

Firstborn Son of Mary

Luke 2:7

BIRTH OF A SON

On Saturday this week, many people will celebrate Christmas. Some will celebrate it as the great holy day of materialism and commercialism. Others will celebrate Christ's birth, though he almost surely was not born in December. Whether or not you will celebrate it, it is clear that you cannot avoid it. What is clearer is that you should not avoid thinking about the birth of our Lord into this world.

There are numerous facets of the diamond that is Christ's birth to look at in the Scripture. Today I want to focus on this idea of him as **Mary's firstborn**. Luke says, "**She gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn**" (Luke 2:7). Let us look at the verse piece by piece.

First, *she* gave birth. Who is "she?" She is Mary, the betrothed virgin of Joseph the Carpenter who lived in Nazareth. She was an **historical person**, not a legend. She was the cousin of a woman named Elizabeth who bore John the Baptist. She was counted in the census of Caesar Augustus while one Quirinius was governor of Syria. She was there for Jesus' first miracle, with him at the foot of the cross, saw him after the resurrection, and was at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon them.

These things are important, because Christianity is **an historical religion**, rooted in things that actually took place in real places with real people. As Luke himself tells us, "**Many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us. From the beginning there were eyewitnesses who were servants of the Word who handed down what they saw. So I investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus, so that you might know the exact truth of the things you have been taught**" (Luke 1:1-4).

This is the witness of the entire NT. Peter said, "**We did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty**" (2Pe 1:16). John said, "**That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life**" (1Jo 1:1). Christianity does not claim to be make-believe, just the opposite. The writers dealt with the facts as they witnessed them. They do not tell of stories from prehistory that no one remembers. They do not exaggerate to create legends. They are not in it to make a buck or become famous. They simply tell what they saw. They couldn't help themselves. You can believe them or not, but it will not do to go around telling people something that contradicts what they themselves told us, for this is dishonesty with the

text at the most fundamental level and the deceit that comes from such liars masquerading as truth-tellers is a serpents venom that has poisoned many people in our day.

Next the verse tells us that **Mary gave birth**. You must read this with the background of the previous chapter. There Luke reports the story of the angel Gabriel coming to Mary. He said, “Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus” (Luke 1:32). “Jesus” means “savior.” Here, Matthew—which was one of the gospel accounts that Luke consulted when in writing his own—agrees saying, “She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21). So, the coming of Jesus in the womb of Mary has a very specific purpose. It is not merely to be a wise teacher or a miracle worker or a good example. It is **to save people from their sins**. The whole of the gospel, the very coming of Jesus to the world of men, presupposes that human beings are sinful and in need of salvation. Surely, this includes even the blessed virgin too, the one who bore Jesus in her womb, for she was born from two sinful human parents and was rebuked by her son for trying to get him to begin his ministry too early (John 2:4).¹ Roman dogma is simply contradictory of the Scripture at this point. Mary was not sinless, but she needed to be saved by her son, otherwise she is a goddess and should be worshipped as an eternal perfect being like Jesus is.

Matthew further illuminates the birth of Jesus, using a prophecy from **Isaiah 7:14**. He says, “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord has spoken by the prophet: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us)” (Matt 1:22-23). This is an important clue that the person Mary will carry in her womb is **no ordinary person**. It does not prove it, but it is a clue. She does not yet understand this when Gabriel gives her the initial announcement. She asks, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” So he tells her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God” (Luke 1:35).

I’m surprised that Gabriel didn’t ask Mary to sit down before he told her this. It must have been stunning news, incomprehensible. Indeed, it had never happened and never will happen again in all the long history of mankind. Her child would be God’s son, conceived by the Holy Spirit, the very power of the Most High, who would overshadow her. This could only be ensured if she were a virgin.

The virgin birth is one of the most foundational doctrines in all of Christianity. Recall the famous **Apostle’s Creed**. It is very short and very basic in terms of what it insists is at the heart of the Christian Faith. The Creed consists of 12 statements.² Tradition says that each

¹ Andreas J. Köstenberger (*John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 94-95) has an excellent analysis of this. “The underlying thrust of the phrase translated “Why do you involve me?” in the TNIV is “What do you and I have in common (as far as the matter at hand is concerned)?” The implied answer: “Nothing.” The expression occurs elsewhere in the Gospels exclusively on the lips of demons who strongly oppose Jesus (see Matt. 8:29 pars.; Mark 1:24 par.). As OT parallels make clear, the phrase always distances two parties and frequently carries a reproachful connotation (see Judg. 11:12; 2 Sam. 16:10; 1 Kings 17:18; 2 Kings 3:13; 2 Chron. 35:21). This suggests that Jesus here is issuing a fairly sharp rebuke to Mary (cf. Matt. 12:46–50), similar to his rebuke of Peter when he failed to understand the nature of Jesus’ calling (cf. Matt. 16:23).”

