Conceiving Jesus

A Narrative Critical Analysis of Matthew 1:18-25

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PMIN 214
Tuesday @ 6-9 pm
June 18, 2009

Abstract

The method of narrative criticism is briefly described and then applied to Matthew 1:18-25. This pericope, often called "The Birth of Christ," is part of the so-called "Infancy Narrative" and primarily describes the circumstances surrounding the conception of the child Jesus. Critical examination of the text reveals Jesus as the protagonist and identifies an early climax: Mary is pregnant and Joseph, her betrothed, is not the father. The spatial and temporal settings, events, and characters are analyzed to reveal the intent of the implied author and glean understanding through the implied reader. The effort finds that this little eight-verse story summarizes Matthew's entire Gospel message by proclaiming that Jesus is the Messiah and has been sent by God to save his people from their sins. Reflection on the pastoral applications finds that each of us must study the scriptures, discern truth, and grow our own faith in Jesus Christ. As ministers, we must not impose our faith and beliefs on others, but rather help them grow their own faith so that they too may come to believe the Gospel message.

Introduction to Narrative Criticism

Narrative criticism is a literary-critical method that focuses on the Gospels as narratives. The method recognizes that an author may have used other written or oral material in creating their story, but treats the finished form of the text as an end in itself. Narrative criticism can make use of other methods of criticism to analyze a text (*e.g.,* text, form, source, or redaction criticism), but with an entirely different goal in mind. For example, a historical critic might dissect a narrative text to understand its origins or historicity, while the narrative critic would look at the text as a whole, recognizing that the author has assembled it in a particular way to tell a particular story. While the historical critic attempts to look through the text as if it were a window to establish a factually correct portrait of the life and ministry of the historical Jesus, the narrative critic attempts to look at the text as if it were a mirror in order to discern meaning from the text itself.[1] In narrative criticism, the text is treated as literature and the story is appreciated for what it says.

A narrative critic understands the text as a form of communication in which a message is passed from an implied author to an implied reader. The "implied author" is not the actual author, but the author reconstructed from clues found in the text which suggest their reliability, values, and world view. Similarly, the "implied reader" is not the actual reader, but the reader the author wishes to reach. So, for example, the evangelist might well write his Gospel for a believing

[1] Mark Allen Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?,* Guides to Biblical Scholarship, New Testament Series (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 8.

community, rather than the Roman authorities or the pagan masses. In this case, the implied reader is any member of that believing community. The actual reader can't be known and may have an unpredictable response, but the implied reader can be expected to have a known response and the text offers clues as to what that response might be.[2] Kingsbury describes the implied reader as the "imaginary person in whom the intention of the text is to be thought of as always reaching fulfillment."[3] Hence, to read as a narrative critic reads, it is necessary to "know" everything the text assumes the implied reader knows and to "forget" everything that the text assumes the implied reader does not know. For example, when reading Matthew's Gospel, the narrative critic must know the Hebrew Scriptures intimately and understand that a talent is worth more than a denarius because the text assumes this. On the other hand, this same critic must forget what he knows about Luke's Gospel and twenty-first century redaction criticism, as such knowledge would certainly distort Matthew's intended message.[4]

The critic examines a narrative as both *story* and *discourse*. The former refers to the content of the narrative (*i.e.,* what is the story about?) and includes such things as events, characters, settings, and plot. The latter refers to the rhetoric of the narrative (*i.e.,* how is the story told?) and includes such things as point of view, narrative style, symbolism and irony, and narrative patterns (*e.g.,* repetition, contrast, comparison). A thorough analysis looks for conflict and climax, examines character interactions to determine traits, identifies unresolved questions and apparent discrepancies, and seeks to understand key symbols, motifs, and themes.[5]

In his final chapter, Powell discusses the strengths and weaknesses of narrative criticism in an attempt to identify what it can do and what it cannot do. He enumerates the potential benefits as:

(a) a focus on understanding the Bible on its own terms,
(b) insight into biblical texts for which the historical background is unknown,
(c) checks and balances on traditional methods because the text has to make sense,
(d) a tendency to bring scholars and nonprofessional readers closer together,
(e) a close relationship with believers because the text is interpreted as intended,

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[2] Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?,* 2-21.
[3] Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 36.
[4] Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?,* 23.
[5] Catherine Murphy, "Narrative Criticism," Course notes for PMIN 214, New Testament, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, California, 2009; online: http://www-relg-studies.scu.edu/facstaff/murphy/courses/exegesis/narrative.htm.

