

Miraculous Conceptions and Births
in Mediterranean Antiquity

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Two canonical gospels, Matthew and Luke, contain infancy narratives. Matthew's narrative compares Jesus with the traditions about Moses' early life (e.g., Magi speak of the birth of a Jewish king; the current ruler attempts to kill all the Jewish male babies; the key baby is saved so he can be the future savior of the people; there is a flight from or to Egypt; after the ruler's death there is a message to return from whence the child had fled). This typology (i.e., viewing the earlier material as the prototype or foreshadowing of the latter) functions as part of Matthew's Christology (Jesus is the new Moses of Deuteronomy 18:15–18), and it adds authority to what Jesus will say in five teaching sections (chaps. 5–7; 10; 13; 18; 24–25). Luke's material about the birth and early life of Jesus functions within the ancient genre of prophecies of future greatness. Prophecies, portents, and other material foreshadow the future greatness of the child.

The two infancy narratives share a tradition that says Jesus was miraculously conceived by the Spirit. According to Matthew 1:20, the angel says to Joseph: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Luke 1:34 has Mary ask the angel who has told her she will bear the Son of the Most High: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel answers in 1:35: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God."

The question to be asked is: How would the authorial audience have heard this material in Matthew and Luke? What cultural assumptions did auditors bring?

Ancient Mediterranean peoples did tell stories of miraculous conceptions and births. There were accounts, set in the mythic past, of individuals born to a divine mother and a human father, for example, Achilles (son of the divine Thetis and the human Peleus—*Iliad* 20.206–7; 24.59), Aeneas (son of Aphrodite and the mortal Anchises—*Iliad* 2.819–22; 5.247–48; see also the late first-century BCE

through early first-century CE Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 14.588), and Persephone (daughter of Demeter and Iasion—*Odyssey* 5.116–28).

In the *Iliad* 20.199–209, Aeneas and Achilles meet in battle. As custom dictated, they taunted one another before fighting:

Aeneas said: "Son of Peleus, do not try to frighten me with words, as if I were a child, since I too know how to taunt. We know each other's parents and lineage for we have heard the ancient stories. . . . They say that you [Achilles] are the son of Peleus and that your mother was Thetis, a daughter of the sea. I am the son of Anchises and my mother is Aphrodite."

Those believed to be the offspring of a god and a human mother included Asclepius (son of Apollo and the mortal Coronis—so the first-century BCE Diodorus of Sicily 4.71.1); Hercules (son of Zeus and the human Alcmene—*Iliad* 14.315–28; Diodorus of Sicily 4.9.1, 3); Dionysus (son of Zeus and Semele—*Iliad* 14.315–28); Perseus (son of Zeus and Danae—*Iliad* 14.315–28); Aristaeus (son of Apollo and Cyrene—Diodorus of Sicily 4.81.1–3); Romulus (son of Mars and the mortal Ilia, or Rhea, or Silvia—so the first-century BCE Cicero, *Republic* 1.41; 2.2; Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, "Romulus," 2.3–6).

Diodorus of Sicily 4.2.1–4 relates what the Greeks say about Dionysus. Cadmus was sent from Phoenicia to search for the maiden Europa. During his travels, in obedience to an oracle, he founded the city of Thebes and settled there. He married Harmonia and had a number of offspring, one of whom was Semele:

Now with Semele, because of her beauty, Zeus had intercourse, doing it without speaking. . . . Whereupon she asked him to treat her as he did Hera. Zeus, therefore, encountered her as a god with thunder and lightning, making himself manifest as they came together. Semele, who was pregnant, was not able to bear the god's power.

So she gave birth prematurely and was herself killed by the fire.

Zeus then had Hermes take the child to the Nymphs to raise. As a result of his upbringing, Dionysus discovered wine and taught humans how to cultivate the vines.

Diodorus of Sicily says: "Aristaeus was the son of Apollo and Cyrene, the daughter of Hypseus, son of Peneius" (4.81.1). According to myth, Apollo was attracted to a maiden named Cyrene. He carried her off to Libya, where he later founded a city named after her. In 4.81.2–3 Diodorus says:

Apollo begat of Cyrene a son, Aristaeus, in that land. He gave the baby to the Nymphs to raise. . . . The boy learned from the Nymphs how to make cheese, how to make beehives, and how to cultivate olives. He was the first to teach these things to humans. . . . those who received the benefits gave Aristaeus honors like those given to gods, as had been done for Dionysus.

