

A Conversation About the Virgin Birth That Maybe Wasn't

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Dieric Bouts, "Virgin and Child," circa 1455-60. Metropolitan Museum of Art

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By Nicholas Kristof
Opinion Columnist

This is the latest in my occasional series of conversations about Christianity, aimed at bridging America's God gulf. Previously, I've spoken with the [Rev. Timothy Keller](#), President [Jimmy Carter](#), the evangelical writer [Beth Moore](#) and others. Here I speak with Elaine Pagels, a prominent professor of religion at Princeton University and an expert on the early church. Our conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

Merry Christmas! This is a time when Christianity celebrates miracles and wonder — and “Miracles and Wonder” is the title of your [fascinating forthcoming book](#). It raises questions about the virgin birth of Jesus, even pointing to ancient evidence that Jesus might have been fathered by a Roman soldier, possibly by rape. But before I ask you about that, I want to be respectful of readers who have a deep faith and may be upset by this line of inquiry. How do we follow the historical research without causing offense?

I love these stories from the Gospels. The skies opened up when I heard them. They picture human lives drawn into divine mystery: “God in man made manifest,” as one Christmas carol says. But at a certain point I had to ask: What do they mean? What really happened? They are not written simply as history; often they speak in metaphor. We can take them seriously without taking everything literally.

So let’s go back to the Nativity. Of the four Gospels, two describe the virgin birth of Jesus, and two don’t mention it. The Gospel of Mark has people of Galilee referring to Jesus as the son of Mary, when the norm was to describe somebody as the son of his father. So did the neighbors growing up with Jesus regard him as fatherless?

We don’t know. Mark is the earliest Gospel written; Matthew and Luke are basically just revising it. Mark has no suggestion of a virgin birth. Instead, he says that neighbors called Jesus “son of Mary.” In an intensely patriarchal society, this suggests that Jesus had no father that anyone knew about, even one deceased. Yet even without a partner, Mary has lots of children: In Mark, Jesus has four other brothers and some sisters, with no recognized father and no genealogy.

You note that Matthew and Luke both borrowed heavily from Mark’s account but also seem embarrassed by elements of it, including the paternity question. Is your guess that they added the virgin birth to reduce that embarrassment?

Yes, but this is not just my guess. When Matthew and Luke set out to revise Mark, each added an elaborate birth story — two stories that differ in almost every detail. Matthew adds a father named Joseph, who, seeing his fiancée pregnant, and not with his child, decides to break the marriage contract. Luke,

writing independently, pictures an angel astonishing a young virginal girl, announcing that “the Holy Spirit” is about to make her pregnant.

The most startling element of your book to me was that you cite evidence going back to the first and second centuries that some referred to Jesus as the son of a Roman soldier named Panthera. These accounts are mostly from early writers trying to disparage Jesus, it seems, so perhaps they should be regarded skeptically. But you also write that Panthera appears to have been a real person. How should we think about this?

Yes, these stories circulated after Jesus’ death among members of the Jewish community who regarded him as a false messiah, saying that Jesus’ father was a Roman soldier. I used to dismiss such stories as ancient slander. Yet while we do not know what happened, there are too many points of circumstantial evidence to simply ignore them. The name Panthera, sometimes spelled differently in ancient sources, may refer to a panther skin that certain soldiers wore. The discovery of the grave of a Roman soldier named Tiberius Panthera, member of a cohort of Syrian archers stationed in Palestine in the first century, might support those ancient rumors.

You write that there were early accusations against Mary of promiscuity, connected to this allegation of an affair with Panthera. But you say that Roman soldiers brutally occupied Galilee in the period before Jesus was born, killing and raping with impunity. So, acknowledging that this is uncertainty stacked on uncertainty, if Panthera was involved, was it probably a case of rape?

Jewish revolutionaries, fighting “in the name of God and our common liberty” to free their land from Roman domination, attacked a Roman fortress and killed many soldiers. The governor brought in Roman soldiers who crucified perhaps 2,000 Jews, then garrisoned thousands of soldiers less than four miles from Nazareth. The historian Josephus says that the soldiers stationed there ravaged the area, taking advantage of local people in every way they could. Josephus also notes that Galilean Jews were especially worried about their daughters’ virginity. Noting such diverse evidence, I thought that these stories sounded plausible in a way I had never imagined.

