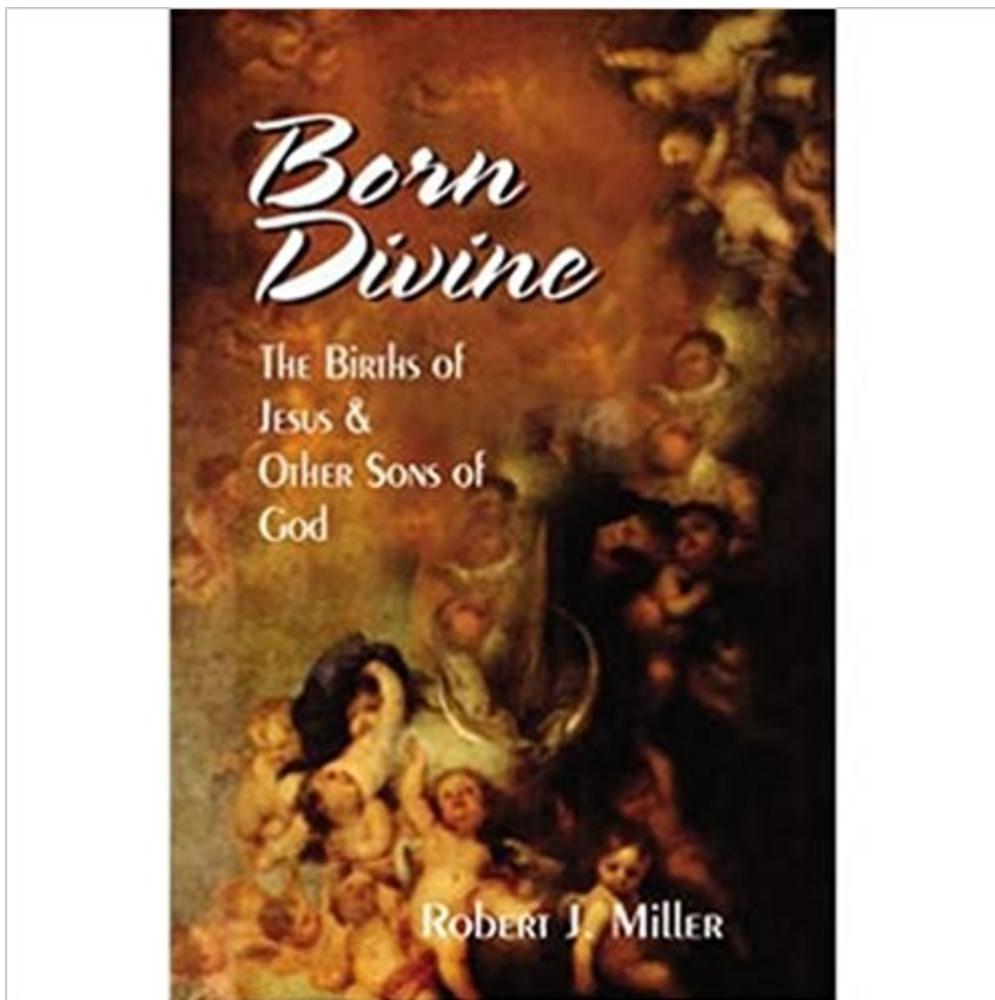


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Born Divine



Synopsis

In this compelling study of the birth and infancy of Jesus, Robert Miller separates fact from fiction in the gospel narratives and relates them to stories about the miraculous births of Israelite heroes and of Greek and Roman sons of God. *Born Divine* analyzes the Christian claim that the birth and childhood of Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies. The historical and theological dimensions of the virgin birth tradition are discussed with honesty and insight. This wide-ranging book also presents additional infancy gospels from the second century through the Middle Ages.