The first-century BCE historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, tells of a vestal virgin, Ilia or Rhea (1.76.3–4), who went to a grove consecrated to

Mars to fetch pure water for use in the sacrifices and was "ravished by someone in the sacred area" (1.77.1):

Most relate a myth of the divinity of that place . . . whose appearance was much more marvelous than the size and beauty of humans. They say the ravisher . . . told her not to grieve. For the marriage had been with the divinity of that place. Out of her being ravished, she would give birth to two sons whose deeds would excel all others [i.e., Romulus and Remus]. (1.77.2)

Sometimes ancient authors would give two traditions: one miraculous and the other nonmiraculous. Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, "Romulus," from the end of the first to the beginning of the second century CE, offers an example. One story, according to Promathion in his history of Italy, runs:

Tarchetius, king of the Albans, . . . encountered a strange phantom at home. A phallus rising up out of the hearth remained for many days. An oracle of Tethys was in Tuscany. From it an interpretation of the phenomenon was brought to Tarchetius. A virgin should mate with the phantom. From her a son would be born who would have great valor, good fortune, and great strength. Tarchetius, therefore, told the prophecy to one of his daughters and instructed her to mate with the phantom. She resisted and sent a handmaid instead. . . . When the handmaid bore twins by the phantom, Tarchetius gave them to Teratius to destroy. He carried them to the riverside. There a she-wolf came to them and nursed them. Birds brought bits of food to them. A cowherd found the twins and took them home with him. In this way they were saved. (2.3–6)

In 3.1–3, Plutarch says the story that has the greatest credence is the one given by Diocles of Peparethus and Fabius Pictor. It focuses on a vestal virgin, Ilia, or Rhea, or Silvia who was found to be pregnant, contrary to the law for vestals. She was saved from death by the intercession of the king's daughter, Antho. The vestal virgin gave birth to two boys, large and beautiful. Plutarch (4.2) says it was the boys' mother who claimed that Mars was the father. It was said by others, however, that the girl was deceived into doing this by Amulius, who came to her dressed in armor.

Stories of miraculous conceptions and births were also told about rulers and philosophers in historical time. Among the philosophers, Pythagoras was said to be the offspring of Apollo and the human Pythais, the most beautiful of the Samians (Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras* 2); Plato was believed to have been the son of Apollo and Amphictione (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 3.1–2; 3.45); Apollonius of Tyana was thought to be the son of Proteus, a divinity of Egypt, or Zeus (Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 1.4.5–9; 1.6).

Diogenes Laertius, in the third century CE but citing early sources, says of Plato (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 3.1–2):

Plato was the son of Ariston and Perictione. . . . Speusippus in the work titled *Plato's Funeral Feast*, Clearchus in the *Encomium on Plato*, and Anaxilaides in the second book *Concerning Philosophers*, tell how at Athens there was a story . . . that Apollo appeared to Ariston in a dream; whereupon he did not touch Perictione until the child's birth.

The early third-century church father Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.37, offers a supplement to Laertius's account:

It is not absurd to employ Greek stories to talk with Greeks, to show we Christians are not the only people who use a miraculous story like this one [i.e., about Jesus's conception]. For some (Greeks) think it proper . . . to relate even of recent events that Plato was the son of Amphichione, while Arisicon was prevented from having sexual intercourse with his wife until she gave birth to the one sired by Apollo.

Philostratus, in his third-century CE *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, says of Apollonius (1.4.5-9):

To his mother, before his birth, came a divinity of Egypt, Proteus. . . . She was not frightened but asked him: "What will I bear?" He said: "Me!" She asked: "Who are you?" He said: "Proteus, the god of Egypt."

The narrator then explains that Proteus excelled in wisdom, knowing past and future. He promises that as the story progresses, Apollonius will be seen to excel even Proteus!

Among the rulers spoken of in terms of a miraculous conception and birth, Alexander the Great and Augustus Caesar stand out. At the end of the first or the beginning of the second century CE, Plutarch's "Alexander" contains this account:

Philip, after the vision [in a dream, he saw himself putting a lion-shaped seal on his wife's womb—2.4], sent Chawon of Megalopolis to Delphi. Chawon then brought Philip a word from the god [Apollo], telling him to sacrifice to Ammon and to reverence this god greatly. He also told Philip that he would lose his sight in the eye with which he had spied on the god, who in the form of a snake, had shared the bed of his wife. Also Olympias, as Eratosthenes says, when Alexander was sent upon his expedition, told him alone the secret about his begetting. She challenged him to be worthy of his origins. Others, however, say she rejected the idea and said: "Alexander must stop slandering me to Hera." (3.1-4)

In the second century CE, Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 13.4.1-2, has this to say about Alexander's origins:

Olympias, wife of Philip, sent a witty response to her son, Alexander, when he wrote to her: "King Alexander, son of Jupiter Hammon, to his mother Olympias, sends greeting."