The virgin birth is just one miracle among many in the Gospels. Jesus walked on water. He raised people from the dead. He multiplied loaves

and fishes. He's resurrected and ascends to heaven. So how should those of us in the 21st century see miracles?

Calling something a miracle is a way of interpreting an event. A friend of mine was hit by a car and thrown about 20 feet and was unharmed. She told me that this was a miracle. Someone else might have said, "I was lucky." Calling it a miracle interprets an event that others might see differently. This often happens with remissions of illness: Some people see many miracles, and some never see any.

I disagree with most evangelicals and conservative Catholics on political questions. But I also find that my fellow liberals are often deeply unfair to conservative Christians. Some of the most heroic aid work around the world is done by Christian organizations like World Vision, Catholic Relief Services and International Justice Mission. Shouldn't those of us in the liberal world be celebrating this kind of faith-based aid instead of belittling it?

Absolutely. I just came from Tennessee, where I was visiting an Episcopal Church program dealing with incarcerated people. There I spoke to a group of men on death row who are taking a course of study, reading and discussing the Bible, and it was quite extraordinary.

You have a foot in each of two worlds, faith and academia, that often seem like rival sides of the God gulf. Can we find paths of mutual respect to bridge that chasm?

The Gospels most often speak in the language of stories and poetry. Intellectualizing these traditions — or turning them into dogma — doesn't make them spiritually deep. What we call Christianity is not a single thing. Instead, it consists of a 2,000-year-old collection of stories, prayers, liturgies, music, miracles — sources drawn from traditions as different as Eastern Orthodoxy is from Pentecostalism or Christian Science. No one can swallow the entire tradition: It's undigestible. Instead, anyone who identifies as Christian chooses certain elements of it.

A professor friend said to me: "I'm an atheist. How can you believe all that stuff?" First of all, as I see it, "believing all that stuff" is not the point. The Christian message, as I experienced it, was transformational. It encouraged me to treat other people well and opened up a world of imagination and wonder.

Your own faith journey seems to bridge the chasm. You were raised in a household hostile to faith, then became an evangelical, then had a crisis when a friend died and you were told he wouldn't go to heaven because he was Jewish.

When some Christians said to me that non-Christians are going to hell, I left their church. That made no sense to me. What about Jesus' message of God's love? At that point I left Christianity behind. For some people, there's no middle ground. You're either in or out — that's how it's often practiced. So for years I was out, although I knew that something powerful was there. But after years of being out, I kept wondering, what made that encounter with Christianity so powerful?

So I had to go back, asking questions. How were these stories written? How do they affect us so powerfully? They speak to a deep human longing for a sense of transcendence and spiritual experience. For we can respond to the same story in more than one way. As a historian, I question the literal truth of the virgin birth story. But I still love the midnight service on Christmas Eve, where the story is gloriously told and sung as miracle. As the poet Seamus Heaney writes, "Believe that a further shore / is reachable from here. / Believe in miracles."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/21/opinion/virgin-birth-jesus.html>

In my fairly broad reading in this area, striving to find the best scholarship, I think I am accurate in noting the refusal of heavyweights in this field to credit Elaine Pagels as fully one of their own. Even though her early work (e.g. *The Gnostic Gospels*) was groundbreaking and opened up the public to the study of early Christianity and the Gospels. This to me need not be any comment on Elaine: egos and clubby types taking over a field are rife in academia.

My question is: Why could Christ not have been born of a Galileean teenager raped by a Roman soldier? If you understand that a "Christ" is possible, then why not? Is the bastard offspring of an unmarried mother beyond the reach or capacity of what becoming Christ means? In certain real ways this makes more sense for me than any of the alternatives (none of which I rule out either.) It has been said, with great merit, that a hierarchy can only begin to be seen accurately from the bottom up. The marginalized have a vantage point, can see hard truths—have had them driven into them painfully—no insider, with loyalties to serve and privileges to lose, can ever bear to recognize. TJB