(f) a potential for unity because different readers can have different interpretations,
(g) fresh interpretations because the stories transcend space and time, and
(h) a power to transform because the stories bring meaning to people's lives.

Similarly, Powell lists the possible pitfalls or objections as:

(a) treatment of the Gospels as coherent when they may be disparate,
(b) imposition of modern literary concepts on ancient literature,
(c) usage of methods developed to study fiction to the Gospel texts,
(d) the lack of objective methods for analyzing texts, and
(e) a failure to acknowledge the historical witness of the Gospels.

He cautions that both praise and criticism of the narrative critical method are often exaggerated by its proponents and opponents, respectively. He argues that narrative criticism should be seen as complementary to the other critical methods of exegesis and may well provide information and insight that are best followed up using other means.[6]

Analysis of "The Birth of Jesus"

Since the narrative critical method examines a text as a whole, it is appropriate to begin by considering the subject pericope, "The Birth of Jesus" (Matt 1:18-25),[7] in the context of its surrounding text. This pericope occupies the latter half of Matthew's Chapter 1 and finds itself sandwiched between the pericopes entitled "The Genealogy of Jesus" (Matt 1:1-17) and "The Visit of the Magi" (Matt 2:1-12). The two pericopes in Chapter 1 are connected by their opening lines; the first refers to the *genesis* of Jesus Christ and the second continues that motif by beginning with the line "Now, as for [Jesus] Christ, his *genesis* ('birth') took place in this way."[8] A second connection is the rather unorthodox way the lineage of Jesus is described in the genealogy pericope. The reader who picks up on the pattern of these earlier verses is expecting the phrase "Joseph became the father of Jesus," and instead finds "Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus" (v. 16). This wording forewarns the reader that there is something special about Jesus' ancestry, but does not reveal what that might be. Interestingly, the subject pericope resolves this issue by providing the details of Jesus' conception, but ironically does not

[6] Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?,* 85-105.
[7] Senior, Donald, ed., *The Catholic Study Bible (NAB)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
[8] Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 50.

describe "the birth of Jesus," as one might expect from its title.[9] In fact, no description of Jesus' birth is given by Matthew, since the following pericope begins "When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea …" (Matt 2:1), indicating by tense and phrasing that his birth has already occurred. Hence, the subject pericope should more correctly be titled: "The Conception of Jesus."

Raymond Brown divides this pericope into four sections, each containing two verses, as illustrated in Table 1.[10] The first two verses set the scene and immediately introduce a problem: Mary was found to be pregnant while betrothed to Joseph. Since the two of them are not living together and have not yet been intimate, Joseph knows that he is not the child's father and evidently concludes that Mary has been unfaithful. The narrator heightens the drama by revealing to the reader that the child has been conceived by the "Holy Spirit," so now God is directly involved.

Table 1. The Structure of Matthew (1:18-25).

No.	Content	Verses
1	Setting of the scene	18-19
2	Command	20-21
3	Formula citation	22-23
4	Execution of the command	24-25

However, Joseph is not privy to this information, so he decides that Mary is unsuited to be his wife. He plans to divorce her quietly, so as not to embarrass her, because he is a "righteous man." This is a remarkable response by Joseph, who would have had every right to be deeply hurt. He probably wanted what many of us want today: a spouse, some children, a home, a job, and a relationship with God. He found a woman he perceived to be a good mate and married her. Apparently Mary was not worthy of this trust and had violated their commitment to each other by having sexual intercourse with another man. Had Joseph been angry and vengeful towards Mary, few would have blamed him.

[9] Richard P. Carlson, "Reading and Interpreting Matthew from the Beginning," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 34 (2007) 444-452.

[10] Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 145.

Clearly this “unplanned pregnancy” is a major problem for Mary as well, and the story is quickly brought to its climax. What will become of Mary and her unborn child if Joseph follows through with his decision? For them, and certainly for the implied reader, this is recognized as a life and death situation. Remember that in the first century, betrothal (or consent) was the first of two steps to full marriage and meant that the man and woman were committed to each other as husband and wife. However, the woman typically continued to live with her parents for some months, or even a year, before the husband formally accepted the wife into his home and assumed her support. Only after this transferal occurred was the marriage to be consummated and normal married life to begin.[11] Hence, Mary’s apparent unfaithfulness would be seen as a major transgression. In fact, such behavior was considered adultery under Mosaic Law and the penalty was death by stoning, both for the woman and her illicit sexual partner (Deut 22:23-24).