Olympias responded in this manner: "Please, my son, be quiet, neither slandering nor accusing me before Juno. She will be vengeful toward me if you say in your letters that I am her husband's lover."

Gellius comments that in this way Olympias urged Alexander to give up the foolish idea he had formed from his incredible success, namely, that he was the son of Jupiter (13.4.3).

In the early second-century CE, Suetonius, *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, "Augustus," 94.4, wrote:

In the books of Asclepias of Mendes, Theologumena, I read: Atia came to the solemn service of Apollo in the middle of the night. Her litter was set down in the temple and she went to sleep. A snake crawled up to her, then went away. Upon awaking she purified herself as she would after sexual relations with her husband. There then appeared on her body a mark colored like a snake. She could not rid herself of it, so she stopped going to public baths. Augustus was born ten months after and therefore was thought to be the son of Apollo.

In most of these stories the liaisons between gods and humans involved sexual relations, either with the deity's identity known (as with Zeus and Semele [Diodorus of Sicily 4.2.1-4]) or Proteus and the mother of Apollonius of Tyana [Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 1.4.5-9]) or with the deity taking another form (e.g., when Zeus could not overcome Alcmena's chastity, he assumed the form of her husband [Diodorus of Sicily 4.9.3], or in a number of cases the deity took the form of a snake [Plutarch, "Alexander," 3.1-4; Suetonius, "Augustus," 94.4]).

There was, however, another tradition that was averse to thinking of physical sexual contact between deity and humanity; consequently, a begetting that did not involve physical sexual contact was sought. Aeschylus is an early example. In "Suppliants" 17-19, he is said to be impregnated by Zeus in the form of "the on-breathing of his love." "Prometheus" 848-52 states that at Canobus near the mouth of the Nile, he will be restored to her senses by Zeus through "the touch of his unerring hand." The offspring will be Epaphus (= touch-born, named from the touch [ephaphis] of the hand of Zeus).

Plutarch gives fullest exposition of this point of view. The first is in "Table Talk" VIII, Question 1.2 (*Moralia* IX, 114-19). The first speaker, Florus, refers to those who attribute Plato's parentage to Apollo and claim that Arisicon, Plato's father, had a vision in his sleep, which forbade him to have intercourse with his wife for ten months. The second speaker, Tyndares, replies that it is fitting to celebrate Plato with the line: "He seemed the child not of a mortal man but of a god." When, however, Plato himself speaks of the uncreated and eternal god as father and maker of the cosmos, "it happened not through semen but by another power of God (*dunameti tou theou*) that God begot in matter the principle of generation, under whose influence it became receptive and was changed." So, Tyndares says he does not think it strange if "it is not by a physical approach, like a man's, but by some other kind of contact or touch that a god alters mortal nature and makes it pregnant with a more divine offspring." Tyndares continues: "The Egyptians say that Apis (= the sacred bull, the incarnation of Osiris) is begotten by the touch (*epophe*) of the moon."

In "Numa" 4.1-4, Plutarch begins by speaking of the story that Numa forsook city life to live in the country because, it was said, he had a marriage with a goddess, Egeria. Such a tale, Plutarch states, is like stories from the Phrygians, Bithynians, and Arcadians. He concludes that it is not impossible to think that the

Deity should be willing to consort with men of superlative goodness, wisdom, and holiness. In 4.3, however, he says: "It is difficult to believe that a god or phantom would take carnal pleasure in a human body and its beauty." In 4.4 he continues: "Nevertheless the Egyptians make a plausible distinction in such a matter. A woman can be made pregnant by a spirit (*pneuma*) of a god, but for a human there is no physical intercourse with a god." This trajectory shows that it was possible in Mediterranean antiquity to think of a miraculous conception without understanding it in terms of sexual intercourse between a deity and a human. It would be no surprise, then, for ancient auditors to hear that Jesus' conception was via "spirit," "power," and involved "overshadowing" (touch).

There were two main reasons the ancients spoke of miraculous conceptions and divine descent. The first was an attempt to explain an individual's superiority to other mortals. Generally Mediterranean peoples looked at one's birth or parentage to explain one's character and behavior. In Plutarch's "Romulus," 7.3–4, Remus has been brought before Numitor for punishment. When Numitor sees Remus, he is "amazed at the youth's surpassing greatness of body and strength, and noting from his face the unsubdued boldness and vitality of his psyche despite the present circumstances, and hearing that his works and acts were like his appearance, . . . he asked who he was and what were the circumstances of his birth." Birth explains later deeds and character!