² (1) I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. (2) I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. (3) He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. (4) He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. (5) He

statement was written by a different one of the 12 Disciples when they came together to form the first official Creed of the Church. **Ambrose of Milan** writing in 390 AD says, “If they will not believe the doctrines of the Clergy, let them believe the oracles of Christ, let them believe the admonitions of Angels who say, *For with God nothing shall be impossible*. Let them give credit to the Creed of the Apostles, which the Roman Church has always kept and preserved undefiled. Mary heard the voice of the Angel, and she who before had said *How shall this be?* not asking from want of faith in the mode of generation, afterwards replied, *Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to thy word*. This is the virgin who conceived, this the virgin who brought forth a Son. For thus it is written, *Behold a Virgin shall conceive and bear a Son*; declaring not only that she should conceive as a virgin, but also that she bring forth as a virgin.” (**Ambrose of Milan**, 390 AD: *Letter* 42:5). Line three of the creed is taken almost verbatim from **Luke 1:35** and **2:7**, “He (Jesus Christ) was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.”

I get asked the question about the importance of the virgin birth quite a lot. **Can you be a Christian and reject the virgin birth?** My answer has been that you can be a Christian and not know about the virgin birth, I suppose. When I say this to people, I explain to them that the good news is not that Jesus was born of a virgin. In other words, Christmas is not the gospel, but only the setting of it, or the way that the gospel becomes possible. The good news is that Jesus died on the cross as an atonement for sin to appease the wrath of God against sin, and was raised to life from the dead for our justification, so that any who believe upon him may have eternal life.

Thus, when a preacher gives the gospel, he may say nothing whatsoever about the virgin birth. Think about all of the sermons in Acts. **How many of them ever mention the virgin birth?** None to my knowledge. So, a person may become converted without ever hearing about this. However, if they are taught about the virgin birth later on and reject it as absurd or inconsequential or irrelevant or untrue, then I do not believe that person was ever genuinely converted. As I said, the virgin birth sets the stage for Jesus to come to earth. It is through a virgin that God becomes man. And no mere man can ever atone for sin or appease God’s wrath against it or raise himself from the dead. Remember, we do not teach that God came and had sex with Mary. Nor do we say that Jesus was Joseph’s biological child. **Both heresies end in hell**. Rather, Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit came upon her and the Power of God **overshadowed** her and a child came into the womb of Mary without ever touching her, so that the child would be “very God of very God.”

So what we have then in Luke’s narrative of the birth of our Lord is this. Jesus is Mary’s firstborn son, for this is who it says she gave birth to. It also says that he is the Son of God. Mary’s firstborn and the Son of God; I want to talk about both for the remainder of our time

descended into hell. On the third day he rose again. (6) He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. (7) He will come again to judge the living and the dead. (8) I believe in the Holy Spirit, (9) the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, (10) the forgiveness of sins, (11) the resurrection of the body, (12) and life everlasting. Amen.

together. First, let me help you understand one of the most [basic theological doctrines of Christianity](#).

We believe that [Jesus is both God and man](#). He is not half god and half man. He is not only man nor only God. He is fully God and fully man. He is fully God because he came down out of heaven from the place where he, as the Word of God, had eternally resided. He came down into the womb of Mary. What she gave birth to was not created by the Holy Spirit. Rather, it was the word made flesh. Jesus is fully man as surely and you and I are human beings. He was conceived in the flesh in the womb of Mary and was not a phantom or ghost, but real flesh and blood.

It is this fact—that [Jesus existed prior to his coming as a man](#), and not the virgin birth itself—that is the ground of his divinity. Just because a virgin would be with child, this does not prove that Jesus was God, for a human woman cannot give birth to God of herself under any circumstances.³ The virgin birth does not prove Christ's deity. Yet, if there was no virgin birth (that is, if there was a human father) you would not have God in a womb, but only a mere human. So the virgin birth is linked to Christ's deity in an essential way, but it is not the cause of it. There is no cause of Christ's deity. He has always been and always will be God eternal.

One more interesting idea is worth considering here too. [The virgin birth is not the cause of Christ's sinlessness](#). Rather, he deity is the cause. Some people will say that sin is passed down through the male sperm (seed), and thus Jesus could have a human mother and not be sinful as long as his Father was God. But David attributes sin *to his mother* saying, "[In sin she conceived me?](#)" (Ps 51:5). So, just because he had no human father, he would still have sin if he was not already God. Thus, you should understand that it was the overshadowing sanctifying work of the Power and Spirit of God that made the conception to be pure and undefiled.¹⁴ This is the work of God alone and not some cooperation between a God and a woman. There is no reason to deify Mary, though there is reason to call her most blessed among women and to give much praise to God when thinking of her, for she and she alone was given the great privilege of carrying the uncreated God in her womb.