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Customer Reviews

Robert J. Miller is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Juniata College in Pennsylvania. A Fellow of the Jesus Seminar since 1986, he was Scholar-in-Residence at Westar Institute in 2001. He is the editor of *The Complete Gospels* (1992), an anthology of twenty early gospels presented in Westar's innovative translation, the Scholars Version, and author of *The Jesus Seminar and Its Critics* (1999) and *Born Divine* (2003).

Exciting reading for anyone that wants to learn more about the great variety of religions that have had an effect on the development of Christian faith. It is possible that Jesus was trained in some of these, and may have traveled afar in his early adulthood.

"Born Divine" is a book in which Robert Miller's ideological bias is hanging out for all to see and

whose conclusion is evident even before he puts pen to paper. His bias is called Methodological Naturalism and his conclusion - "I don't care what you say, Jesus Christ is a fraud. I said it and it is very, very true, and I have the credentials to prove it." One wonders why a man of his convictions even bothers with the Jesus of the Gospels. It seems outside his competence and area of interest. The book is a weaving of his version of the Four Gospels, with the pen of a destroyer of Christian illusions, and the creator of new Gospel for those deceived by a Jesus who never existed, and whose followers created a Biblical Frankenstein, which he proceeds to disassemble piece by piece, haggadah by haggadah, prophecy by prophecy. With a certainty as if he were there as midwife, he reveals to us the hidden secrets of the "virgin birth", with all the tomfoolery that was not revealed in the Gospel account, not openly affirmed but not openly denied, that Jesus was the illegitimate son of Mary and a Roman soldier named Panthera, and strong hints that when some critics replied to him in John 8/41 with "we are not illegitimate!", they were throwing back into his face that he was! That reveals in all its raw rhetoric the literary obscenity after historical obscenity, the real purpose and intent of his cleverly disguised "exegesis" of the Four Gospels and the lengths the Jesus Seminar will go to destroy the Jesus of the Gospels by clever manipulation and bold dismantling of the Biblical texts. I would urge anyone to read his chapters on "The Virgin Birth" and "Understanding the Virgin Birth" to see the level to which he will descend to defame the Jesus of the Gospels, by every trick and literary device that can be devised to accomplish that purpose. This is not a "Gang of Four" trying to foist a political agenda on the masses, it is rather a Gang of 150 "scholars" trying to foist their unbelief in Jesus Christ on the masses, under the guise of scholarship. They are intent on reading into the Gospels and fashioning Jesus Christ Himself into a disillusioned fanatic or immoral monster bent on deceiving His followers - making Himself God - and dying a tragic death in the process. The book is not worth the paper it is printed on - but buy it and read it and judge for yourself. Father Clifford Stevens Boys Town, Nebraska

Miller's badly written "Born Divine" goes through the usual litany of problems with the infancy stories, but he never makes reference to the counter arguments. This is poor scholarship and "Born Divine" ends up sounding like one of those atheist rants by Dawkins. Miller goes on and on and on about Isaiah 7:14 "clearly had nothing to do with virginity" (p 95). The Second Temple Jews lived in an honor/shame society. A thirteen year old girl raised in such a society would be a virgin. Christians didn't "misunderstand" (p 95) the quote. They were simply taking it to its logical conclusion and reading the text in the light of the new facts they had. Miller has taken a pea and tried to make it the size of an elephant by huffing and puffing. Doesn't work. Furthermore, Jewish