If the possibility of miraculous conception or birth was believed to be true in general, then a truly superior person could only be explained by a divine origin. Several examples make the point. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 1.77.2, in his account of the vestal virgin Iliia's being ravished in the grove consecrated to Mars, has the ravisher say to the maiden after the event that she should not grieve because "out of her being ravished, she would give birth to two sons whose deeds would excel all others." A divine begetting results in superior deeds! The first-century BCE Diodorus of Sicily, *Library of History* 4.9.2, says: "When Zeus had sexual relations with Alcmena he made the night three times longer than usual and by the length of time given to making the child he foreshadowed the superior nature of the one begotten."

The second-century CE Arian, *Anabasis* 7.30, says of Alexander the Great: "And so not even I can suppose that a man quite beyond all other men was born without some divine influence." Aulus Gellius, in *Attic Nights* 13.4.3 (second century CE), says that Olympias attempted to get Alexander to give up the idea he had formed from his incredible success, namely, that he was the son of Jupiter. Here great success implies a divine origin! The third-century CE Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 1.4.5–9, has the narrator explain that Apollonius would excel in wisdom because he had been begotten by the deity Proteus, who also excelled in wisdom. The early third-century CE Church Father Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.37, says that Greek stories like that of Apollo's begetting Plato

are really fables. They have been invented about a man they think has greater wisdom and power than others. Their claim, then, is that he received the beginning of

his physical existence from a better, diviner sperm, something that is fitting for persons who are greater than ordinary humans.

Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 3.45, quotes an epitaph:

And how, if Phoebus [Apollo] did not cause Plato to be born in Greece, did he [Plato] heal human minds with letters? For even as the divinely begotten Asclepius is a healer of the body, so Plato is of the immortal soul.

One could not do what Plato did had he not been the offspring of a god! One reason the ancients used stories of miraculous conceptions and births was as an explanation of the superiority of the individual.

The second function of such stories of miraculous conceptions in antiquity was the veneration of a benefactor. For example, Cicero, *The Republic* 1.41 (first century BCE), gives a quote from Ennius regarding Romulus: "O father, O sire, O one whose blood comes from gods." In 2.2 Cicero says concerning Romulus that he was one

who was born of father Mars (we concede this to the popular tradition, preserved from ancient times, handed down by our ancestors who thought that those who merited good from the community should be regarded as descendants of the gods and endowed with divine qualities).

Here the tradition of Romulus's supernatural conception is part of the ancient Roman veneration of benefactors.

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 14.581–608, tells of Venus approaching Jupiter with a request on behalf of Aeneas, her son and Jupiter's grandson. Based on Aeneas's worthiness, Jupiter grants Venus's wish. So Aeneas, the legendary ancestor of the Romans, is honored by the Roman populace with temple and sacrifice. It was part of the Roman mentality to venerate benefactors by ascribing divinity to them. This often included stories of their miraculous conception and birth.

Early Christian auditors of Matthew and Luke would have assumed that the stories of Jesus' divine begetting were certainly needed to explain his marvelous life. A divine origin was appropriate for their chief benefactor and founder. This much the Greco-Roman materials make clear. These auditors, however, were heir not only to the Greco-Roman traditions but also to the Christian traditions before and contemporary with them. Two aspects of this Christian tradition call for attention.

First, the Gospel of Mark, which most scholars think was earlier than Matthew and Luke, lacks a birth narrative. It begins with John the Baptist and with Jesus as an adult. Second, some Christians believed that their relation with God depended on their taking the initiative and performing acceptably so that God would respond approvingly (e.g., Galatians 2:15–16; 3:1–5). The late second-century Church Father Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.26, speaks of one Cerinthus (late first century) who believed

Jesus was not born of a virgin, but was the son of Joseph and Mary according to the usual manner of begetting. Because he was more righteous, more prudent, and wiser

than other humans, after his baptism the Christ descended upon him in the form of a dove. Then he preached the unknown Father and performed miracles.

The Gospel of Mark, without a miraculous birth narrative, was susceptible to such an interpretation of a meritorious Jesus who is rewarded by God. If Jesus is the model for Christians, then they too must be meritorious. Ever since Paul, at least, this was not what mainstream Christians believed. The relation with God was based on God's gracious initiative to which humans responded in trust and obedience (i.e., faith).

When Matthew and Luke added birth narratives with a miraculous conception as part of their rewriting of Mark, they were saying that this type of life can be produced only by God's prior gracious, creative act. If it is so for Jesus, then it is likewise true for his followers. The tradition of miraculous conceptions and births is thereby refined in its Christian-Jewish context. The Greco-Roman conviction that a human's superiority can be explained only by a divine creative act is used to establish the prevenience of divine grace in the divine-human relation. This is what an ancient auditor would have heard.

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Note: The translations are made from Greek and Latin texts found in the Loeb Classical Library and Migne's *Patrologia*. Quotations from the Bible are from the NRSV.

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