

**NATUS EX MARIA VIRGINE:
A Case for Biblical Necessity and Biblical Fittingness
of The Virgin Birth¹**

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Abstract: The purpose of this essay is to show that in spite of common objections, the doctrine of virgin birth is the only possible interpretation, inference and implication of what the Bible says, especially in the birth narratives. In other words, the doctrine is *biblically or canonically necessary*. Nevertheless, it will be argued that the doctrine is not *metaphysically necessary*: God can use other ways to bring about the incarnation while keeping the divinity, humanity, and sinlessness of Jesus Christ. Instead of defending the doctrine as metaphysically necessary, it is more fruitful to proclaim it as *biblically fitting*. Three theologians who see the doctrine as *biblically fitting* will be expounded (Irenaeus, Anselm, and Thomas Aquinas), followed by suggestion to establish criteria for good biblical fittingness, partly by cultivating Christian imagination and a sense of divine mystery.

Keywords: *virgin birth; biblical necessity; metaphysical necessity; biblical fittingness; aesthetic fittingness; agential fittingness; telic fittingness; dramatic fittingness.*

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Introduction

What if tomorrow someone digs up definitive proof that Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry, and archeologists find Larry's tomb and do DNA samples and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the virgin birth was really just a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in to appeal to the followers of the Mithra and Dionysian religious cults that were hugely popular at the time of Jesus, whose gods had virgin births? But what if, as you study the origin of the word 'virgin' you discover that the word 'virgin' in the gospel of Matthew actually comes from the book of Isaiah, and then you find out that in the Hebrew language at that time, the word 'virgin' could mean several things. And what if you discover that in the first century being 'born of a virgin' also referred to a child whose mother became pregnant the first time she had intercourse?²

2. Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 26. The original context of this quotation is this: Bell recalled a time when he was watching a videotaped lecture about the creation of the world. The speaker said that if we deny that God created the world in six literal twenty-four-hour days, then you are denying that Jesus ever died on the cross. Bell then says in this book, "It's a bizarre leap of logic to make, I would say." He says that this speaker's faith is like a wall of bricks, if one brick is pulled out, then the whole wall starts to crumble: "It appears quite strong and rigid, but if you begin to rethink or discuss even one brick, the whole thing is in danger." He then gives the above lengthy hypothetical questions regarding the virgin birth. Bell confesses explicitly that he affirms the historic Christian faith, which includes the virgin birth. But from the above quotes, it can be inferred that for Bell, this doctrine is not significant for his faith in Jesus. Even if the doctrine is seriously questioned, it won't affect his faith in God. This essay is surely not an assessment of Bell's

As evangelicals who hold high view, infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture, how do we respond to the above hypothetical questions? The orthodox Christian church have from the beginning received and taught the doctrine of virgin birth, because they believe that it is biblical and scriptural; it is what the Bible says and what the Bible means. The phrase “born of virgin Mary” (Latin: *natus ex Maria Virgine*) is in the Apostles’ Creed, which is confessed by Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. They believe that what the Bible says about the virgin birth is factual and historical, not a fiction or a fabrication. Can the biblical birth narrative be interpreted in any other way? Can it be true that the birth narratives in the Bible are indeed a myth borrowed from other mythical religion? Can it be true that if we interpret the Bible more carefully, we will find out that the Bible actually does not mean to say that Jesus was born of a virgin named Mary? Is the doctrine of virgin birth a necessary interpretation, inference and implication of what the Bible says regarding the birth of Jesus? In other words, is the doctrine *biblically necessary*?

And, if the doctrine is indeed a necessary interpretation, inference and implication of what the Bible says and what the Bible means, how can we best defend this doctrine? What is the wise and most effective way to defend the doctrine? Anthony Lane laments

thought; his hypothetical questions are quoted for the purpose of introducing the importance of understanding this doctrine biblically and defend it wisely.

how the defenders of the virgin birth “have usually sought to show not just that it did happen but that it ought to have happened or indeed that it must have happened.”³ Is it true the doctrine of virgin birth must have happened? In other words, is the doctrine *metaphysically necessary*? Does God have no other way to bring about the incarnation of Christ than by the miracle of virgin birth? Lane adds that if Christian apologists are not careful in defending this doctrine, they can do “most harm to the cause that they are supposed to be defending.”⁴ He says, “If the apologist gives implausible reasons why the virgin birth must have occurred he will lose the confidence of his client who will see him as a shameless propagandist who is determined to produce any and every argument possible, regardless of its merit.”⁵

This essay will be divided into two parts. In the first part, I will argue with the historic and orthodox church in all ages that the doctrine of virgin birth is *indeed* biblically necessary. In other words, the belief in a virgin birth is the only possible interpretation, inference and implication of what the Bible says (especially in the birth narratives). I will show how some scholars use the Bible (i.e. interpreting the birth narratives in the Bible) to reach different conclusions from the orthodox belief in the virgin birth. Their three common objections to the doctrine will be explained: objection of the

3. A. N. S. Lane, “The Rationale and Significance of the Virgin Birth,” *Vox Evangelica* 10 (1997): 48.

4. Lane, “The Rationale,” 48.

5. Lane, “The Rationale,” 48.

pagan/Jewish derivation, objection of embellishment/exaggeration, and objection from 'silence.' I will then try to argue that the key to rightly interpret the birth narratives is by looking at the genre of these narratives. By rightly determining the genre, I will then try to respond to the three objections with biblical arguments, supported by relevant extrabiblical arguments when necessary. The assumption, of course, is that biblical arguments have higher authority than the extrabiblical arguments.

In the second part, I will argue that even though the doctrine is biblically or canonically necessary, it is not metaphysically necessary, as some scholars suggest. God can use other ways to bring about the incarnation and still keeps the divinity, humanity, and sinlessness of Jesus Christ. Instead of defending the doctrine as metaphysically necessary, it is more fruitful and richer to proclaim it as *biblically fitting*. I will then explain three different models of fittingness from Irenaeus, Anselm, and Thomas Aquinas respectively, emphasizing how these three theologians see that virgin birth is biblically fitting. I will conclude this essay by suggesting the way forward: to establish criteria for good biblical fittingness. To achieve this end, I will suggest that we need to cultivate our Christian imagination and a sense of divine mystery.

