

“Not through Semen, Surely”

Luke and Plutarch on Divine Birth

“For what is born from god is a god”
 (τὸ γὰρ ἐκ θεοῦ γεννηθὲν θεός ἐστιν)

—PTOLEMY IN IREN., *HAER.* 1.8.5

INTRODUCTION

The philosopher Celsus, in one of the first attempts to compare Christ with other ancient Mediterranean heroes, points out that Jesus is not alone in his divine conception.¹ Ancient stories (παλαιοὶ μῦθοι) also attributed a divine begetting (θείαν σποράν) to Perseus, Amphion, Aeacus, and Minos. These are men who demonstrated their divine origin by their truly great and wondrous works (Orig., *Cels.* 1.67). Earlier in Origen’s *Contra Celsum*, Celsus even pokes fun at the Christian birth narrative, depicting it as a run-of-the-mill Mediterranean legend: “Was Jesus’ mother beautiful, and did God have sex (ἐμίγνυτο) with her due to her beauty, although according to nature God does not love a perishable body (οὐ φεφυκῶς ἔρᾶν φθαρτοῦ σώματος)? It is not reasonable (οὐδ’ εἰκὸς ἦν) that God lusted for her—she being neither rich nor royal—since nobody—not even her neighbors—knew her” (1.39; cf. Justin, *Dial.* 67).²

1. The phrase “divine conception” is preferred over “virgin birth” since it puts the focus on Jesus and the divine agency to which he owes his origin.

2. See further John Granger Cook, *The Interpretation of the New Testament in Greco-Roman Paganism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 28–31.

Although speaking of Jesus' divine conception means wading into a theological maelstrom, it is necessary to discuss this first element of Jesus' biography in order to form a complete picture of the strategies that early Christians used to depict Jesus' divine status in their literature. The possibilities of comparison are vast. In this chapter, however, I focus on the nearly contemporary accounts of Jesus' divine conception in Luke (1:26-38) and Plato's divine conception in Plutarch's *Table Talk* (717e-718b; cf. *Num* 4). Since the comparative road is well-trodden, I prepare the way with some well-needed clarifications. Comparisons of divine conceptions have—since the days of Celsus—repeatedly run aground because they have attempted to make (or strongly imply) genetic links between the divine birth of Jesus and other Mediterranean gods and heroes.³ In the “Greek” world (so it is thought), divine conception is literal and common (as seen, for instance, in the cases of Heracles, Dionysus, Perseus, and so on), whereas in the “Jewish” world, divine conception is infrequent and figurative.⁴ Although the Israelite king (Ps. 2:7; 1 Sam. 7:14), collective Israel (Exod. 4:22; Deut. 14:1; Hos. 11:1), and the righteous man (Sir. 4:10; Wisd. of Sol. 2:18) are all called “sons of god” in ancient Jewish literature, this is usually understood figuratively.⁵ Thus many interpreters—and not a few

3. For a survey of older literature, see Josef Hasenfuss, “Die Jungfrauengeburt in der Religionsgeschichte,” in *Jungfrauengeburt gestern und heute*, eds., Hermann Josef Brosch and Josef Hasenfuss (Essen: Driewer, 1969), 11–21. Rudolf Bultmann stated that Matthew's account of Jesus' birth “was first added in the transformation in Hellenism, where the idea of the generation of a king or a hero from a virgin by the godhead was widespread” (*History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh, 2nd ed. [New York: Harper & Row, 1968], 291–92). More recently, Gerd Lüdemann has stated, “The notion that Jesus was fathered by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin derives from the reinterpretation which was being given, indeed which had to be given, to the title ‘son of God’ at the moment when Hellenistic Jewish Christianity was making Jesus as Son of God at home in a Hellenistic environment” (*Virgin Birth? The Real Story of Mary and Her Son Jesus*, trans. John Bowden [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1998], 75–76). Most arguments of this sort *imply* genetic links rather than trace them directly. Robert Funk, for instance, states, “Ancient literature abounds with infancy narratives about famous men. These narratives characteristically underscore in various ways how the divine, or the gods, participated in the generation and protection of these heroes” (“Birth and Infancy Stories,” in *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* [New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998]), 501–2. On 497–507, he includes the birth stories of Alexander the Great, Apollonius of Tyana, and Plato as self-evident parallels to the divine birth of Jesus.

4. Examples of Greco-Roman divine conceptions are catalogued and briefly discussed in Pfeleiderer, *The Early Christian Conception*, 33–35; and Knox, *Hellenistic Elements*, 22–25. Beverly Ann Bow discusses at length miraculous births in the Jewish tradition (“The Story of Jesus' Birth: A Pagan and Jewish Affair,” PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1995], 19–330).

5. Even striking phrases such as, “today I have begotten you” (Ps. 2:7) and “from the womb before the morning star I begot you” (Ps. 109:3, LXX) have not broken this consensus.

critics of Christianity—have deduced that early Christians must have borrowed a tradition of divine birth from Greco-Roman sources, either as a result of their own gradual hellenization or in a secondary attempt to render the gospel persuasive to gentiles.