Mary’s knowledge of her situation is never revealed to the reader, so it is unclear whether she understands the nature of her conception. If she did understand, she either chose not to explain it to Joseph, he was unwilling to listen, or she just wasn’t convincing enough. There are many other details missing from this story that would be nice to understand. For example, how could Joseph ever expect to “divorce her quietly” in a small village like Bethlehem? Certainly Joseph’s and Mary’s families, friends, and acquaintances would know about their broken relationship and eventually Mary’s pregnancy would become obvious to everyone. Hence, word would get out sooner or later, and there would be a scandal. Was Joseph really naïve enough to believe he could divorce Mary quietly? It seems more likely that this was simply Matthew’s way of convincing the reader that Joseph was a “righteous man.” As to the conflict itself, this appears to have been set up by Matthew to illustrate God’s power to bring about his preordained plan.

The second two verses of this pericope relate a dream by Joseph, in which he is visited by “the angel of the Lord.” This is a very common Old Testament way of describing divine communication with a human being. This dream has been compared and contrasted to those of Joseph, son of Jacob (Gen 37:5-11, 19), Amram, father of Moses (Ant II 212-217), and the

[11] Senior, *Catholic Study Bible*, Footnote to Matt 1:18.

auditory message dreams of Abimelech, Jacob, Laban, Balaam, and Solomon.[12] In Joseph's dream, the angel tells him that he need not fear taking Mary as his wife because she has conceived by the Holy Spirit, not by another man. There is no suggestion that the Holy Spirit has any physical union with Mary as the male element (in fact, the Holy Spirit is feminine in Hebrew and neuter in Greek).[13] The begetting is portrayed strictly as creative, rather than sexual. Finally, in the last revelation of his dream, Joseph is commanded to name the child Jesus "because he will save his people from their sins." In first-century Judaism, the Hebrew name Joshua (Greek *Iēsous*), which means "Yahweh helps," was interpreted as "Yahweh saves."[14]

Note that the angel speaks directly to Joseph, so the message is transparent and requires no interpretation by either Joseph or the reader, unlike the apocalyptic dreams of Daniel (7:1-12:13).[15] The angel calls Joseph by name and refers to him as the "Son of David" to remind the reader of Joseph's ancestry. Joseph is open-minded and changes his plans to be in accord with God's plan as revealed through the angel. By following through and naming the child (v. 25), Joseph claims him as his legitimate heir and son, thereby making him a descendent of David from a Jewish legal point of view. Thus, Matthew is able to explain how Jesus can be begotten in the womb of a virgin through God's Holy Spirit and be God's son, while simultaneously being a descendent of the royal Davidic line through Joseph's response to God's command. Matthew sees a very tight connection between Jesus' divine and Davidic sonships. In fact, Matthew heralds this child as the literal fulfillment of the promise of God to David through Nathan: "I shall raise up your son after you … I shall be his father, and he will be my son" (2 Sam 7:12-14).[16] Of course there is some irony here, in that Jesus becomes Davidic only because a man says "yes" to God. Had Joseph said "no," as Adam did, salvation history would be different. The evangelist may not have considered this possibility, but a modern understanding of human free will certainly demands it.

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[12] Robert Gnuse, "Dream Genre in the Matthean Infancy Narratives, *NovT* 32 (1990) 97-120.
[13] Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 124.
[14] Senior, *Catholic Study Bible*, Footnote to Matt 1:21.
[15] Gnuse, "Dream Genre," 97-120.
[16] Sheila Klassen-Wiebe, "Matthew 1:18-25," *Interpretation* 46 (1992) 392-395.