Before moving further, it is important to clarify the definition of doctrine of virgin birth used in this essay. Stated negatively, the doctrine of virgin birth is not the same as the Roman Catholic doctrine of perpetual virginity of Mary (i.e. that she remained a virgin

throughout her life) or the doctrine of the “immaculate conception” (i.e. that from the moment when Mary was conceived in the womb of her mother, she was kept free of original sin, and that she remained sinless throughout her life).⁶ Strictly speaking, in Protestant view, the doctrine of virgin birth consists of three distinct aspects: “the Virginal Conception, gestation, and the Virgin Birth of Christ.”⁷ In this essay, virgin birth refers specifically to the virginal conception of Christ. By virginal conception, we mean that “Jesus’ conception in the womb of Mary was not the result of sexual relationship.”⁸ Mary became pregnant through a supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit, but “that does not mean that Jesus was the result of copulation between God and Mary.”⁹ Oliver Crisp meticulously defines the virginal conception of Christ as “the miraculous asexual action of the Holy Spirit in generating the human nature of Christ in the womb of Virgin Mary, using an ovum from the womb of the Virgin and supplying the missing genetic material (specifically the Y chromosomes) necessary for the production of human male.”¹⁰ Millard J. Erickson notes that some Protestant theologians, like Dale Moody, prefer the term “virginal conception” or “miraculous

6. H. Douglas Buckwalter, “Virgin Birth,” in *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 799.

7. Oliver D. Crisp, “On the ‘Fittingness’ of the Virgin Birth,” *Heythrop Journal* 49, no. 2 (March 2008):198.

8. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 759.

9. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 759.

10. Crisp, “On the ‘Fittingness’,” 199.

conception” to distinguish their view from the Roman Catholic view.¹¹ However, Raymond Brown, a Roman Catholic theologian, also uses the term “virginal conception,” as stated explicitly in the title of his book.¹² For the purpose of this essay, the term “Virgin Birth” will be preserved, with an awareness that it has the same referent as the term “Virginal Conception of Christ.”

Using (Abusing) the Bible to Reject the Doctrine

Is the doctrine of virgin birth biblical? Is this doctrine a necessary inference and implication from what the Bible says, especially in the birth narratives of Jesus (Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2)? The Gospel of Mark says, “Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together *she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.*” (Matthew 1:18; ESV). Matthew implies that supernatural event has happened, because Mary was conceiving a child prior to her union with Joseph. The Gospel of Luke emphasizes the virginity of Mary at several points, which further indicate “the nonnatural means of conception (Luke 1:27, 34).”¹³ Luke 1:35 says, “And the angel answered her, ‘*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the*

11. Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth: A Summary of Christian Doctrine Based on Biblical Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 417. Quoted in Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 759.

12. See Brown, Raymond E. *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus*. New York: Paulist, 1973.

13. Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 366.

power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God.” (Luke 1:35; ESV). Isn’t it clear from these verses that the doctrine of virgin birth is taught by the Bible?¹⁴

Not every scholar is convinced. Some scholars think that the doctrine of virgin birth is not taught by these birth narratives. In other words, they think that the doctrine is not the right *referent* (what it says about) of the Scriptural *sense* (what it says). They come up with some objections to prove that the doctrine is indeed a wrong inference and implication of these narratives.

Objection of Pagan/Jewish Derivation. This objection says that the biblical virgin birth narratives are “nothing more than ‘an adaptation of similar accounts occurring in the literature of other religions.’”¹⁵ Bible’s description of the virgin birth reflects “a mythological (i.e. nonfactual worldview, particularly mythological

14. Bird notes that despite the differences between the Matthean and Lucan accounts, they agree on these twelve following details: (1) Jesus’ birth is set in relation to the reign of Herod the Great (Matt. 2:1; Luke 1:5); (2) Mary is a virgin, betrothed to Joseph, but their relationship is not yet consummated (Matt. 1:18; Luke 1:27, 34; 2:5); (3) Joseph is of Davidic descent (Matt. 1:16, 20; Luke 1:27; 2:4); (4) The birth is announced by angels (Matt. 1:20-23; Luke 1:26-35); (5) Jesus is the Son of David (Mat. 1:1; Luke 1:32); (6) Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:18, 20; Luke 1:35); (7) Joseph plays no role in the conception (Matt. 1:18-25; Luke 1:35); (8) The name “Jesus” is divinely given (Matt. 1:21; Luke 1:31); (9) An angel refers to Jesus as “Savior” (Matt. 1:21; Luke 2:11); (10) Jesus is born after Mary and Joseph have come to live together (Matt. 1:24-25; Luke 2:4-7); (11) Jesus is born in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:1; Luke 2:4-7); (12) Jesus’ family settles in Nazareth (Matt. 2:22-23; Luke 2:39). See Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 366.

15. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 769.

traditions about the origins of remarkable men.”¹⁶ According to this objection, in those days “great men were thought to be virgin-born, so it is not surprising that Jesus is also described in this way.”¹⁷ Examples from pagan (non-Jewish) world abound: Plutarch (who lives in the first century) suggests that “a woman can be impregnated when approached by a divine pneuma.”¹⁸ There are also other stories about the origin of these great figures: “Zeus begat Hercules, Perseus, and Alexander; Apollo begat Ion, Asclepius, Pythagoras, Plato, and Augustus.”¹⁹ It was claimed that the historical figures like Alexander “was not sired by an earthly father, but by Zeus himself.”²⁰

Other scholars believe that the worldview of early Christianity was not significantly influenced by the polytheistic beliefs of Greco-Roman mythology and religion, but much more by the monotheistic worldview of the Old Testament.²¹ For this reason, they believe that the virgin birth narrative came from Judaism (and its Ancient Near Eastern influence) instead of from paganism. In ANE worldview, it is not uncommon to find the belief that nations and/or kings are in some sense physical offspring of the gods.²² These scholars claim that in Judaism, there was an expectation of a virgin

16. Brandon D. Crowe, *Was Jesus Really Born of a Virgin?* (Philadelphia: P&R Publishing, 2013), 10.

17. Crowe, *Was Jesus*, 10.

18. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 769.

19. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 769.

20. Crowe, *Was Jesus*, 10.

21. Crowe, *Was Jesus*, 11.

22. Crowe, *Was Jesus*, 11.

birth.²³ They believe that some early Christians invent the story of virgin birth in the Bible to fit their expectation that someday the prophecy in Isaiah 7:4 will someday be fulfilled.