In response, Christian apologists throughout the ages have come armed with ways to present Jesus’ divine conception as unique. One apologetic strategy uses Judaism as a buffer to protect Jesus’ earliest birth accounts from the “pagan” environment. In a classic essay, for instance, Martin Dibelius argued that divine conception through *pneuma* (or “spirit”) (Luke 1:35) was a “theologoumenon” (i.e., a theological statement) already present in “hellenistic Judaism” (as seen in Philo and Paul).⁶ Dibelius then contrasted a Jewish theologoumenon with a “pagan” “myth.”⁷ According to this great form critic, Luke’s story of Jesus’ divine conception does not borrow from “pagan” myth, but simply adapts an essentially Jewish idea (the “hellenistic-Jewish” now being muted).⁸ Dibelius was willing to grant that the notion of a god’s congress with a virgin probably stemmed from Egyptian royal mythology⁹ but was careful to emphasize that this “Egyptian theology” (now no longer a “myth”) was already integrated into Hellenistic Judaism.¹⁰ Thus Luke did not need to go outside Judaism to speak of Jesus’ divine conception.

The political implications of Dibelius’s attempt to save divine conception for Judaism become clear later. When he traces out the development of divine conception in Christianity, he includes a “Fall” myth. Later Christian traditions of Jesus’ divine conception, that is, succumb to borrowing from “pagan” mentality.¹¹ Such borrowing is illustrated by later texts that speak of the *manner* of Jesus’ conception. Sometimes the “Word” enters Mary’s womb. In other cases, an angel enters her—or even Christ in the form of an angel. The

6. Dibelius, “Jungfrauensohn und Krippenkind. Untersuchungen zur Geburtsgeschichte Jesu im Lukas-Evangelium,” in *Botschaft und Geschichte: Gesammelte Aufsätze von Martin Dibelius* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1932], 1.33. In his curt formulation: “aus der Vorstellung wurde die Legende” (39). Analogies for this process (i.e., the development of a legend from a theologoumenon) include the actual description of Jesus’ resurrection (first found in the *Gos. Pet.*) expanded from bare statements (e.g., “He is risen!”), as well as the harrowing of hell—mentioned in 1 Pet. 4:6—growing into colorful legends in the second century (36–38).

7. *Ibid.*, 35, 39.

8. *Ibid.*, 35.

9. *Ibid.*, 41, n. 66.

10. *Ibid.*, 41–42.

11. Dibelius briefly discusses the putatively paganized birth traditions of *Prot. Jas.* 11.2, *Ascen. Isa.* 11:1–16; *Odes Sol.* 19.8; *Sib. Or.* 8.456–79, as well as passages from the *Ep. Apos.*, *Pist. Soph.*, and *Ps.-Matt.* (*ibid.*, 47–52).

penetration of Mary by a divine entity (however that is “conceived”) indicates, for Dibelius, a mythical mindset. The “ecclesiasticizing” (*Verkirchlichung*) of this myth, Dibelius says, occurred in the fourth century when it was taught that Mary conceived through her ear.¹²

The essentially apologetic dichotomy of “myth” versus “theology” colors Dibelius’s conclusion. Although later Christian tradition was infected with myth, the “chaste beauty” of the Lucan legend (derived from a Jewish theologoumenon) is never made into a “pagan” “mythologoumenon.”¹³ Indeed, Dibelius concluded that there are no “pagan” elements in Luke 1:26–38 at all. It remains a virgin account, just like Mary herself.¹⁴

To leap to a more recent example of Judaism used as a “buffer” to protect Christianity from “paganism,” I turn to N. T. Wright. Although an unlikely bedfellow with Dibelius, Wright’s apologetic attempt to maintain the stiff competition of “Jewish” versus “pagan” tradition remains similar. The “setting” of the divine birth in both Matthew and Luke is “Jewish,” as indicated by the “verbal and narratival allusions to and echoes of the Septuagint.”¹⁵ Luke has a “very Jewish point,” namely that Christ’s birth challenges “pagan” power (in this case, Caesar). “This fits,” Wright says, “with Luke’s whole emphasis: the (very Jewish) gospel is for the whole world, of which Jesus is now the Lord.”¹⁶ At the same time, Wright admits that there is nothing in Judaism to suggest a virgin birth—for the Messiah or anyone else.¹⁷ “The only conceivable parallels are

12. *Ibid.*, 52. For conception through the ear, see Katarzyna Urbaniak-Walczak, *Die conceptio per aurem: Untersuchungen zum Marienbild in Ägypten unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Malereien in El-Bagawat* (Altenberge: Oros, 1992).

13. Dibelius, “Jungfrauensohn und Krippenkind,” 52.

14. Dibelius had to admit that the tradition in which the father abstains from sex to guarantee the truly divine origin of the child (cf. Diog. Laert. *Vit. Philosoph.* 3.2; Plut., *Alex.* 2.2) is a pagan motif with no Jewish intermediary. But this motif is only found in Matthew (1:25).

15. Marcus Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 174. A similar argument was made a century ago by G. H. Box, “Gospel Narratives of the Nativity and the Alleged Influence of Heathen Ideas,” *ZNW* 6 (1905): 80–101.

16. *Ibid.*, 175.