In the third set of verses, Matthew introduces an Old Testament citation with the words "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet" (v. 22). Matthew may have left the prophet's name unspecified so as not to distract the reader, but it is more likely absent because the audience was intimately familiar with the passage and already knew the author's identity. This particular passage is the earliest occurrence of a fulfillment citation in the Gospel. These are sometimes called *formula* citations because they use standard or formulaic phrasing; they imply that the subject event took place in order to fulfill the Old Testament passage that is cited. Matthew uses such formula citations more frequently and adopts a more standard structure than any other evangelist. Such citations invoke the authority of the Old Testament, reuse preferable words, and point to a larger reality because the author and the intended audience share a common tradition and understand its cultural context.[17]

This particular quote, which is taken from Isaiah (7:14), was originally directed towards King Ahaz (*ca.* 735 -715 B.C.) and refers to the imminent birth of a naturally conceived child, possibly a Davidic prince. This child was to deliver Judah from its enemies and thus preserve the House of David as a sign that God was still with us.[18] Though not originally intended to be a prophecy of a virginal conception in the distant future, Matthew puts this passage to good use here, for it reminds the reader that this child, already introduced as "Jesus the Christ," has been conceived by the interaction of a human and the divine; that this child has been chosen by God for a special role; and that this child will "save his people from their sins" and manifest himself as "God with us." Clearly, the evangelist wants the reader to understand that this child is important; that these events have come about, not by accident, but to fulfill God's plan; and that this child and these events are central to an understanding of the entire Gospel message.

Finally, in the last two verses, Joseph awakes from his dream and does what "the angel of the Lord had commanded him" (v. 24). He accepts Mary as his wife and takes her into his home, she bears a son, and Joseph names him Jesus, thus fulfilling God's plan. Matthew mentions that Joseph "had no relations with her until she bore a son" (v. 25) to emphasize to the reader once

[17] Warren Carter, "Evoking Isaiah: Matthean Soteriology and an Intertextual Reading of Isaiah 7-9 and Matthew 1:23 and 4:15-16," *JBL* 119 (2000) 503-520.
[18] Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 150.

again that Joseph was not responsible for the conception of Jesus. Note that the Greek word for 'until' neither implies nor excludes normal sexual relations between Joseph and Mary after Jesus' birth.[19]

Though no spatial setting is explicitly described, the first verse of the following pericope (Matt 2:1) states that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Since Matthew's text does not describe any last-minute journey as found in Luke (2:4), this story presumably occurs in Bethlehem. It seems likely that Joseph is at home when he gets "up from sleep." The other events probably occur in or near the homes of Joseph and Mary, since they are already in a relationship as the pericope begins. As is typical of the Gospels, little information is revealed about the spatial setting that is not essential, either because it was obvious to Matthew's implied reader or because it enhances conceptualization by allowing the reader to insert their own experience.[20] Since the Gospels are remarkably devoid of setting compared to other literature of their time, the latter explanation is preferred.

The events in this pericope occur in proper chronological order, beginning with an internal analepses[21] stating that Mary is already "with child" (v. 18) and ending with an external prolepses[22] stating that Joseph "had no relations with her until she bore a son" (v. 25).[23] The formula citation (*i.e.,* the reference to Isaiah (7:14)) is an external analepses because it recalls events that transpired before this pericope begins. Even though the temporal setting for this story is not explicitly stated, the durative chronological time is obviously less than the human gestation time (*i.e.,* nine months). Moreover, if the aforementioned anachronies are excluded, the remainder of this story occurs over a period of a few days as Joseph learns of Mary's pregnancy, contemplates his response, and has a dream revealing God's will. Joseph's dream most likely occurs at night, though no typological setting is explicitly stated.[24] Matthew's message to the

[19] Senior, *Catholic Study Bible*, Footnote to Matt 1:25.
[20] Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?,* 72.
[21] A discrepancy between the order of events in story time and discourse time (*i.e.,* an anachrony), in which an event is narrated belatedly, but within the temporal properties of the story, Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?,* 37.
[22] An anachrony in which an event is narrated prematurely, Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?,* 37.
[23] This is technically considered *external* because Jesus' birth is announced in the following pericope.
[24] Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?,* 72.

reader is that Jesus' conception is a major event, marking the end of the time of prophecy (*i.e.,* the old covenant) and beginning the time of fulfillment.[25]

The characters in this pericope are Joseph, Mary, the unborn child Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the "angel of the Lord." Much of the story is told through the eyes of Joseph, so in some sense he is the protagonist or main character who acts, thinks, and makes decisions. However, the real protagonist is Jesus, around whom the Gospel story already revolves even though he is still *in utero*. The narrator clearly puts Joseph in a supporting role, telling the reader that Joseph does as the "angel of the Lord" commands and gives Jesus the name that God has chosen. Joseph's motivation is quite simply to do the will of God, which the narrator makes obvious to the reader by having God's angel make it obvious to Joseph.