Objection of Embellishment/Exaggeration. Related to the first objection, this objection says that the virgin birth narratives are “nothing more than embellishments concocted to explain the origins of a great man.”²⁴ Scholars who believe this think that the stories included in the gospels grew and evolved over time as Christians found themselves at a greater historical distance from the actual events.²⁵

Objection from ‘Silence.’ Some scholars reject the doctrine of virgin birth because most of the New Testament writers are silent on this supposedly important narrative. Mark (the oldest Gospel), John (probably the most theological of the four Gospels), and Paul (with his high regard of Christ and strong orientation toward doctrine) seem to be ignorant of this matter.²⁶ If the narrative of virgin birth (and the doctrinal implication/inference of it) is indeed a fact, why did they omit it from their writings? “Is it not peculiar that only two books make mention of the virgin birth, and then only in brief account?”²⁷

23. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 770.

24. Crowe, *Was Jesus*, 13.

25. Crowe, *Was Jesus*, 13.

26. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 766.

27. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 766.

Using the Bible to Affirm the Doctrine

Are those objections valid? Is it really the case that the doctrine of virgin birth is not the right and necessary inference and implication of the virgin birth narratives? To answer this question, we must investigate the genre of these narratives (in Matthew 1-2 and in Luke 1-2). Understanding the genre will help us to move from what it says (sense of the text) to what it says about (referent of the text).

Ben Witherington III rightfully states that to a great extent, the way we evaluate the birth narratives is determined by “one’s presuppositions about the proper starting place for evaluating this material.”²⁸ There are at least two ways to approach it. On the one hand, “one can assume that both Matthew and Luke received an historical tradition or traditions about the circumstances surrounding Jesus’ birth and then took that source material, wrote it up in their own manner so as to highlight the theological points they wanted to make.”²⁹ In the case of Matthew, he wrote his gospel to draw out potential theological links with the OT.³⁰ On this explanation, both Matthew and Luke wrote real historical event (not fiction), but did some “creative editing and rewording according to their respective purposes and according to the conventions of ancient history-writing.”³¹ Moreover, they were not only using sources, but (at least

28. Ben Witherington III, “Birth of Jesus,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green & Scot McKnight (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 60.

29. Witherington III, “Birth of Jesus,” 60.

30. Witherington III, “Birth of Jesus,” 60.

31. Witherington III, “Birth of Jesus,” 61.

inferring from Luke 1:1-4) they “chose the sources that were historically credible” and then did some editing.³² On the other hand, however, one can assume that Matthew and Luke “only present us with some historical fragments in the midst of a largely fictional account, and that the point of the narratives is primarily theological not historical.”³³

Witherington III claims that it is wrong to assume that we must choose between either theology or history in this material. He states, “What we likely have is material of historical substance that has been theologically interpreted so as to bring out its greater significance.”³⁴ The birth narratives are “theological history-writing, not historicized theology.”³⁵

There are some problems if we look at the birth narrative as historicized theology or merely as fictional material (either as a result of Pagan/Jewish derivation or as an embellishment/ exaggeration). First, if one believes that this narrative is a fictional account, then he/she “must treat this material as substantially different in character from the rest of the Gospel tradition, a great deal of which can be plausibly argued to have a basis in historical events in Jesus’ life.”³⁶ In other words, it requires that we see the birth stories as “some sort of separate entities, perhaps even of a different genre

32. Witherington III, “Birth of Jesus,” 61.

33. Witherington III, “Birth of Jesus,” 61.

34. Witherington III, “Birth of Jesus,” 61.

35. Witherington III, “Birth of Jesus,” 61.

36. Witherington III, “Birth of Jesus,” 61.

from the rest of the Gospel material.”³⁷ Witherington III notes that “there are various indications that the birth narratives should not be separated from the rest of their respective Gospels.”³⁸ For example, the thematic and theological unity of Luke 1-2 with the rest of Luke’s Gospel has been demonstrated.³⁹ Furthermore, “there is evidence in both Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2 that we are not dealing with free compositons.”⁴⁰ With regard to Luke, “the fact that Luke 1-2 abounds in Hebraisms in contrast to the classical Greek prologue in Luke 1:1-4 speaks for the use of a Semitic narrative source(s) of considerable proportions at least up to Luke 2:40.”⁴¹ With regard to Matthew, “the way he sometimes awkwardly works his formula citations into his narrative suggests he was working with one or several narratives sources to which he has added OT quotations.”⁴² Witherington III also mentions that “here are various details in these narratives that are theologically irrelevant and suggest an historical source (e.g. the name of Anna’s father), therefore proves that these narratives are much more than merely historicized theology.”⁴³ In sum, the birth narratives definitely cannot be read as a non-factual and non-historical account, but must necessarily be treated as historical *and*

37. Witherington III, “Birth of Jesus,” 61.

38. Witherington III, “Birth of Jesus,” 61.

39. Witherington III, “Birth of Jesus,” 61.

40. Witherington III, “Birth of Jesus,” 61.

41. Witherington III, “Birth of Jesus,” 61.

42. Witherington III, “Birth of Jesus,” 61.

43. Witherington III, “Birth of Jesus,” 61.

theological narratives. With this in mind, how can we answer the above objections?

Response to Objection of Pagan/Jewish Derivation. With regard to pagan derivation, although it is true that there are stories about supernatural and remarkable births in the ancient worlds, we do not encounter a preponderance of “*virgin births*.”⁴⁴ In these stories, “a sexual union between the god and the woman is either stated explicitly or implied.”⁴⁵ With regard to Jewish derivation, even though most scholars now persuaded that the birth narratives are much closer to the Jewish infancy narrative than to pagan stories, “no extra-biblical materials provide such precise parallels with the birth narrative material that they can definitely be affirmed as the source(s) of the Gospel material.”⁴⁶ Is it true that Jewish people are expecting a virgin birth (from their interpretation of Isaiah 7:4) and invent the story of the Jesus’ virgin birth in the Gospel? Crowe thinks that this is “extremely unlikely,” since there is no evidence that this text from Isaiah was widely understood to refer to a virgin-born Messiah before the birth of Jesus.⁴⁷ Matthew, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, understands Isaiah 7:4 to be fulfilled in the birth of Jesus from the virgin Mary (Matthew 1:22-23), but this appears to be “a new appreciation for the message of the text that comes *after* the virgin birth of Christ, not a Procrustean mold into

44. Crowe, *Was Jesus*, 10.

45. Crowe, *Was Jesus*, 13.

46. Witherington III, “Birth of Jesus,” 60.

47. Crowe, *Was Jesus*, 12.

which the description of Christ's birth had to be fit."⁴⁸ John Frame suggests that for Matthew, the concept of "fulfillment" sometimes takes on "*aesthetic dimensions* that go beyond the normal relation between 'prediction' and 'predicted event' (cf. his use of Zech. 9:9 in 21:1-4)."⁴⁹ Bird reminds us that in its original context, the prophecy in Isaiah 7:4 refers to an infant born during the time of Ahaz and Isaiah, not to a divine messianic deliverer to be born some seven hundred years later.⁵⁰ Bird believes that a virgin conception is "clearly not predicted in the Hebrew text of Isaiah 7:4."⁵¹ In Bird's view, Matthew's citation "postulates a correlation of patterns or types between Isaiah's narrative and the birth story Matthew narrates."⁵² Therefore, can Isaiah 7:4 be used to prove the doctrine of virgin birth? No. Anthony Lane concludes the argument perfectly, "It is