17. Jews did apparently know of the divine begetting of the Messiah (1QSa 2:11–12, based on Ps. 2:7), but this begetting is usually taken in a figurative sense, and does not occur through a virgin. See Otto Michel and Otto Betz, “Von Gott gezeugt,” in *Judentum, Urchristentum, Kirche: Festschrift für Joachim Jeremias*, ed. Walther Eltester [Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1964], 3–23. According to Gerhard Dellling, “The idea of divine generation seems to be incompatible with the OT belief in God” (“παρθενοσ,” *TDNT* 5:832). More recently Robert Menzies has commented that the creative spirit in Luke 1:35 is “quite uncommon to the Jewish thought-world of Luke’s day” (*The Development of Early Christian Pneumatology with Special Reference to Luke-Acts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 122.

pagan ones.” But there cannot be any genetic relation between these “pagan” parallels and Luke’s account because Luke’s story is so “fiercely Jewish.”¹⁸

Such attempts to isolate Luke’s narrative of divine conception from the larger Mediterranean culture remain unconvincing. Few scholars today are prepared to assert (with Dibelius) an entirely Jewish (even if “hellenistic” Jewish) origin for Luke’s account of divine conception.¹⁹ Paul’s statement that Isaac was born according to spirit (κατὰ πνεῦμα, Gal. 4:29) does not indicate that he was born without a human father. Philo’s statement that God impregnated the matriarchs through “the divine seeds” (τὰ θεῖα σπέρματα) (*Cher.* 46) is an allegory about God fertilizing the soul with the seed of blessedness (σπέρμα . . . εὐδαιμονίας) (*Cher.* 49). The product is not a child, but virtues (ἄρεταί)—virtues that the matriarchs themselves represent. The notion that Philo knew a Jewish tradition of literal divine conception that he subsequently allegorized has the convincing power of what it is—speculation. There is, it seems, no “hellenistic Jewish” precedent for Jesus’ divine conception.

Even fewer scholars are prepared to take Wright’s path and depict “Jewish” and “pagan” in such openly oppositional ways. Such language perpetuates the old (and mistaken) Judaism/Hellenism divide, and is no longer acceptable in mainstream scholarship. That said, many scholars are content to perpetuate a binary between “Judaism” and “Hellenism,” provided that it is done in more circumspect and clandestine ways. One such way is to deny that there is any “precise parallel” between Jewish and Mediterranean stories of divine conception. The great Roman Catholic scholar Raymond Brown speaks for many when he states that “there is no clear example of *virginal* conception in world or pagan religions [*sic*] that plausibly could have given first-century Jewish Christians the idea of the virginal conception of Jesus.”²⁰ In this way, Christian scholars can still secure the uniqueness (thus revelatory quality, thus

18. Borg and Wright, *Meaning of Jesus*, 176.

19. Raymond Brown (among others) rightly notes that Isa. 7:14 was interpreted with reference to the virginal conception only after this tradition had become known (*The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* [Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1977], 524). Cf. his *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1973), 15–16, 63.

20. Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 523; cf. Brown, *Virginal Conception*, 65. Similar conclusions in Alphons Steinmann, *Die Jungfrauengeburt und die vergleichende Religionsgeschichte* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1919), 33; C. E. B. Cranfield, “Some Reflections on the Subject of the Virgin Birth,” *SJT* 41 (1988): 177–89 (181); Robert Gromacki, *The Virgin Birth: A Biblical Study of the Deity of Jesus Christ*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2002), 210–215. The phrasing of Hasenfuss is worth quoting: “Comparative History of Religions has not compared anything as dignified (*Ebenbürtiges*) as the birth of the Lord from divine pneuma through the virgin mother Mary” (“Jungfrauengeburt,” 22).

truth) of Christian belief. Indeed, the presumed uniqueness of the Christian story of divine conception threatens to undermine comparison as such.

But Brown's statement that "there is no exact parallel" between Jesus' divine conception and that of other heroes and gods in the ancient Mediterranean—though often repeated—is founded (it seems to me) on a misunderstanding of the very nature of comparison.²¹ The first rule of comparison is that *it does not assert identity*. As a result, there is *never* an "exact" parallel.²² Difference will always remain in comparison if the comparison is going to work (and if it is going to be interesting). Consequently, we need not search for an "exact parallel" between divine birth stories to speak of their similarities due to common cultural conceptions.

In the theologically charged arena of comparative religions, one needs to forsake both the search for genetic links (many of which are banal and at any rate historically impossible to prove) as well as the religiously motivated attempt to sever those links. As some have pointed out, it is not that the author of Luke *borrowed* from the stories of Perseus, Heracles, or Minos to present his idea of divine conception. Stories of divine conception were cultural common coin in the ancient Mediterranean world and could be imagined in philosophically and theologically sophisticated ways.²³

Luke, no unsophisticated literary artist, expressed the "mechanics" of divine birth in subtle and theologically sensitive language. In the passage commonly known as the "Annunciation" (Luke 1:26-38), Gabriel announces to Mary that she will have a son. Surprisingly, the young (but betrothed!) girl asks a

21. Brown, *Virginal Conception*, 62.

22. I recognize that there is some ambiguity in Brown's notion of "exact parallel." Although it need not mean "identical" it still suggests a kind of similitude that borders on equivalence. It seems to me that Brown used the ambiguity of his expression to good rhetorical effect.