This pericope has little character development because Matthew is primarily focused on revealing who Jesus is. The narrator does not introduce the characters to the reader by having them talk and act, but simply relates their thoughts and actions. The reader is told that Joseph is "a righteous man" and may conclude that he is also kind and lenient because of his unwillingness to expose Mary to shame. Joseph's response to the "angel of the Lord" suggests that he is humble, open, and trustful, as well as possibly being prayerful (*i.e.,* those who pray are able to hear God's response). Though he is generally portrayed as good, the initial conflict (vv. 18-19) leaves the reader with some doubt as to whether Joseph will accept this "unfaithful" Mary as his wife and this "bastard" child as his own. Hence, from the perspective of this pericope, Joseph could be considered a "round" character (*i.e.,* one who possesses a variety of character traits, some of which may conflict, so that their behavior is not always predictable). Such "round" characters behave like "real people." However, from the context of the larger Gospel, Joseph is a relatively "flat" character since he never gets mentioned by Matthew after Chapter 2, possesses few distinct character traits for certain, and ultimately ends up having highly predictable behavior. His only purpose in the narrative is to act as a servant of the Lord, who helps carry out God's divinely ordained plan.

[25] Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 27.

Even less can be said about Mary's character traits, since none of her thoughts and feelings are revealed in this pericope, and the narrator offers nothing but her name and the fact that she is "with child." Though she has a slightly larger overall role in Matthew's Gospel than Joseph, here she is a very minor character who is so "flat" that she can actually be considered a "stock" character. That is to say, Jesus needs a mother, so one is provided, but within this pericope, that appears to be her only attribute and no particular character traits are ascribable to her. The same can be said about the Holy Spirit and the "angel of the Lord." Both are important characters in the sense that they are required to tell the story, but they are very flat. It is clear that they act as representatives of God and are always faithful, trustworthy, and truthful. Moreover, the reader never gets the feeling that these divine spirits can really be known in any substantive way. They more closely resemble concepts like "goodness" and "truth" than they do real characters with personalities, beliefs, and character traits.

Hence, as mentioned earlier, Jesus is the true protagonist. However, since he is yet to be born, he does not talk or act within the bounds of this pericope. Nevertheless, the narrator reveals many important things about him to the reader: Jesus is of Davidic descent and was conceived by the Holy Spirit; Jesus will be born of woman and is a child of God; and Jesus "will save his people from their sins" (v. 21) and is "God with us" (v. 23). Matthew is telling the reader that Jesus is the Son of Man and the Son of God; that Jesus is both human and divine; and that Jesus is the Christ, the one who is the Messiah. In essence, this pericope summarizes the entire Matthean Gospel message by succinctly telling the reader who Jesus is and why he was incarnated into this world.

For all its "good news," this story is relatively sterile from a modern perspective. Only those details which are required appear; the text is very compact and Spartan. The story says a lot for its length, but also leaves a lot unsaid. There is no mention of Joseph and Mary's courtship, their families and friends, or their feelings towards one another. The story simply states a set of facts and professes them as true with little character development, description of the scene, or other peripheral material. The clear implication is that the reader should accept and believe the story as written because it presents a biographical account of the events surrounding Jesus'

conception and birth. It is written in a narrative style and, at first glance, seems to provide some important details about the historical Jesus. However, Brown argues that the modern reader must examine this narrative in the context of Matthew's entire Gospel and other biblical stories to discern its true nature. He identifies three main issues with a strictly historical interpretation: (a) the lack of corroborating witnesses, (b) the many details that conflict with Luke's account of Jesus' birth (Luke 1:26-38), and (c) strong evidence that the theological understanding of the evangelists evolved over time.[26]

To understand the first issue, recall that the Gospels are generally believed to be eye-witness accounts that were passed down by oral tradition for one or several generations before being captured in their present written form. For Jesus' public ministry, passion, death, and resurrection this is a credible argument, but his disciples almost certainly did not witness his conception. Those that could possibly know would be family (*i.e.,* Mary, Joseph, and James the "brother of the Lord") and the ordinary people amongst whom Jesus was raised. Brown argues that all these individuals and groups are unlikely sources of this narrative because their subsequent actions, as described in the Gospel, suggest they knew nothing of an extraordinary event associated with Jesus' conception, birth or infancy.

