about Jesus’s origins would have been an outgrowth of this Easter faith. The Gospel of Matthew, for example, probably did not include the virgin birth narrative as a means of converting people; rather, Matthew was interpreting Jewish Scriptures such as Isa 7:14 to “draw out Christ’s significance” for readers who already believed Jesus was the Messiah (49). Matthew quotes from Jewish Scriptures not so much to persuade readers that Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecy but to “give expression to the confession that he and his readers share” (44). Thus, the virgin birth is an expression but not a requirement of faith.

Lincoln details how Matthew and Luke both employ Greco-Roman biography as a model for Jesus’s birth. Thus, the Gospel birth narratives “provide features that would be expected of an ancient biography’s depiction of the beginnings of the life of a great figure,” including omens (such as the star and the angels) and the genealogies (62). Modern Christians need not take the “virgin birth” as historical or literally true to find truth and meaning about the significance of the risen Christ in these texts.

Lincoln provides a historical context for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke in chapters 4 and 5, where he explores what the earliest hearers might have understood by a “virgin birth” and how our modern expectations of history and biography have changed from ancient times, thus distorting our understanding of these texts. Lincoln draws on a variety of ancient sources, including Jewish Scriptures, pseudepigrapha, New Testament apocrypha, early rabbinic writings, and Greco-Roman literature, to explain how the early church might have understood the concept of virgin birth and how the first Christians
regarded its relative importance to the kerygma. For example, in his examination of the Matthean birth narrative, Lincoln turns to extrabiblical contexts such as the divine men from Greco-Roman literature and the interpretations of Philo, who claimed that Sarah, Leah, Rebekah, and Zipporah conceived by God’s direct intervention. Lincoln concludes from these comparisons that the Matthean birth narrative is not so much about virgin birth per se as it is about God’s fulfillment of God’s promise to Israel (98).

Lincoln turns to historical questions in chapter 6 to try to ascertain from where the Gospels of Matthew and Luke received their virgin birth tradition and if they did so independently. After examining a myriad of ancient sources, he concludes that the earliest traditions were Jewish and concerned Joseph’s paternity. Thus, even though several other strands of tradition contributed to the Matthew and Luke’s narratives, it is reasonable to posit that the tradition always included the possibility that Jesus was Joseph’s biological son.

In chapter 7 Lincoln traces the importance of the virgin birth through the writings of church fathers and New Testament apocrypha to the Council of Chalcedon. Augustine’s theology of “original sin,” affirmations of Christ’s sinlessness, and debates about Christ’s divine and human natures were issues that brought the importance of his conception to prominence. As the church became less flexible and more concerned about continuity of tradition, belief in virgin birth became the norm, while other possibilities diminished.

Chapter 8 jumps to the early nineteenth century, in the wake of the Enlightenment, to explore the work of pastor and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher as a model for modern applications of reason to religious dialogue, how the church continues to integrate faith and criticism. In chapter 9 Lincoln applies this model of reason to religious insight by contrasting ancient and modern understandings of conception. The ancients perceived the woman’s contribution as a mass of flesh and blood and the male’s contribution as the animating life force. Therefore, the ancients were not constrained by modern knowledge of X and Y chromosomes but readily could imagine conception as God’s spirit providing the spark of life. Lincoln finds an irony in the fact that a form of Docetism persists today, because our modern understanding of conception and misunderstanding of the birth narratives’ historical contexts cause people to question Jesus’s humanity.

The concluding chapter summarizes and reiterates the author’s position that “[t]here is no reason to think that a non-historical perspective on the virgin birth leads to a non-incarnational Christology” (275). Lincoln suggests several avenues of discussion in the church and academy, including the diversity of the New Testament witnesses and modern theologies of embodiment. Lincoln also advises that virgin birth is not necessary
to the claim that Jesus was without sin. Rather, Christians can find meaning in the fact that Jesus struggled against sin and yet lived a fully authentic life, transparent to God, which was not preconditioned by a miraculous birth. Lincoln asserts that the ongoing life of the church must involve a “living tradition” that need not be “monolithic” (291); therefore, the church should allow discussion and difference of interpretation. Taking a stance of “critical loyalty” to the tradition allows Christians openly to discuss the historical and theological contexts of their faith.

The depth of research and theological argumentation is this book’s strength as well as its weakness. The author discusses methods of interpretation and issues of biblical authority, and he tackles theological conundrums such as incarnation and the Trinity with excellence of scholarship and insight. Unfortunately, however, the book is not well suited for the pastors and lay persons who are among the author’s intended audience. Most busy pastors and lay people, no matter how capable and well educated they are, will not be inclined to wade through such a dense study as this.

Some minor points of criticism include the section on Schleiermacher, which is rather longer than necessary to make the author’s point, while a discussion of Reformation views was not included due to lack of room. Oddly, Lincoln is somewhat dismissive of the work of Jane Schaberg (The Illegitimacy of Jesus), who also discusses an ecclesial affirmation of a nonvirgin birth and whose conclusions largely support Lincoln’s; indeed, his treatment largely ignores contributions from feminist scholarship. These quibbles aside, the book is a thought-provoking and welcome study of the critical and theological issues surrounding the virgin birth of Jesus that will appeal primarily to scholars. One hopes that Lincoln’s findings will make their way into seminary classrooms and from there into the church.