23. Dieter Zeller also denies any Christian borrowing from Greek tales, since both Jews and "cultured pagans" resisted "sexually colored myths." Nevertheless Luke wrote in a "horizon of thought" (*Denkhorizont*), that was both "Jewish-Christian and hellenistic." Yet only the "hellenistic" side of this *Denkhorizont*, for Zeller, appeals to a divine conception ("Religionsgeschichtliche Erwägungen zum 'Sohn Gottes' in den Kindheitsgeschichten," in *Neues Testament und hellenistische Umwelt*, Bonner Biblische Beiträge 150 [Hamburg: Philo, 2006], 94). For similar formulations, see Robert Miller, *Born Divine: The Births of Jesus & Other Sons of God* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2003), 134, cf. 238-39; Andrew Welburn, *Myth of the Nativity: The Virgin Birth Re-examined* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2006), 148; Heikki Räisänen, "Begotten by the Holy Spirit," in *Sacred Marriages: The Divine-Human Sexual Metaphor from Sumer to Early Christianity*, ed. Martti Nissinen and Risto Uro [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008], 333; Andrew T. Lincoln, "'Born of the Virgin Mary': Creedal Affirmation and Critical Reading," in *Christology and Scripture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Lincoln and Angus Paddison (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 94-95.

rather awkward question: “How will this be—since I do not know a man?” (1:34).²⁴ Such a question puts a nervous smile on the face of the reader since it could easily function as an innocent lead-in to a discourse on divine sex education. Gabriel is in a delicate situation, since he is now forced to explain to an adolescent girl exactly where divine babies come from. Thankfully, Luke provides him with a tactful and poetically pleasing response:

holy spirit (πνεῦμα ἅγιον) will come upon you (ἐπελεύσεται ἐπὶ σέ), and power of the Most High (δύναμις ὑψίστου) will overshadow you (ἐπισκιάσει σοι)—and so (διὸ καὶ) the child to be born will be called holy (ἅγιον), son of god (υἱὸς θεοῦ). (Luke 1:35)

Such delicate and indeterminate theological language allowed Luke to present his narrative of Jesus’ divine birth as both plausible and reliable history, and thus to distance himself from stories of sexual divine conception that he deemed mythical (with the sense of *untrue*) and unworthy of Yahweh.²⁵

Since the beginning, Christian apologists and conservative commentators have pointed out the non-sexual nature of conception in Luke.²⁶ As it turns out, Luke shared with philosophers of his day a theological presupposition that still remains prevalent: God (or the gods) do not have sex (since sex involves passion and passion is perceived to be an evil). Celsus, as we have seen, bases this point on a Platonic maxim: “by nature, God does not love [or feel sexual attraction for] a perishable body” (οὐ φερυκῶς ἐρᾶν φθαρτοῦ σώματος) (*Cels.* 1.39). When in other ancient stories the gods are depicted as enjoying sexual

24. On the narrative logic of this question, see Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives*, expanded ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006), 84–85; David T. Landry, “Narrative Logic in the Annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:26–38),” *JBL* 114 (1995): 65–79.

25. To be sure, Yahweh in Luke’s account does make overtures (via a messenger) to a young, nubile, virgin woman. Nevertheless Mary’s sexual ripeness is not at issue as in Greek divine birth traditions (see further Giulia Sissa, *Greek Virginity* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990]). Mary the virgin is Mary chaste and pure (a fact especially emphasized later in the *Prot. Jas.*) (see further Mary Foskett, *A Virgin Conceived: Mary and Classical Representations of Virginity* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002], 141–64, esp. 162–64). She is a clean vessel, safe for interaction with divine pneuma (cf. Philo, *Cher.* 49). See further Todd Klutz, “The Value of Being Virginal: Mary and Anna in the Lukan Infancy Prologue,” in *The Birth of Jesus: Biblical and Theological Reflections*, ed. George J. Brooke (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 71–88 (80). Mary’s humility, low social status, and obedience also distinguish her from the typically noble and privileged women who bear divine children in Greek stories.

26. Brown, *Virginal Conception*, 62; Schweitzer, “πνεῦμα,” *TDNT* 6:397; Joseph A. Fitzmyer “Virginal Conception of Jesus in the New Testament,” *TS* 34 (1973): 541–75 (565–66, n. 84).

intercourse, such accounts are perceived to take on a legendary, mythical aura. Christian apologists throughout the ages have taken it upon themselves to expose these mythical elements with relish.

According to Justin Martyr, for instance, the Word, the “first offspring of god” (πρῶτον γέννημα τοῦ θεοῦ), was born “without sexual union” (ἄνευ ἐπιμιξιάς) (1 *Apol.* 21), “not through intercourse (οὐ διὰ συνουσίας) but through power (διὰ δυνάμεως)” (§33). A venerable line of patristic and medieval commentators have beat this same drum, and it suffices to fast-forward to the modern period. Writing in 1919, Alphons Steinmann summed up the prevailing sentiment among theologians and theological exegetes of his time:

Although holy Scripture expressly allows Christ’s divine origin and through this shows that he is in no way inferior to the heroes and famous men of the pagans (*der Heiden*), still it anxiously ensures that this splendor not be darkened by any blemish (*Makel*). One reads not of amatory adventures (*galanten Abenteuer*), of the disgraceful amours of a god (*schimpflichem Liebesglühen*), of sensual lusts (*sinnlichen Lüsten*), or of tasteless transformations into a bull, a dragon, a snake, a shower of gold, *et sim.* Rather, *everything is connected to the Spirit of God, to the holy and chaste (keuschen) Spirit. In general, pagan miraculous births have to do with a perhaps miraculous, but always a physical (physische) begetting. The father of the hero is not removed but replaced by a god.*²⁷

Although less colorfully expressed, Brown essentially emphasizes the same point: “These [extrabiblical] ‘parallels’ consistently involve a type of *hieros gamos* where a divine male, in human or other form, impregnates a woman, either through normal sexual intercourse or through some substitute form of penetration.”²⁸ Thus in one fell swoop, Brown eliminates as parallels not only Zeus bedding with Semele, but also the famous golden drops impregnating Danaë.²⁹

27. Steinmann in Brosch and Hasenfuss *Jungfrauengeburt*, 32–33, emphasis in original. Steinmann concludes, “Paganism was lost in sensual notions, in mythological concepts, in vague speculations about the wandering of souls or purely political expectations of a deliverer, which support no comparison with the presentation of the Gospels” (41).

28. Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 523. Brown’s distinctive language reappears in the collaborative study *Mary in the New Testament*, ed. Raymond Brown (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 121.

29. Divine beings having sex with mortal women is, interestingly, part of Jewish lore (cf. Gen. 6:1–4). The *Testament of Reuben* makes clear that the “sons of god” (here called “Watchers”) “were transformed

Luke’s theologically tactful avoidance of sexual language, however, does not remove him from his culture’s presuppositions about divine conception. The Platonist philosopher and biographer Plutarch (c. 50–120 CE), Luke’s contemporary, uses like language and a similar pattern of thought when he speaks of divine conception (*Quaest. conv.* 717e–718b; *Numa* 4).³⁰ Careful comparison with Plutarch will indicate, I believe, that Luke was thoroughly in step with the culture of other sensitive literary men of his day who eschewed the crass anthropomorphism of a divine–human sexual encounter in an attempt to construct a historically and theologically plausible account of divine conception.

COMPARISON WITH PLUTARCH

In Plutarch’s *Table Talk*, Tyndares the Lacedaemonian remarks that begetting (τὸ γεννῶν) seems opposed to divine incorruptibility (τῷ ἀφθάρτῳ) (8.1 [= *Mor.* 717e–f]) because it involves change (μεταβολή) and passion (πάθος) in God. This logic goes back to Plato’s famous models (τύποι) for theology, the first of which being that God is good, and second, that God does not change (*Resp.* 380d–381e). Tyndares goes on to make a remark derived from Plato’s *Timaeus*: “I take courage when I hear Plato himself [say concerning] the father and maker of the world (κόσμου) and other born beings (καὶ τῶν ἄλλων γεννητῶν)—whom he calls the unborn and eternal God—[that beings born of God] do not come to be through seed (οὐ διὰ σπέρματος) surely, but by another power of god (ἄλλη δὲ δυνάμει τοῦ θεοῦ), who engendered (ἐντεκόντος) in matter the productive principle [or generative beginning] (γόνιμον ἀρχήν) by which it [the world and the things made in it] suffered passion and changed” (8.1 [*Mor.* 718a]).³¹

The theological language is tactful and careful—and for good reason. In his treatise to an unlearned prince (*Princ. inerud.* 5) Plutarch says, “For it is neither probable nor fitting that God is, as some philosophers [i.e., the Stoics] say, mingled with matter.” For Plutarch, as for Celsus, the imperishable God does not love a perishable body and cannot be mixed with it. Thus it is not God who

into human males” and appeared to women who were already married (5:5–6). For more on this episode, see John J. Collins, “The Sons of God and the Daughters of Men,” in *Sacred Marriages*, 259–274.

30. Plutarch’s *Table Talk* was composed between 99–116 CE. It was during this time also that Plutarch was writing his *Lives*. The historical setting of the *Table Talk*, however, is earlier—going as far back as the 60s CE (Plutarch’s student days) (Frieda Klotz and Katerina Oikonomopoulou, eds., *The Philosopher’s Banquet: Plutarch’s Table Talk in the Intellectual Culture of the Roman Empire* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], 4).

31. My translation. Translations of Plutarch and Luke that follow, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

directly interacts with matter, but God’s power. God’s power—a term used to defer God’s (sexual) presence—is made the means of his generative activity.

Plutarch illustrates the generative activity of this “other power of God” (ἄλλη δυνάμει τοῦ θεοῦ) by a humorous quote from Sophocles: “the crisscrossing of the winds (κἀνέμων διέξοδοι) escapes the notice of the hen, except when she lets fall a chick (παρῆ τόκος)!” The idea here is that the hen is not made pregnant by male seed but by a more subtle power transmitted in or by the winds.³² The word for “wind” that Plutarch uses is ἄνεμος, whereas in his *Life of Numa*, he uses the more flexible term πνεῦμα (“wind”/“breath”/“spirit”). The linguistic overlap between Luke and Plutarch—both of whom use δύναμις and πνεῦμα in their accounts of divine conception—invites a closer investigation of their conceptual similarity.³³

THE LIFE OF NUMA

In the fourth chapter of his *Life of Numa*,³⁴ Plutarch passes on the common tradition that Numa (Rome’s second king and lawgiver) had a “divine marriage” (γάμων θείων) with the nymph (i.e., lesser goddess) Egeria, and from her learned divine laws and rites (τὰ θεῖα) (4.1–3).³⁵ Although the language of “divine marriage” could easily excite the vituperative outcry of a parallel-buster (“The skirts are lifted! Behold *hieros gamos*!”) it is important to see how Plutarch treats this detail. Although as a *historical writer*, he feels obliged to pass on this Roman tradition, Plutarch the late first-century *Platonist* and *man of learning* presents a reaction of mild disgust.³⁶ Although he finds it reasonable that God (τὸν θεόν) loves human beings (φιλόανθρωπον), and especially joins company

32. Cf. Arist., *Hist. an.* 541a27; 560b14; Virg., *Georg.* 3.274–75; Varro, *Rust.* 2.1.19; Pliny, *Nat.* 2.116; 10.102, 166; Ael. *Nat. an.* 17.15; Lact., *Inst.* 4.12.2. The idea is scoffed at in Lucian, *Tox.* 38; *Vera hist.* 1.22. See further Conway Zirkle, “Animals Impregnated by the Wind,” *Isis* 25 (1936): 95–130.

