

# Incarnation



*“The day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus by the Supreme Being as his father, in the womb of a virgin, will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter.”*

– Thomas Jefferson, 1823

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## 1<sup>st</sup> break:

Levine expresses that it's not that important that things happened exactly the way the gospel writer told it. What does she think is the importance of Matthew and Luke's nativity accounts? What are your thoughts?

## 2<sup>nd</sup> break:

With whom does Jesus share the claim of miraculous birth? Why?

As the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke can't possibly be historical, what is their purpose?

According to Levine, what is Luke up to in his telling of the birth of Jesus?

## 3<sup>rd</sup> break:

According to Brueggemann, what is Luke up to in his telling of the birth of Jesus?

What are the implications of “doing Christology all over again”?

Spong describes at least five different Biblical explanations of how “God got into Jesus”: Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. Explain.

How would re-imagining “God as the life power itself, the power of love itself” change our understanding of incarnation?

**4<sup>th</sup> break:**

Discuss Spong’s distinction between “difference in degree” and “difference in kind.”

What is “doing Christology from below”?

How does Athanasius’ thought fit in with the “continuum” suggested by Spong?

### **General Reflection:**

What do you find most helpful or interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications for your personal spiritual journey? For Christianity as a whole?

## **Spirit Practice**

### Communion of Saints

Name one person, now deceased, whose life embodied the teachings of Jesus. You may have read about the person, read their writings, or known the person. What was it about that person that reflected God's love in such a way?

Think of a person who is alive who lives incarnational love. Write their name in your journal and describe what Christ-like qualities the world witnesses through their lives.

## **Words of Wisdom**

Our earliest witnesses to Jesus' life, Paul and Mark, are evidently unaware of anything miraculous about his birth – in fact, Paul says just the opposite. As Paul introduced himself and his message to the Romans, he described Jesus as having been “made of the seed of David according to the flesh.” He mentions no virgin birth or any of the elements most people have come to associate with the Christmas story. To Paul's mind, Jesus was only declared to be the “Son of God” by having been resurrected from the dead a decidedly “adoptionist” – and according to later church councils, heretical – interpretation of the data.

***Read Romans 1:3-4 & Galatians 4.4-5***

The gospel of Mark skips all of Jesus' evidently unremarkable early life and jumps straight to the beginning of his ministry – while John goes the other direction and places Jesus at the beginning of time, participating in the very act of Creation.

***Read Mark 1 and John 1.1-18***

*“The virgin birth story was an honest mistake. Most liberal theologians believe that the author of the Gospel of Matthew (or someone who supplied the writer with source material) scanned an unknown ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. He found what he believed to be a reference to Jesus’ birth. It was in Isaiah 7:14. This has since become a famous passage often recited at Christmas time. He simply copied it into Matthew (1:23) as a method of showing that prophecies in the Hebrew Testament were fulfilled in Jesus’ life. As it happens, the Greek translators had made a mistake. When they were translating the Hebrew writings into the Greek Septuagint and similar translations, they converted the Hebrew word almah as the Greek equivalent of our English word for virgin. Almah appears nine other times in the Hebrew Scriptures. In each case it means “young woman.” When the scriptures referred to a virgin (and they do over 50 times) they always used the Hebrew word betulah. So, Isaiah appears to have referred to a young woman becoming pregnant (a rather ordinary event).”*

– Culver “Bill” Nelson, in LtQ’s *Saving Jesus*

***Read and compare Isaiah 7.14 with Matthew 1.23***

Foreshadowing elements of Jesus’ birth and life, *The Wisdom of Solomon* was but one document circulating in the years prior to Jesus’ appearance that likely contributed to his later legend.

***Read Wisdom of Solomon 7.1-7*** (late 1<sup>st</sup> century, B.C.E.)

What we *do*, for better or for worse, is the measure of the incarnation in the world. Approaching life incarnationally can have consequences. One needs to be prepared for situations that take risk, that can be messy, that include speaking out or standing up for people; that might even mean making a personal sacrifice for someone else’s sake.

***Read Matthew 25:37-40***

## **Try it**

Put on the Christmas pageant, “Matt & Lucy’s Version Births.” A clever musical utilizing all the traditional trappings of a standard children’s Christmas pageant, “Version Births” exposes the performers and the audience to the different birth narratives in Matthew and Luke.

The play opens as Matt & Lucy volunteer to help with the pageant. Little do they know that the Director will give them each a different script and leave them to work out how to put on a play with conflicting story lines, characters, and settings. As the play ends, the Director explains how having two stories gives us an appreciation of the diversity of ways early Christians expressed their understanding of who Jesus was.

“Matt & Lucy’s Version Births” is available at [www.livingthequestions.com](http://www.livingthequestions.com).