48. Crowe, *Was Jesus*, 12. Italics in the original.

49. John M. Frame, "Virgin Birth of Jesus," Originally published in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), 1143-45, <http://www.frame-poythress.org/virgin-birth-of-jesus/> (last accessed December 13th, 2013). Frame further argues that for Matthew, the "fulfillment" may draw the attention of the people to the prophecy in startling, even bizarre ways which the prophet himself might never have anticipated. It "corresponds" to the prophecy in unpredictable but exciting ways, as a variation in music corresponds to a theme.

50. Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 369.

51. Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 369. Bird explains that the Hebrew word '*almâ*' means a woman of marriageable age, not necessarily a virgin. The notion of virginity is probably imported from the LXX through the word *parthenos*, which was used to translate '*almâ*', and *parthenos* more explicitly implies a "virgin." Even so, while '*almâ*' is not a technical term for *virgo intacta*, the idea of virginity could not be connoted, depending on the context.

52. Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 369.

unlikely that Isaiah 7 would have been taken to refer to the virgin birth of the Messiah except by those who already held such a belief. The use of Isaiah 7 arose from the belief in the virgin birth, not vice versa.”⁵³

Response to Objection of Embellishment/Exaggeration. To refute this argument, we can show that Matthew and Luke show “considerable restraint” to the miraculous in the birth narratives.⁵⁴ This is very different from the exaggerated emphasis on the miraculous of Jesus’ birth and childhood in the New Testament apocryphal books (e.g. Proto-Gospel of James; Infancy Gospel of Thomas).⁵⁵ Crowe notes how the birth narratives are very subtle and understated compared to Plutarch’s description of Alexander’s conception, which involves “a mighty peal of thunder, a thunderbolt striking the womb of his mother Olympias, her room being filled with fire, and the dream of a serpent lying next to Olympias,”⁵⁶ which was taken by Alexander’s father to be an indication that she was the partner of a superior being. It is also impossible to see the birth narratives as “christianized” legend, because they lack specific Christian concepts and Christological explanation or reflection.⁵⁷ The birth narrative is indeed a fact of history (however written with theological purposes); it is “documenting what happened at the time

53. Lane, “The Rationale,” 50.

54. Buckwalter, “Virgin Birth,” 800.

55. Buckwalter, “Virgin Birth,” 800.

56. Crowe, *Was Jesus*, 16.

57. Buckwalter, “Virgin Birth,” 800.

of Jesus' birth before the Christological significance of Jesus was yet known."⁵⁸

Witherington III notes that a legend generally develops over a much longer period of time than the few decades that exist between the time of Jesus and the final form of the Gospels.⁵⁹ Even as late as the 80-90s, there were still some eyewitnesses to the Gospel events (who were able to provide authentication to the virgin birth event), and Luke claims to have relied at least in part on their testimony.⁶⁰ Crowe highlights the structure of the Gospel of Matthew and Luke to prove the impossibility of seeing the birth narratives as fabrications. He says that "the first two chapters of Matthew are quite important as part of the overall message of the gospel, and their authenticity is not disputed."⁶¹ Matthew's gospel is literarily framed by a theme that open and closes the book – the promise of Jesus' presence with his people (Matthew 1:22-23; 28:20), and the first part of this frame is found in the virgin birth narrative. Matthew 1:21 (which is part of the birth narrative) contains the plot statement of Matthew's gospel (Jesus will save his people from their sins) that is crucial to the rest of the gospel. Therefore, it is highly impossible that the birth narrative is a later embellishment. Like Matthew, Luke 1-2 (specifically Luke 1:34-35) is certainly an original part of the

58. Buckwalter, "Virgin Birth," 800.

59. Witherington III, "Birth of Jesus," 60.

60. Witherington III, "Birth of Jesus," 60.

61. Crowe, *Was Jesus*, 13.

Gospel; themes that are developed later in the gospel are introduced in these chapters.⁶²

Response to Objection from 'Silence.' What about the fact that other books in the New Testament are silent on this matter? Bird says that "general absence does not mean specific insignificance."⁶³ He believes that this absence is perhaps explainable on the grounds that "it refers to second order instruction."⁶⁴ The question can also be answered from a different angle, by looking back to the specific theological purposes of each New Testament book. For example, the Gospel of Mark is designed "to provide a report of the events that had been a matter of public observation, not to give the intimate details of Jesus' life."⁶⁵ Other than that, the fact that Mark received his information primarily from Peter suggests that Mark "may have chosen to include only what the apostle had personally observed."⁶⁶ However, Frame highlights that at least there is a hint that Mark knew about the virgin birth. It is interesting that the Markan variant of Matthew 13:55 (Mk. 6:3) eliminates reference to Joseph and speaks of Jesus as "Mary's son"; this is "an unusual way of describing parentage in Jewish culture."⁶⁷ This indicates some knowledge of the virgin birth by Mark, or at least some public knowledge of an irregularity in Jesus' origin, even though Mark does not include the

62. Crowe, *Was Jesus*, 14.

63. Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 370.

64. Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 370.

65. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 767.

66. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 767.

67. Frame, "Virgin Birth," (last accessed December 13th, 2013).

birth narrative in his gospel.⁶⁸ As for the Gospel of John, it is understandable that John did not include the birth narrative. The prologue of his gospel is “theologically rather than historically oriented,”⁶⁹ and immediately followed by a picture of Jesus and John the Baptist at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. John did not bother narrating Jesus’ life prior to his public ministry. However, there is a hint that virgin birth is implicit in the Gospel of John (John 8:41), where Jesus’ opponents hint his illegitimacy. Quoting Raymond Brown, Frame says that “such a charge would not have been fabricated by Christians, nor would it have been fabricated by non-Christians, probably, unless Jesus’ origin were known to be somehow unusual.”⁷⁰ What about the absence in Pauline letters? Erickson rightfully reminds us to look at the nature of his epistles: “not general discourses of a catechetical nature, but treatments of particular problems in the life of the church or an individual.”⁷¹ If the occasion called for exposition or argument on a particular topic, Paul would deal with it (e.g. the issue of grace and law, spiritual gifts, the body of Christ, personal morality).⁷² If an issue was not a matter of dispute in the churches or the individuals to whom he wrote (e.g. the person of Christ), he would not go into details.⁷³ However, Michael Bird notes that Paul refers in passing to Jesus as “born of a woman” (Galatian

68. Frame, “Virgin Birth,” (last accessed December 13th, 2013).

69. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 768.