33. Most commentators merely cite Plutarch’s *Table Talk* as an apparent parallel to Luke’s account of divine conception, with no discussion. An exception is Hans Dieter Betz, “Credibility and Credulity in Plutarch’s *Life of Numa Pompilius*,” in *Reading Religions in the Ancient World: Essays Presented to Robert McQueen Grant on his 90th Birthday*, ed. David Aune and Robin Darling Young (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 52–54. Compare also Talbert, “Jesus’ Birth in Luke and the Nature of Religious Language,” in *Reading Luke—Acts in its Mediterranean Milieu* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 79–90 (esp. 88).

34. For a general introduction to the *Life of Numa*, see Robert Lamberton, *Plutarch* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 87–91.

35. For the divinity and cult of nymphs, see *OCD*⁴, “Nymphs,” 1027.

36. In *The Fortune of the Romans*, Plutarch calls the story of Numa’s association with Egeria “rather mythical” (μυθωδέστερον), and argues that it is more likely that Numa had Good Fortune (personified: ἀγαθή Τύχη; non-personified: εὐτυχία) as his true companion, counselor, and colleague (§9 [*Mor.* 321b–322c]).

with people who are good (ἀγαθός), religiously correct (ὄσιος), and temperate (σώφρωνος), he cringes to think that “a god and daimon” would engage in fellowship and gratification (κοινωνία καὶ χάρις) with a human body, however lovely.³⁷ Consequently, Plutarch—as a man sensitive to the symbolic truth of ancient tradition—tries to find a way to hold together both divine-human love, and proper respect (εὐσέβεια) for a transcendent deity.

He turns to Egyptian theology. The “Egyptians,” he says, “not unpersuasively assume this distinction: that *with a woman* (γυναικὶ μὲν), it is not impossible for a pneuma of a God (πνεῦμα . . . θεοῦ) to draw near (πλησιάσαι) and engender (ἐντεκεῖν) certain principles of generation (ἀρχὰς γενέσεως), but *with a man* (ἀνδρὶ δέ), there is no mingling with a god (σύμμυξις πρὸς θεὸν) nor bodily association (ὀμιλία σώματος)” (*Num* 4.4).

The best way to construe this text is to let Plutarch interpret Plutarch. “A God’s pneuma” (πνεῦμα . . . θεοῦ) in the *Life of Numa* is analogous to the “other power of God” mentioned in *Table Talk*. The results of power and pneuma, we note, are the same: the engendering (ἐντίκτω—the verb used in both *Quaest. conv.* 718a and *Num.* 4.4) of “principles of generation” (ἀρχὰς γενέσεως, *Num.* 4.4), or a productive principle (γόνιμον ἀρχήν, *Quaest. conv.* 718a). Pneuma and power are evidently linked for Plutarch; they are, furthermore, sophisticated terms that do not imply a sexual encounter.

We must understand why Plutarch says that—according to Egyptian theology—divine pneuma can interact with a woman but *not with a man*. It is important for Plutarch to be clear on this point, because his comments appear in a biography of Numa—a *man* who (according to tradition) had a peculiar relation with a goddess. To help explain this passage, we can again draw on *Table Talk* as an illuminating parallel discussion. In *Table Talk* 718b, the Egyptians are said generally to “allow association (ὀμιλίαν) with a mortal woman and a male god [to produce divine conception]. On the contrary, they would not think that a mortal *male* could impart to a female divinity the principle of birth and pregnancy, because they posit (τίθεσθαι) that the substances (τὰς οὐσίας) of the gods consist of air (ἀέρι) and breaths (πνεύμασιν), and of currents of heat and moisture.”³⁸

For Egyptians, then, pneuma—called the “pneuma of god (θεοῦ)” in *Numa* 4.4—is a kind of divine “stuff” (οὐσία) associated with the basic elements of air, heat, and moisture. In his *On Isis and Osiris*, Plutarch observes that for

37. Brown was thus wrong to say that in *Numa* 4, Plutarch “argues . . . that a man ought to be able to have intercourse with a goddess” (*Virginal Conception*, 62, n. 104, emphasis his).

38. The word οὐσία is a correction for the MS reading θυσία (“sacrifices”).

Egyptians, Zeus-Amon himself is identified with πνεῦμα (365d).³⁹ It is unclear exactly how much of this Egyptian theology has undergone an *interpretatio Graeca*. The identity between the high God and pneuma—as well as the association of pneuma with fire and air—bears a significant resemblance to Stoic theology. According to Chrysippus, for example, the essence of God (ἡ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐσία) is an intelligent and fiery pneuma (πνεῦμα νοερόν καὶ πυρῶδες) (*SVF* 2.1009). According to Alexander of Aphrodisias, the Stoics understand God to be “an intelligent and eternal pneuma” (*Mixt.* 224.32–225.4= *SVF* 2.310). Pneuma, in other words, embodies the reality of God (who for Stoics, is also called “Logos” and “Zeus”), as it is spread throughout the universe.