So Jesus is fully God and fully man. Now, I want to help you understand this even better by looking at him as the son of God and the firstborn son of Mary. I hope it will give you a much deeper appreciation for the birth and coming of our Great Savior.

Son of God

"Son of God" is a remarkable name, to say the least. The Hebrew translation of the Greek NT translates is *ben-ha'elohim*. This phrase occurs nowhere in the OT. But the plural

³ Think about how the prophecy seems to have been fulfilled in some way in the life of Isaiah himself, who is the near referent to the prophecy of a virgin born with a child. His child was not God.

¹¹ See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), II.13.4; 481.

⁴ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1998), 551.

form does exist in several places in the OT: sons of God (*beney-ha'elohim*), where it always refers to [heavenly beings](#). The idea in calling him the son of God is that Jesus is a heavenly being.

The fact that God has other sons should be no strange teaching in your ears. After all, Christians are called the sons of God, as it says, “[All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God](#)” ([Rom 8:14](#)). In the OT, Israel was God’s “firstborn Son.” This is a reference to his taking for himself a peculiar people, a nation out of the nations, whom he would lead and guide, teach and save as his very own. He tells Pharaoh, “[Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son. . . Let my son go that he may serve me](#)” ([Ex 4:22-23](#)). Interestingly, it is the angel of the LORD who tells Moses to say this. But this “angel” was no ordinary angel. He was Israel’s angel, the angel of God’s presence, and he bore the name Yahweh. To put this another way, He was the Word of God before he became flesh.

If God can have earthly sons, he can also have heavenly sons. So [Psalm 89](#) says, “[Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones! For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD? Who among the sons of God is like the LORD, a God greatly to be feared in the council of the holy ones, and awesome above all who are around him?](#)” Job says that these “sons of God” shouted for joy when God laid the foundation of the earth ([Job 38:7](#)). Jesus is one of these sons, and yet he is not. For he is alone unique, not alike his earthly sons and not like his heavenly sons. He is eternal, the Word who created all things, the one possessed by God for all time.

Of the word of God we are told by the Apostle John, “[The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.](#)” This is the ESV’s translation. I have come to appreciate the ESV more and more, but in this instance, it is woefully inadequate. For Christ is not the Father’s “only Son.” The Greek word is monogenes. “Mono” is the word for “single” or “alone.” “Genes” is a word meaning “unique” or “of a kind.” And so Jesus is not God’s only son, [he is his only unique son](#), his only one of a kind son.

There is an English word that gets at this. It is the word begotten. So, the NAS says that the Word was “[the only begotten from the Father](#),” or in [John 1:18](#) he is the [only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father](#). In other words, the Father begat the Son in a way that is true of no other son in heaven or on earth. We are all created and adopted sons. The same is true of our angelic counterparts. In fact, Colossians and other places tell us not merely that God created us all, but that Christ did!

[Christ alone is begotten of the Father](#). We are not begotten by him. We are adopted by him. He alone came from the Father’s bosom. We did not come from the Father’s bosom. We go to the Father’s bosom in Christ. Another creed, trying to put words to this difficult idea, says that he is “[eternally begotten](#).” This puts two ideas seemingly in contradiction together in an ironic way. Christ is eternal, never created, always there with the Father. Yet, he proceeds from the Father and is eternally subordinate to him as a son is to a father. No friend, Christ is not God’s *only* son. He is the only unique son of God, the only uncreated son, the only eternally

existent son, the only omnipotent son, the only preeminent son, the only good son, the only wise son in heaven or on earth. As the Son of God, he is a heavenly being.

What is truly remarkable about this is how this person who is very God of very God would [come down to earth and be born one of us](#). God in Christ adds a new nature to his own. He temporarily sets aside the full use of his divine attributes and takes a form that we should not be attracted to him. He empties himself of his heavenly position and authority and becomes a man. Matthew explains this in a most curious OT reference saying, “[Out of Egypt I called my son](#)” ([Matt 2:15](#)).