70. Frame, “Virgin Birth,” (last accessed December 13th, 2013).

71. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 769.

72. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 769.

73. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 769.

4:4); he says that “though it might mean no more than Jesus was born in the ordinary way, it could echo a known tradition about Jesus’ birth.”⁷⁴

Is the Doctrine Metaphysically Necessary?

We have come to the conclusion that the doctrine of virgin birth is biblically necessary referent of the Scriptural sense. In other words, the doctrine of virgin birth is the only possible inference and implication of what the Bible says about the birth narratives of Jesus. However, one might ask: did Jesus *need* to be born of a virgin?⁷⁵ Is the virgin birth of Jesus *metaphysically* or *ontologically* necessary?

Some scholars say “Yes”; they believe that virgin birth was “absolutely necessary” and that “it can be proved that God could not possibly have arranged things in any other way.”⁷⁶ J. Gresham Machen seems to hold his view, particularly when he says, “If Jesus Christ was really born without human father, if that was really God’s way for our Savior to enter into the world, then it may certainly be assumed that it was the best way and that any other way would have

74. Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 365.

75. Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 370.

76. Lane, “The Rationale,” 48. As a *caveat*: this is not the position held by Lane. In p. 49 Lane states explicitly his position, “I do not believe that human reason can show that the virgin birth was a logical necessity. But I do believe that it can be shown to be reasonable, to cohere with the rest of the Christian faith and to be fitting and plausible in the context of our total picture of Christ.

been wrong.”⁷⁷ Machen also claims, “One thing at least is clear: even if the belief in the virgin birth is not necessary to every Christian, it is certainly necessary to Christianity.”⁷⁸ Those who hold this view usually argues that the doctrine of virgin birth was necessary to guarantee or secure at least three things: (1) the incarnation; (2) the true divinity and humanity of Christ; and (3) the sinlessness of Christ. Crisp notes how Machen maintained that denial of the Virgin Birth inevitably leads to one of two outcomes: the evasion of a biblical doctrine of sin or evasion of the biblical presentation of Christ’s supernatural person.⁷⁹

However, there are some problems with this view. First, this view seems to misunderstand the relationship between the virgin birth and incarnation (and by implication, relationship between the virgin birth and the divinity of Christ). This has led to the belief that “Jesus is the Son of God because God was His Father *instead of* Joseph.”⁸⁰ Implied in that sentence is a fallacious view of the virgin birth as a biological explanation of the Incarnation, looking at Jesus as human on his mother’s side and divine on his father’s side.⁸¹ Lane

77. J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1930), 392. Quoted in Lane, “The Rationale,” 49.

78. Machen, *The Virgin Birth*, 396.

79. Crisp, “On the ‘Fittingness,’” 211. In Machen’s own words: “Deny or give up the story of the virgin birth, and inevitably you are led to evade either the high Biblical doctrine of sin or else the full Biblical presentation of the supernatural Person of our Lord.” See Machen, *The Virgin Birth*, 395.

80. Lane, “The Rationale,” 50. Italics in the original.

81. Lane, “The Rationale,” 50

warns us to clearly grasp the distinction between the Incarnation and the virgin birth. The virgin birth “concerns the origins of the *humanity* of Christ, while the doctrine of the Incarnation, on the other hand, concerns the deity of Christ.”⁸² To summarize the distinction,

The Incarnation means that Jesus is the Son of God become flesh, the virgin birth means that he had no human father. It is not hard to see how the two have come to be confused. The one states that God is his Father, the other that Joseph was not. It has been fatally easy to put these two together and to conclude that God was his father *instead of* Joseph, *because* Joseph was not. But this is a serious confusion. God is his Father at the level of his eternal existence as God, not at the biological level. It was at the latter level that Joseph failed to be his father. When it is stated that Jesus did not need a human father because God was his Father the two levels are being confused.⁸³

Furthermore, P.T. Forsyth argues that virgin birth does not guarantee both the Incarnation and the divinity of Christ. He points out that “the product of a virgin birth need not even be preexistent, let alone divine.”⁸⁴ Lane adds, “That the virgin birth does not guarantee either the Incarnation or the deity of Christ can be seen from the fact that it has traditionally been held by both Arians (who

82. Lane, “The Rationale,” 50-51.

83. Lane, “The Rationale,” 51. In p. 52 Lane adds, “The Incarnation and the virgin birth are referring to different things because they are answering different questions. The incarnation affirms Jesus’ divine origin, the virgin birth the miraculous origin of his humanity.”

84. P.T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ* (London, 1946), 261. Quoted in Lane, “The Rationale,” 51.

deny the deity of Christ) and Adoptionists (who deny the Incarnation), to say nothing of Muslims who also hold it.”⁸⁵

Against those who believe that virgin birth was *metaphysically* necessary, Crisp – with his analytic and Reformed background – proposes some arguments to argue that those three important doctrine (the incarnation, divinity and humanity of Christ, and his sinlessness) can perfectly be guaranteed by the No Virgin Birth (NVB) version of the incarnation.⁸⁶ Crisp believes that “Christ could be both sinless, through the work of Holy Spirit at the moment of conception, and possessed of two natures, as per Chalcedonian

85. Lane, “The Rationale,” 51. Conversely, Lane believes that the Incarnation does not necessitate the virgin birth.

86. Crisp, “On the ‘Fittingness’,” 208-211. In p. 209, Crisp describes the NVB version of the Incarnation as follows: “Jesus was born to Mary and Joseph through a normal act of human procreation. There was no miraculous generation of Y chromosomes or fertilization of Mary’s ovum involved in this act. Assume Joseph was the natural father of Christ (according to his human nature). At the moment of conception, as Joseph’s sperm fertilized Mary’s ovum, God created a human soul out of nothing, which he attached to, or integrated into the fertilized ovum. Yet at the self-same moment of conception, the Holy Spirit intervened in this miraculous respect: he ensured that the soul of Christ was without original sin. ... At the same moment in which God creates the human nature of Christ in the womb of Mary, the Word of God assumes it.” The Reformed orthodox presupposition behind this explanation distinguishes three aspect of the Virgin Birth: (1) the formation of Christ’s human nature by the Holy Spirit; (2) his sanctification of that human nature and; (3) its assumption by the person of the Word of God (all three being conceptual, not temporal distinctions. The NVB account preserves the 2nd and 3rd aspect of the traditional account whilst amending the 1st. The claim is that the human nature of Christ is generated through normal procreation, rather than divine intervention. See p. 211.