Whatever the exact relation between Stoic and Egyptian theology, however, the point is relatively clear: pneuma can fertilize flesh, but flesh cannot impregnate pneuma. Divine reality (the active principle) can make humans bear children (in particular, “passive” human females), but humans (even if “active” human males) cannot make a god (or rather goddess) conceive.⁴⁰ This is a basic principle of theological “physics” as it were: divine pneuma can make a woman pregnant, but human men cannot return the favor! Evidently, then, the Egyptians—and Plutarch—would consider the stories of Demeter and Iasion (*Hom., Od.* 5.125–28; *Hes., Theog.* 969–70), Anchises and Aphrodite (*Hom. Hymn Aphr.* 74–167), as well as Eos and Tithonus (*Hom. Hymn Aphr.* 218–25) untrue. “With a man,” Plutarch apparently concedes to the Egyptians, “there is no mingling with god (σύμμικσις πρὸς θεὸν) nor bodily association (ὀμιλία σώματος).” This assertion should not be taken to imply that Plutarch accepts ordinary bodily sex (σύμμικσις) with a *male* god and a *female* human. He has already made clear that any “drawing near” (πλησιάζω) between god and woman is mediated through (a neuter) pneuma. The pneuma of God (πνεῦμα θεοῦ), as we see in *Numa* 4.4, draws near to engender the principles of generation.

39. Δία μὲν γὰρ Αἰγύπτῳ τὸ πνεῦμα καλοῦσιν. Cf. *Diod. Sic., Bibl.* 1.12.2: “[The Egyptians] call vital breath (πνεῦμα) ‘Zeus’ (Δία).” For further remarks on Egyptian theology, see Andrew Welburn, *Myth of the Nativity*, 145.

40. In *Quaest. conv.* 718a, Plutarch writes that the power of God engenders the generative principle in matter (ὑλη), which the Stoics consider to be a passive principle, generally associated with the female. See A. A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California, 1986), 153–56. According to ancient medical science, women’s bodies were more “porous” and thus more penetrable than men’s bodies, making them more susceptible to the entrance and effects of πνεῦμα (Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995], 242). On ancient views of conception, see Craffert, *Life of a Galilean Shaman*, 368–77.

To be sure, pneumatic proximity does not signify a completely *incorporeal* liaison, since πνεῦμα in the first century was not usually taken to refer to an incorporeal entity (as seen for instance among the Stoics).⁴¹ Nevertheless, the “drawing near” of pneuma to a woman is entirely non-anthropomorphic. The pneuma, if a kind of body, is not a *human* body. When Plutarch speaks of a pneuma interacting with a woman, he is not assuming that a god in a male body has sex with a female.

Nonetheless, in *Numa* 4 Plutarch does not want the Egyptian prohibition of all σύμιξις between a *male* and a divinity to mean that there is no *possibility* of love between a god and men in general. “To the contrary, it would be fitting for there to be love (φιλίαν) in a god for a human being (πρὸς ἄνθρωπον), as well as what is called eros (ἔρωτα)—which is based on this (i.e., φιλία).” The eros spoken of here does not lead to bodily sex but to moral virtue. It is, as Plutarch says, naturally engendered for the care of human character and virtue (ἦθους καὶ ἀρετῆς) (4.4).

It is important to understand the Platonic background of what we might call Plutarch’s “moral eros.” In Plato’s *Symposium*, Socrates defines eros in this way: “eros (ὁ ἔρως) is wanting to possess the good forever” (τοῦ τὸ ἀγαθὸν αὐτῷ εἶναι αἰεὶ) (206a11–12). The action of lovers is “engendering in beauty” (τόκος ἐν καλῷ) (206b7–8). On the level of the body, “engendering” (τόκος) is the union (συνουσία) of a man and a woman (206c5–6). But other people conceive in their *soul*, and they beget “wisdom and the rest of virtue” (φρόνησιν τε καὶ τὴν ἄλλην ἀρετὴν) (209a3–4). The most beautiful part of wisdom “deals with the proper ordering of cities and households” (ἡ περὶ τὰ τῶν πόλεων τε καὶ οἰκήσεων διακόσμησις) and is called “moderation and justice” (σωφροσύνη τε καὶ δικαιοσύνη) (a6–8).⁴² The engendering of these virtues occurs in the soul. When a young man meets a soul that is “beautiful and noble and well-formed,” he begins to teem with “ideas and arguments about virtue” (209c; cf. *Phaedr.* 246e–253c). Those who beget virtue beget children who are not mortal but immortal. Plato specifically singles out lawgivers like Lycurgus and Solon as those who have created the very constitutions in which virtue can be fostered and operate (*Symp.* 209d–e). These are the sorts of figures who have

41. A point often made by Troels Engberg-Pedersen. See, for example, his *Cosmology and the Self: The Material Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 8–74.

42. According to Plato, someone can be pregnant with these virtues while being ἥθεος (209b1). This word means “an unmarried youth.” In several passages it is paired with πάρθενος (“virgin”; see Hom., *Il.* 22.127; Herod., *Hist.* 3.48, cf. Plut., *Thest.* 15.1).

seen truly divine Beauty, and thus beget true virtue (ἀρετὴν ἀληθῆ). It is this kind of man who is loved by God (θεοφιλῆς) (212a-b).

In tune with this moral vision of divine-human eros, Plutarch explains tales of gods loving particular men. Phorbas, Hyacinthus, and Admetus were said to be the beloveds (ἐρωμένους) of Apollo (*Num* 4.5).⁴³ One could take this in a sexual sense. Plutarch, however—as a Platonist and sympathetic student of Greek tradition—spiritualizes the eros. Those loved by Apollo are taught Apollo’s special virtue: poetry and music.⁴⁴ This leads Plutarch to speak of other examples of this type: Pan loved the songs of Pindar, Asclepius loved the tragedian Sophocles, and the poet Hesiod dallied with the Muses (*Num* 4.6).⁴⁵ These were certainly not sexual relationships. What this eros produced was not children but immortal poems.