The second issue is that the Matthean and Lucan narratives contain many conflicting details which are difficult to reconcile into a single account. In addition, these stories are unsubstantiated by Jewish records or other New Testament material, but actually seem better understood as rewritings of Old Testament stories based on popular scenes and themes.[27] For example, John Dominic Crossan argues that Matthew's story of Jesus' conception and birth is remarkably similar to Moses' conception and birth. He further points out that the Matthean claim of divine intervention and virgin conception can be viewed as an attempt to trump Rome, since Octavian claimed divine sonship, but could not credibly claim a virgin conception because he was known to have an older sister, Octavia.[28]

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[26] Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 33.
[27] Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 33-37.
[28] John Dominic Crossan, "Virgin Mother or Bastard Child?," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 59 (2003) 663-691.

Thirdly, there is strong evidence in the New Testament books that Matthew was primarily espousing theology, not relating history, when he wrote this pericope. Looking cross Gospel, the message of the evangelists appears to have developed backwards in time, with the earliest preaching focused on the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection (*e.g.,* 1 Thess 1:10; Rom 1:3-4, Phil 2:8-9). A decade later, when Mark wrote his Gospel, he has God reveal Jesus as his Son at the beginning of his public ministry (Mk 1:11), but this fact doesn't become obvious to humanity until after his death (Mk 15:39) – the so-called Messianic secret.[29] Later, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is recognized as the Son of God during his lifetime by confessions of faith that aren't present in Mark (*cf* Matt 14:33 with Mark 6:51-52; and Matt 16:16 with Mark 8:29). Moreover, both Matthew and Luke choose to reveal this truth early in their Gospels by prepending Jesus' genealogy, conception, and birth to their accounts (Matt 1-2; Luke 1-2). It has often been argued that these chapters, had they been lost, could not be inferred from the remainder of the New Testament. Finally, John's Gospel preaches Jesus as the pre-existing "Word of God" (John 1:1-5). Given this clear progression in the evangelists' understanding of the Risen Christ during the latter half of the first-century, the lack of corroborating evidence from other writings of antiquity, and the clear parallels with Old Testament thought, it is very difficult to understand this pericope as completely historical. In fact, many critics have concluded that it contains little, if any, factual content and categorize the text as religious folklore.[30]

On the other hand, it has been strongly argued that certain aspects of the story, particularly the virgin conception, are common to both infancy narratives and are presented even though they are embarrassing, so they must have some historicity in order to have been retained. Why would Matthew choose to tell his story in this awkward way if it weren't true? In addition, some argue that the proclamation of a virgin birth from the earliest kerygma is so compelling that it must be accepted on faith,[31] whereas others find evidence in the text for rape, incest, and seduction.[32] Since the experts don't agree, all that can be said here is that this story is an unknown

[29] Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1977) 129.
[30] Ben F. Meyer, *The Man for Others*, Faith and Life Series (New York: Bruce Publishing, 1970) 108.
[31] Otto A. Piper, "The Virgin Birth: The Meaning of the Gospel Accounts," *Interpretation* 18 (1964) 131-148.
[32] Jane Schaberg, "Feminist Interpretations of the Infancy Narrative of Matthew," *JFSR* 13 (1997) 35-62.

combination of Old Testament tradition, New Testament theology, and actual historical events all rolled into one. Nonetheless, it is considered non-fiction prose because the evangelist certainly intended it to convey truth. That is to say, Matthew consistently presents God's system of values as normative.[33]

The genre for this pericope is myth. The main purpose of myths, like parables, is to deliver a message to the implied reader, not to relay historically accurate information like a modern newspaper would. The story in this pericope is told through the eyes of an omnipresent and omniscient third-person narrator who provides the reader with inside information that is not simultaneously available to the characters in the story. Using this technique, the narrator interprets characters and describes events in order to render judgment on them. This allows the evangelist to "lead the witness," so that the reader may quickly understand what the narrator wishes to convey through the story. Matthew has done his best, using the literary techniques at his disposal, to unequivocally establish the identity of Jesus as the Christ and proclaim his purpose for coming into the world through this short pericope and the other infancy material in Chapters 1 and 2 of his Gospel.