orthodoxy, on an NVB account.”⁸⁷ To guard against Docetism, those who believe in the metaphysical necessity of the virgin birth argue that “the traditional doctrine of Virginal Conception and Birth of Christ preserves his true and complete humanity” (anti-docetic thesis).⁸⁸ However, Crisp replies by saying that an NVB account would be a better way of ensuring the true, full humanity of Christ.⁸⁹ With regard to the sinlessness of Christ, Crisp reminds us that it is not the doctrine of virgin birth that secures the sinlessness, but the doctrine of hypostatic union.⁹⁰ Moreover, in line with this, the NVB account of the Incarnation can also guarantee the sinlessness of Christ’s human nature from conception onward.⁹¹ From different angle, theologians from early church like Augustine argue that virgin birth guarantees Christ’s sinlessness because “as Christ was conceived without sexual intercourse, it follows that he was without original sin.”⁹² However, Lane rightly argues that hypothetically speaking, virgin birth can only be said to guarantee sinlessness if these two conditions can be proven to be biblical: (1) that original sin is transmitted by sexual intercourse (as the Church fathers maintained); or (2) it is transmitted through the male line only, not through the female line.⁹³

87. Crisp, “On the ‘Fittingness,’” 211.

88. Crisp, “On the ‘Fittingness,’” 212.

89. Crisp, “On the ‘Fittingness,’” 212.

90. Crisp, “On the ‘Fittingness,’” 213.

91. Crisp, “On the ‘Fittingness,’” 213.

92. Lane, “The Rationale,” 55.

93. Lane, “The Rationale,” 55. It is obvious that these two ideas do not have any biblical support.

To return to Bird's question: "did Jesus *need* to be born of a virgin?" Responding to Machen's claim that "even if the belief in the virgin birth is not necessary to every Christian, it is certainly necessary to Christianity," Crisp states that in one sense this is perfectly true: "The Virgin Birth is a constituent of the theology of Scripture and the Creeds, without which we would have a mutilated, or at least depleted, account of the Incarnation as it has been traditionally understood."⁹⁴ Virgin birth is how God actually brought about the incarnation, as witnessed clearly in the Bible. In other words, the doctrine of virgin birth is "biblically necessary." However, as has been shown, God could also have brought about the incarnation without a virgin birth.

In sum, it is fitting to conclude this section with Crisp's statement:

So Machen is right, if the necessity he has in mind is conditional upon God's ordaining that the Incarnation takes place by Virgin Birth. But it is not the case that the Virgin Birth is a necessary mode of Incarnation, in the sense that it was the only *metaphysically possible* way for the Incarnation to take place. God could have ordained matters otherwise.⁹⁵

From Biblical Necessity to Biblical Fittingness

So far, we have concluded that the doctrine of virgin birth is *biblically* or canonically necessary, but not *metaphysically* or

94. Crisp, "On the 'Fittingness'," 211.

95. Crisp, "On the 'Fittingness'," 211. Italics in the original.

ontologically necessary. However, “necessity” is not the only possible category that can be used to explain the reality of virgin birth and its relation (primarily) to the event of incarnation. The idea of “fittingness” (Latin: *convenire; decere*)⁹⁶ can lead us to understand more richly why God *actually* chose the virgin birth as the means by which the incarnation is brought about. In other words, the category of “fittingness” tries to answer why it is fitting for God to choose this means (virgin birth), even though He could have ordained matters otherwise. Crisp notes that the notion of “fittingness” of the incarnation has a long theological pedigree.⁹⁷ For the purpose of this essay, three models of fittingness of the virgin birth will be expounded.⁹⁸

Aesthetic Fittingness (Irenaeus). Dustin Resch contends that “a determining factor in Irenaeus’ use of Scripture is what Osborn calls his ‘aesthetic’ criterion.”⁹⁹ Irenaeus’ biblical exegesis is shaped

96. Adam Johnson, “A Fuller Account: The Role of ‘Fittingness’ in Thomas Aquinas’ Development of the Doctrine of the Atonement,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 3 (July 1, 2010): 304.

97. Crisp, “On the ‘Fittingness’ of the Virgin Birth,” 214.

98. The focus of this essay is not to provide prescription, to evaluate each model or adjudicate which of these “fittingness” models are best or better than the other models. The purpose is more descriptive; to illustrate the concept of “fittingness” of virgin birth as understood by these theologians. I will suggest in the conclusion of this essay that we should take this research to the next level by trying to establish criteria for good biblical fittingness.

99. Dustin G Resch, “The Fittingness and Harmony of Scripture: Toward an Irenaeian Hermeneutic,” *Heythrop Journal* 50, no. 1 (January 2009): 74. Quoted from Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2001), 18-20, cf. 193-210.

much by his concern to “display the ‘harmony’ (*consonantia*) and ‘fittingness’ of the Scriptures and, *mutatis mutandis*, the Christian faith itself.”¹⁰⁰ Irenaeus tried to subvert his enemies—who in his view “violently fragment the Scriptures by conforming them to their alien teaching”—by presenting the beauty of Scripture’s internal coherence and unified harmony.¹⁰¹ In his view, the fundamental mistake of the heretics of his day has been “their use of the statements of Scripture without regard to their overall shape.”¹⁰² In Resch’s words, “by beginning with sources alien to Scripture the heretics must wrench the biblical expressions from their proper place to fit with their doctrine.”¹⁰³ Irenaeus likens the heretics’ practice of biblical interpretation to the act of “breaking into pieces the ‘beautiful image’ of a king constructed by a ‘skilful artist’ out of precious jewels.” The heretics then re-arrange the gems “to fit together into the form of a dog or a fox – ‘and even that but poorly executed.’”¹⁰⁴ For Irenaeus, the unity and harmony, the form and structure of Scripture is the important key for right interpretation.¹⁰⁵

100. Resch, “The Fittingness”, 74.

101. Resch, “The Fittingness”, 74.

102. Resch, “The Fittingness”, 74.

103. Resch, “The Fittingness”, 75.

104. Resch, “The Fittingness”, 75. Resch also notes that Irenaeus also compares the exegesis of the heretics to a pastiche. Irenaeus illustrates this by “taking lines drawn from Homer’s *Odessey* and *Iliad* and detaches them from their original narrative shape, reordering them according to a form entirely different from their original structure.” By doing this, “the expressions no longer refer to their original subject.”