This is a quote from [Hosea 11:1](#). It says, “[When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more they called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols.](#)” This is a complex passage. **First**, it is talking about historical events. Thus, Matthew’s use of it is not prophecy/fulfillment, but typological fulfillment. Israel was a type of Christ; Christ is the True Israel. Everything from his birth to his being cut off from the land is foreshadowed in Israel’s history. **Second**, as [Walt Kaiser](#) says, it is out of one of the sons of Israel that Jesus would eventually come. Thus “[when Israel was delivered by God as they crossed the Red Sea. . . should anything have happened to all Israel, and in particular to that next ‘son’ in the line of ‘sons’ leading up to Jesus, the rest of revelation along with Christmas and Easter would have been cancelled.](#)”⁵

Third, as I was thinking about this passage in light of the fact that God has heavenly sons and that Jesus is one of those in the OT, the very one who leads Israel out of Egypt as the Angel of the LORD, it seems quite plausible to me that God is actually telling us that he quite literally called Christ out of Egypt in former times to lead and save Israel from the hands of the gods (whom they listen to and immediately begin sacrificing to), and he is doing it again now in the birth of Christ who had to go down into Egypt in the days of Herod when he was a baby, so that he might be called up out of Egypt in order to redeem all of his people from their slavery to Satan. All of these things show us that Christ is the son of God, not made in Mary’s womb, not a man become God, but always God and fully God, the only God who has ever been born a man in all the long the history of the world. Is this not worth celebrating, the coming of our savior in the womb of Mary?

Firstborn of Mary

Let me turn my attention back to her then. It says that Jesus is Mary’s “[firstborn](#)” son. This not only reinforces her virginity, it also gives us some very important theological truths to think about this time of year. In the Scripture, firstborn is not necessarily a term of indicating chronology, although in this case it does. Isaac is Abraham’s firstborn son, though he came after Ishmael, because Isaac is the son of prominence and of birthright, which is what the term firstborn really signifies.

You can see how the word does not always mean “born first”, for example, in [Colossians 1:15](#) which says Christ is “[the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.](#)” In this

⁵ Kaiser, *Three Views of the NT Use of the OT*, 223.

case, firstborn does not have anything to do with giving birth, but with preeminence. All commentaries are in agreement with this, unless they are biased by an Arian/JW heresy. The idea is the same thing you find in Proverbs regarding wisdom. "The LORD possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth" (Prov 8:22-23). It is not that God is creating wisdom, as if wisdom was somehow born and did not exist prior to that (wouldn't it take wisdom to do that in the first place?). It is that God's Wisdom (which is Christ) is there doing all the creating, set apart from the Father in such a way as to glorify both father and son.

You see it in Psalm 88:28 (LXX), "I shall make him the firstborn, higher than the kinds of the earth." Christ is superior to everything, and that is why he is the firstborn. "When he brings the firstborn into the world he says, 'Let all the angels worship him'" (Heb 1:6). Is this not what the heavenly host do in Luke 2:14 at the birth of the baby, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

This idea that Christ is Mary's firstborn not only precedes her in eternity past, it also postdates her into eternity future. Revelation 1:5 says, "Jesus Christ is the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings of the earth." Here you see the preeminence of Mary's son as ruler of the kings of the earth. But you also see why. He is the firstborn of the dead. What is Christmas without Easter, his birth without the resurrection? For this is why he came to earth as a baby, so that he might grow up and die for our sins and be raised to eternal life.

The life Christ took in his resurrection was immortality in his human glorified body. Remember that he came to Thomas and showed him his hands and his feet? Well, this was in his resurrected body! There is continuity between that which was and that which now is. Yet, when he walked with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, they did not even recognize him, so there is obviously a lot of discontinuity as well.

The point is, Christ Jesus the man born of a virgin was raised from the dead as the firstborn. This is a sign of his preeminence, his exaltation, his glory, his greatness, his divine authority, his rule over angels and men. As Colossians 1:18 says, "He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent." That is what the resurrection allowed him to do. Praise be to God that he did not leave his soul in the grave nor let his body see corruption. But he gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

How so? Because not only is he the firstborn of the dead, but it says, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers" (Rom 8:29). For you here today, this is the most important benefit of the birth of Christ. You see, God did not send our Lord to this earth as a man so that people might put up trees and exchange gifts. He did it so that many brothers, who were loved beforehand and predestined before the foundation of the earth, might come to eternal life and be raised themselves from the dead. This is what Matthew tells us in the birth story, "he will save his people from their sins."

Beloved, if you have not been saved from your sins, I plead with you to flee to Christ this day. Believe upon him as fully God and fully man. Believe that he came to earth to do these marvelous works. Trust in him to save you from yourself and he will not be disappointed, but eagerly answers all who call on him, for they call upon him because he delighted to predestine them for this very thing. It is the risen power of Jesus Christ that makes this promise sure to those who suffer and are in need of comfort. It is our great hope, and one day we will be reunited with our bodies and reign eternally with Christ on a new earth.

None of this is possible without him coming to earth as a man. For it is only a man that can possibly pay back what is owed to God—a blood debt for the sins and violations of the covenant that we have committed. It is as a man that Christ regains entrance and authority originally given to Adam in the Garden of Eden to rule and have all dominion on planet earth. It is as a man that God came down and was born of a virgin to become the firstborn of Mary, the only begotten son of the ever living God.