Reflection on Pastoral Applications

But exactly what did Matthew intend to convey when he wrote about the virgin conception of Jesus? Was he recording a historical fact or employing literary symbolism in order to reveal greater truths? Much ink has been shed over these questions, particularly since the Enlightenment and the advent of modern critical methods. I intentionally chose this "Infancy Narrative" for my research paper because I wanted to better understand the Church's teachings on the "Virgin Birth." Did Mary conceive as a virgin or did Jesus have a human father? I first encountered this question in a serious way last fall in a Christology class. I didn't completely understand the Church's position then, so I thought this paper might be a good opportunity to do some additional research.

[33] Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 10.

However, as I complete this paper, I find that I still don't have all the answers. Though that may sound like failure, I consider it a resounding success. Through my research, I discovered that the questions surrounding the virgin birth remain complex and controversial, not just for me, but for the biblical scholars who make this their life's work. In the end, I actually find this comforting. It reaffirms by belief that things are often not black and white; that all things are not knowable. But even more importantly, it taught me that I was hung up asking the wrong question! I discovered that Matthew's infancy narrative isn't primarily about virginity or paternity, but about the identity of Jesus Christ as understood by the First Evangelist. After strongly arguing the case for a virgin birth, Piper expresses this rather succinctly when he says "No person will go to hell merely for doubting the virgin birth."[34] Simply put, this is not the big issue here. Thus, I have learned that the Gospels are much deeper and richer than I had appreciated and I have been gifted with some modern analysis tools which will help me search for truth. The critical methods taught in PMIN 214 have been immensely eye-opening, mind-expanding, and spiritually enriching for me.

Happily, what benefits me will also benefit my ministry. I am a member of a men's faith-sharing group that meets regularly every Saturday morning. Over the years, several members have routinely expressed the idea that to discern and follow God's call is easy. They believe that one simply has to "follow the good book" or "do what the Pope says." One Saturday morning a friend noticed me referencing "A Morally Complex World: Engaging Contemporary Moral Theology."[35] He shrugged his shoulders and said, "What's so complex about the world? All you have to do is follow God's commandments." I was speechless, to say the least, as discerning the will of God has never been that easy for me. In continued discussions with these men, I have come to realize that some of them have a very conservative approach to reading the Bible that is based on literal interpretation and borders on fundamentalism. Sometimes I try to convince them to see things differently, while at other times I wonder why God did not bless me with such a black and white world.

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[34] Piper, *The Virgin Birth*, 148.

[35] James T. Bretzky, *A Morally Complex World: Engaging Contemporary Moral Theology* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2004).

Hence, I found it tremendously refreshing to understand how the apostles and disciples grew in their faith and understanding of the Risen Christ in the decades after Jesus' death. I see how they evolved the story of Christ's birth over time. I see how their thinking was colored and shaped by the world in which they lived. I see how they responded to the threats and challenges that they encountered. And most importantly, I see that Jesus asks the very same of me: to view the world in the light of the Gospel and to respond appropriately, so that I too may come to believe. The corollary, of course, is that everyone won't see, can't hear, and doesn't believe the same things as I do. In fact, I am confident that there are people sitting in the pew on Sunday morning who would be horrified and walk out, never to return, if the homilist questioned the virgin birth. Ironically, I am equally certain that there are people who would join the Church if the homilist did. How do we successfully minister to such a diverse group of people with such widely varying backgrounds and beliefs?

Schaberg claims that a variety of perspectives is healthy because it creates new insights. However, many people in the Church are highly intolerant because of their inability to distinguish ideology and exegesis.[36] St. Paul advises us to call a truce when he writes, "Let everyone be fully persuaded in his own mind" (Rom 14:5). This is particularly good advice for those in ministry, as we are simply workers in the vineyard of the Lord. Our job is not to persuade others to believe as we believe or as the majority believes, but to help each individual believe what God is calling them to believe. We must not strive to pass on our faith so much as to help others grow in their own faith. This insight on my part will benefit those I encounter in my ministry, whether it is the men in my faith sharing group, the candidates in our parish's RCIA program, or the parishioners in the pew, should I ever be privileged to preach.

[36] Schaberg, "Feminist Interpretations," 35-62.

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