105. Resch, “The Fittingness”, 75.

How does Irenaeus see the fittingness of virgin birth? Several points can be highlighted:¹⁰⁶ (1) The virgin birth is fitting with a prophecy in Isaiah which says that mentions the ‘belly’ of David (rather than his ‘loins’), showing that there is no male involvement in the conception of the promised child; (2) The virgin birth is fitting to explain Adam/Christ and Eve/Mary typologies. The analogy between the first and second Adam expressed the inner logic of God’s plan of salvation. Christ’s work was a ‘recapitulation’ of the sin of Adam; (3) The virgin birth was a fitting ‘sign’ and ‘token’ of the significance of Christ’s advent. Irenaeus develops this second point by saying that, first, the unexpected sign of the virgin birth is fitting to attest the most unexpected work of God in salvation. Second, the virgin birth is a fitting sign to express the primacy of God’s action in salvation apart from the agency of human beings. Third, the virgin birth is a fitting token of both the divine and human generations of Christ.

*Agential fittingness (Anselm).*¹⁰⁷ According to Johnson, Anselm uses both the term *convenire* and *decere* in his *Cur Deus Homo* (both translated as “fittingness”).¹⁰⁸ Johnson explains that these two words are used with three general senses.¹⁰⁹ First, they are used in the Irenaean aesthetic sense of fittingness or balance in his notion of recapitulation which Anselm seeks to undergird by means

106. Resch, “The Fittingness”, 78-79.

107. The term “Agential Fittingness” is adopted from Johnson, “A Fuller Account,” 306.

108. Johnson, “A Fuller Account,” 304.

109. Johnson, “A Fuller Account,” 304-5. The following explanation given here is taken from footnote no. 7.

of his own account (1.3, 2.8). Second, there is a sense in which an act is appropriate (or even necessary), based on the nature and character of the agent and the circumstances in question. Anselm's central concern with the fittingness of the incarnation as it relates to God's nature and human sin falls under this category. *Convinere* and *decere* both serve to express these first two senses. The third and anomalous sense is conveyed solely by the term *convenire*. This sense pertains to the act of 'bringing together' the two nature of Christ (2.9), or the various persons which constitute an assembly (2.16). Johnson concludes that with the exception of the third sense, Anselm's use of *convenire* and *decere* typically refers to the "appropriateness of an action given the nature/character of an agent in a given set of circumstances."¹¹⁰ In this sense, *convenire* means: reasonable, appropriate or befitting. Anselm wants to argue that God's becoming human is an act demanded by the combination of three factors: "God's nature, God's purpose for human beings and the fallen condition of humankind."¹¹¹

Crisp mentions four specific reasons for the fittingness of virginal conception in Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*:¹¹² (1) God has yet to create a human via virginal conception (he had previously used the three other logically possible methods); (2) It is appropriate that as the curse originated with a woman (Eve), so salvation begins with a

110. Johnson, "A Fuller Account," 305.

111. Johnson, "A Fuller Account," 304.

112. Crisp, "On the 'Fittingness'," 214.

woman (Mary); (3) The inclusion of Mary in salvation history is the occasion by which God is able to rebuild the hope of women, which might have been crushed by the action of Eve in bringing about original sin; (4) As Eve was created from the 'virgin' Adam without a woman, it is fitting that Christ's human nature is created from a virgin, Mary, without a man.

Although Crisp does not agree with every detail of Anselm's points,¹¹³ he admits that this Anselmian reasoning can be used to argue for the fittingness of the virgin birth. Crisp found that in modern theology, the doctrine of virgin birth is thought to be in conflict with the doctrine of pre-existence of Christ. However, Crisp believes that the opposite is the case. This doctrine can better explain the pre-existence of Christ than the NVB account. He says, "A special birth signals the fact that it is a divine person taking on human nature, not the beginning of the life of a new individual, as a normal process of human generation from two human parents might suggest."¹¹⁴ The traditional doctrine 'fits' better with Christ's pre-existence than the NVB account does. He further says:

What the traditional doctrine provides that a NVB account does not, is a signal, or marker for the Incarnation that preserves the uniqueness of this event, without explaining it

113. In his words, "Anselm's attempt to supply reasons for the fittingness of the Virginal Conception of Christ is not, I suggest, an unqualified success, despite several insightful observations. See Crisp, "On the 'Fittingness', 215.

114. Crisp, "On the 'Fittingness'," 216.

(it is, after all, a divine mystery). ... The traditional doctrine points to the fact that Jesus of Nazareth is the second person of the Trinity. It is pre-existing person of the Word of God who assumes human nature in addition to his divine nature at the Incarnation. And this unique event is marked by the mode of his conception and birth.¹¹⁵

Anthony Lane makes similar observations. He argues that the virgin birth is congruous with the Incarnation “as a sign pointing to it.”¹¹⁶ It is fitting for Christ to have a special birth; the abnormal birth is “fitting and appropriate as a pointer to the deity of Christ.”¹¹⁷ In a rather Irenaeian spirit, he invites us to see the virgin birth not in isolation (as a random event) but fittingly as part of the total picture of Christ, with his incarnation and resurrection.¹¹⁸ Lane helpfully advises us to look at the relationship between the virgin birth and the incarnation not in a “cause-effect” relationship, but in a “sign-things signified” relationship.¹¹⁹ The virgin birth did not cause the incarnation any more than the empty tomb caused the resurrection. The virgin birth is a sign, pointing to the thing signified, which is: “(1) the importance and supernatural character of the One born; and (2) God’s initiative in the incarnation; (3) the new start involved in the Second Adam, the originator of a new humanity.”¹²⁰

115. Crisp, “On the ‘Fittingness’,” 216.

116. Lane, “The Rationale”, 53.

117. Lane, “The Rationale”, 53.

118. Lane, “The Rationale”, 54.

119. Lane, “The Rationale”, 54.

120. Lane, “The Rationale”, 54, 61.

Telic Fittingness (Thomas Aquinas). For Thomas Aquinas, the idea of fittingness refers primarily to “the bringing together of various things: *convenire*, to come or bring together.”¹²¹ Johnson argues that Thomas does not deny the Anselmian use of the term, but he goes beyond Anselm in “emphasizing the way in which God’s act brings together an array of results appropriate to the motive underlying that act.”¹²² In other words, the doctrine of virgin birth is fitting for Thomas because “*it brings together the greatest number of desired effects*.”¹²³ Here Johnson differentiates Thomas from Anselm. He says, “when Anselm speaks of fittingness, he look back from the act to the agent, to see whether the act is appropriate for the agent (‘agential fittingness’). ... When Thomas speaks of fittingness, he primarily (though not exclusively) looks forward from the act to its multiple effects (‘telic’ fittingness).”¹²⁴ It is in this task of “recognizing the fittingness of God’s activity, or ‘bringing together’ the various aspects of God’s acts” that Thomas uses philosophy and reason as the instrumental tools.¹²⁵ For Thomas, philosophy “enables the theological task without providing the materials or directions for the activity.”¹²⁶ The conceptual material, used in the activity of ‘bringing