But Plutarch is not satisfied with poets. If gods dallied with poets to produce poems, he asks, should we disbelieve that “the divine (τὸ δαίμονιον) was in the habit of conversing to the same effect with Zaleucus, Minos, Zoroaster, Numa and Lycurgus who piloted kingdoms and established constitutions (βασιλείας κυβερνῶσι καὶ πολιτείας διακοσμοῦσιν)?” (*Num* 4.7).⁴⁶ The phraseology here is reminiscent of Plato’s *Symposium* (209a6-7), where Plato says that the most beautiful part of wisdom “deals with the proper ordering of cities and households” (ἡ περὶ τὰ τῶν πόλεων τε καὶ οἰκίσεων διακόσμησις) (a6-8), and lists the lawgivers Lycurgus and Solon as examples (209d-e). Lycurgus (the Spartan lawgiver) is an important figure for Plutarch, since he is the parallel with Numa in this set of Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*. For both Plato and Plutarch, these ancient lawgivers are as divine as any human could hope to be. These are the men specially loved by God, and so became pregnant with divine ideas. But these heroes were pregnant with far more than poems; they bore immortal virtue. As legislators, they formed the characters of whole nations that came after them.

To say that such men had erotic relations with God(s) does not—for Plutarch at least—imply anything about bodily sex. Rather it is a way of

43. The mention of Apollo is important to Plutarch because of the tradition of Plato’s birth from Apollo. See below.

44. In Betz’s interpretation of Plutarch, “the Delphic Apollo is to be regarded as the highest god of all, as intellect (νοῦς), law and world order (λόγος, νόμος). Thus, Apollo is also the ultimate guardian of truth, including both the oracle of the Pythia and all scientific enterprise” (“Credibility,” 43). For Apollo the one and indivisible god, see Plut., *E Delph.* 393b-d.

45. Cf. Hes., *Theog.* 29–33, esp. 31–32: “they [the Muses] breathed into me (ἐνέπνευσαν δέ μοι) divine song.”

46. For Zaleucus, lawgiver of Italian Locri Epizephyrii, see *OCD*⁴, “Zaleucus,” 1586.

pointing out the source of their virtue. Numa and Lycurgus did not produce virtue out of their own means or ability. Virtue is divine and had to come from a divine source. So, to use the metaphor of Plato in the *Symposium*, these lawgivers were made pregnant by gods. They were made pregnant not in their bodies, but in their souls. What they conceived was, as Plutarch makes clear, the finest teaching (διδασκαλία), and exhortation toward the best things for humankind (παραινέσει τῶν βελτίστων). These “best things,” as we know from Plato’s *Symposium*, are the virtues of moderation and justice.

In this way Plutarch bring us back to Numa who in his “divine marriage” with Egeria was said to produce τὰ θεῖα—namely, divine virtue, order, law, and ritual for the Roman people. Numa proves that gods can fruitfully interact with (in this case, male) humans to produce—not children—but a new and productive way of life. This is the result of a “divine marriage” (γάμος θεῖος) and “more sacred companionship” (σεμνότερα ὁμιλία), which Plutarch does not—as is clear from the context—conceive of in a sexual way. Indeed, Plutarch is savvy enough to know that the myth of Numa’s “relationship” with Egeria probably arose as a political ploy to legitimate Numa’s reforms among the Roman *plebs* (*Numa* 8.3–6). But even if there is a touch of political machination in the old tradition, Plutarch is sensitive to the deeper meaning of divine–human eros.

PNEUMATIC PREGNANCY

Let us return to the relationship of the πνεῦμα θεοῦ and women, specifically. As we saw in *Numa* 4.4, Plutarch concurs with the Egyptians that “with a woman, it is not impossible for a pneuma of god (πνεῦμα . . . θεοῦ) to draw near and engender (ἐντεκεῖν) certain principles of generation (ἀρχὰς γενέσεως).” The ambiguity of πνεῦμα (breath? wind? spirit?) is important, and it makes apt Plutarch’s analogy of the wind impregnating the hen in *Table Talk* 718a. In both cases, the motion of air was felt to be a good analogy for how the divine comes into contact with a human female in order to make her pregnant.⁴⁷ Wind is invisible, but its effects are powerful. Even more importantly, wind is not anthropomorphic. It does not take any shape at all. Thus wind or breath cannot make contact with the human body in a crude, sexual way.⁴⁸

47. According to Aeschylus, the family (γένος) of the Danaids—and specifically Epaphus, son of Ino—was generated “from the contact and in-breathing of Zeus” (ἔξ ἐπαφῆς καὶ ἐπιπνοίας Διός) (*Suppl.* 16–18, 41–45). In this play, the whole land rejoices at Epaphus’s birth with the cry: “This is indeed the son of life-begetting Zeus” (φυσιζόου γένος τόδε Ζηνός ἐστιν ἀληθῶς) (581–585). Cf. Aesch., *Prom.* 849–51, where Zeus, touching Io by his “hand, which produces no fear” (ἐπαφῶν ἀταρβεῖ χειρὶ) and “only touching her” (θιγῶν μόνον), causes her to give birth to “black Epaphus” (τέξεις κελαινὸν Ἔπαφον), who has his name from the manner in which Zeus engendered him (i.e., by touch, ἐπαφή).