121. Johnson, “A Fuller Account,” 305.

122. Johnson, “A Fuller Account,” 305-306.

123. Johnson, “A Fuller Account,” 305. Italics in the original. As a *caveat*, in this article, Johnson does not specifically discuss Thomas Aquinas’ concept of the fittingness of the virgin birth, but the fittingness of the doctrine of atonement.

124. Johnson, “A Fuller Account,” 306.

125. Johnson, “A Fuller Account,” 306.

126. Johnson, “A Fuller Account,” 306-7.

together' is "Scripture and the scriptural interpretations of the Church Fathers."¹²⁷

For Thomas, there are several reasons for the fittingness of the virginal conception:¹²⁸ (1) it was fitting that Christ be conceived by a virgin because it would be unfitting for him to have a father other than God the Father; (2) the virginal conception, in which there is no "corruption of the mother" (that is, there was no sexual intercourse and, thus, no damage to her body) is fitting for the Word of God who is eternally begotten by the Father without resulting in any "internal corruption" in the being of God himself; (3) Christ's virginal conception is a fitting "exemplar" of the incarnation's divinely ordained "end": the rebirth of human beings as sons of God by the power of God; (4) a conception apart from fleshly concupiscence was fitting to the dignity of Christ's humanity in which there was no sin and by which he took away the sin of the world.

127. Johnson, "A Fuller Account," 307.

128. Dustin Resch, *Barth's Interpretation of the Virgin Birth: A Sign of Mystery* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012), 16. The following reasons for Christ's conception are taken from p. 16. As discussed before, some of these reasons (1, 2, 4) are similar to the reasons given by those who argue for the ontological or metaphysical necessity of the virgin birth to guarantee the incarnation, divinity, humanity, and the sinlessness of Christ. The difference is that Thomas looks at these reasons in the context of fittingness rather than metaphysical necessity. We can also see the influence of Augustinian concept of original sin in Thomas' explanation.

Conclusion

We have come to the conclusion that the doctrine of virgin birth is both biblically necessary and biblically fitting. We have learnt that looking at this doctrine in terms of fittingness can help Christians in the vocation of faith seeking clearer understanding and can assist them in more effective apologetics. However, we have yet to establish criteria for distinguishing good argument for biblical fittingness from the bad ones. I want to suggest that to take this preliminary research to the next level, we must try to establish good criteria for biblical fittingness. At the same time, I believe that the project of establishing criteria for good biblical fittingness is more than finding the right method; it is also a matter of character and habit formation. I will suggest two kinds of habit formation that I think crucial for this task.

First, we need to look at the *aesthetic fittingness* (Irenaeus), *agential fittingness* (Anselm), and *telic fittingness* (Thomas Aquinas) from the overall framework of *dramatic fittingness* (Vanhoozer).¹²⁹ Vanhoozer rightly reminds us that judgments about fittingness “depend on one’s prior construal of ‘the whole’: its kind, its shape.”¹³⁰ He warns us not to look at the idea of fittingness only in terms of “Being,” because this can make the wholeness too systematic and static.¹³¹ He says, “Given its theo-dramatic subject matter, theological

129. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: WJK, 2005), 256.

130. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 256.

131. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 256.

fittingness should neither be reduced to symmetry nor frozen into systematicity.”¹³² He further argues that “theological fittingness is less a matter of logical than of *dramatic* consistency, for the wholeness in question is a matter not simply of being but of *doing*. *The dogma is the drama*: the whole and complete action of God, creating and recreating in Jesus Christ through the Spirit.”¹³³ To do this task, we must cultivate our Christian imagination. Imagination is no other than “the power of synoptic vision – the ability to synthesize heterogeneous elements into a unity.”¹³⁴ It is “a cognitive faculty by which we see as whole what those without imagination see only as unrelated parts.”¹³⁵ Our imagination must be sanctified if we are to see the dramatic fittingness, which involves not only canonical fittingness but also contextual and contemporary fittingness.¹³⁶

132. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 256-257.

133. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 257. Italics in the original.

134. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Lost in Interpretation?: Truth, Scripture, and Hermeneutics” in *Whatever Happened to Truth?*, ed. Andreas Köstenberger (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005), 121.

135. Vanhoozer, “Lost in Interpretation?,” 121.

136. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 258-263. In an interview, Vanhoozer makes two points regarding “sanctified imagination.” In his words: First, I find that the imagination is a vital ingredient in my sanctification. I need to keep the big biblical picture (creation-fall-redemption-consummation) in mind as I attempt to live day by day, minute by minute, as a follower of Jesus Christ who desires above all to have one’s thought and life correspond to the gospel. To do that, I have to keep the gospel story (together with its presuppositions and implications) in mind, and I have to connect my story to that of Jesus. That requires imagination. Second, the imagination is “sanctified” because it is “set apart” for the purpose of making just these kinds of connections. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “An Interview with Kevin Vanhoozer,” Online interview with *Justin Taylor in Between Two Worlds*, May 11th, 2009, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/>

Second, we need to cultivate a sense of wonder of the divine mystery. In trying to understand the doctrine of virgin birth in terms of biblical fittingness, we must guard ourselves against overanalyzing it and losing its sense of divine mystery. Karl Barth laments that the reason why modern Protestants have felt the need to question the doctrine of virgin birth (among other doctrines) is because of a “deficiency in their own approach to the theological task.”¹³⁷ The deficiency that is lacking for Barth is “the dimension of what for once, though not confusing it with religious and moral earnestness, we may describe as mystery.”¹³⁸ For Barth, an awareness of the mystery of God in the miracle of virgin birth will keep us from “all theological over-confidence.”¹³⁹ We would do well to heed Barth’s wise warning.

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137. Dustin Resch, *Barth’s Interpretation of the Virgin Birth: A Sign of Mystery* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012), 63.

138. Resch, *Barth’s Interpretation of the Virgin Birth*, 63. Quoted from Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, p. xiv.

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