writers contemporary with the early Christians never mentioned Isaiah and the birth in connection with the coming messiah. This was clearly a unique Christian interpretation, and Miller forgets to ask why. Here are some questions he has overlooked: Why did churches who had recently been in touch with the original apostles accept the doctrine? Why did it circulate during a time when Jesus' relatives were still alive and could have contradicted the story? And we know that some of Jesus' relatives were still alive in Domitian's time, because he had them dragged to Rome so he could examine them. Indeed, the stories of John the Baptist, Jesus, Mary, James, Peter, and many of the earliest Christians are so intertwined that it would be impossible to yank out one element and have the story remain true. Dozens, even hundreds of people named in the gospels and in Paul epistles are involved. Why was the idea of the virgin birth everywhere, and all at the same time? Why is there no evidence of competing stories or disclaimers, even a trace of disagreement? And even later on, when the anti Christian author Celsus wrote, why was he unable to show any evidence that the early Christians didn't believe in a virgin birth? Why weren't Jewish critics either? Why did all the evidence brought by Celsus and the Jews try to disprove the virgin birth? Miller argues that "the theory that Mary's personal memories as the source for Luke's story is untenable in light of the errors in the description of the temple ritual...the family going to the temple for 'their purification'" (p 176). His thesis is that "purification after childbirth was for the mother alone, and there was no such ritual as the presentation of a child" (p 176). Granted, the temple burned down in 70 AD. Finding out what rituals were, or were not, done there is impossible. However we do have this clear bit of information from Exodus 13: "Consecrate to me every first-born that opens the womb among the Israelites, both of man and beast, for it belongs to me" ...or.... "For this I sacrifice to the Lord every male that first issues from the womb, and redeem every first-born of my sons". Redeem every first born son? Sure sounds to me as though there would be some sort of ritual for first born sons. Does Miller not know about Exodus 13? Or is he just not mentioning it and being deceptive so that his argument has more force? Either way, it's another huge error. Miller also has serious problems with his arguments about Matthew's prophecies. "Isaiah's prediction is about his immediate future" (p 164) he actually argues. So we must assume Miller has never heard of that old biblical standard, only used for the last two thousand years, multiple fulfillment. He actually argues that "'I called my son out of Egypt'" (p 165) is not a prediction" (p 165). This is amazing. The early Christians were using typology, not prophecy in the sense of prediction. Good grief, has Miller never heard of typology? It's only the single most basic interpretation made by the early Christians. Used by Paul. Without knowing about typology, it's impossible to understand early Christianity. I am aghast at the extent of his ignorance here. Miller staggers again, hilariously, by summing up: "Of the five

prophecies...only three are predictions..." (p 166). No surprise to anyone who knows anything about biblical scholarship and therefore knows these were all examples of typology. Here are more mistakes: "He will be called a Nazorean...is not an authentic prophecy" (p 165). On the contrary. The wordplay about Nazareth only works in Hebrew, and therefore likely goes back to the very first circle of Christians. "Nezer" comes from Isaiah 11:1: There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. Nazareth=branch town as Bethlehem is wordplay on 'house of bread' and a reference to the Eucharist. So, instead of proving the early Christians were making errors, that phrase is another very strong confirmation that the infancy narratives go back to the earliest Jewish strata. Further, it is important to note that when Matthew picks out references to the Christ from the Old Testament, he picked obscure texts. Many have a connection to the Old Testament that is difficult, and convoluted. This makes no sense if Matthew himself choose the texts and made up a story to go with it. It makes no sense if this was midrash. Again, that would have been specifically tailored to fit the prophecies. Matthew would have chosen only the most obvious, easiest of references to the Christ. This certainly buttresses the idea that the story was true. "The visit of the magi is certainly not historical" (p 100)," Miller pontificates. It is difficult to imagine making up a story about magi in a Jewish society which detested and condemned pagan astrology. The magi were not typical 'wise men' to the Jews. They were the very opposite--pagans who created evil rituals and sorcery. Why would they have been added as midrash? Clearly, they would not be chosen by anyone raised in Second Temple Judaism. Furthermore, the magi are clearly symbolic--TYPES, again, as in TYPOLOGY-- of those gentiles who would come to believe in Jesus, just as the shepherds, a group commonly thought of as ruffians by Jews, are a type of those within Second Temple Judaism who would believe in Christ. But neither are believable as figures a Second Temple Jew would make up in midrash. To give an idea of how poor Miller's research is, consider this dogmatic statement he makes: "Scholars regard the infancy narratives a whole to be non-historical" (p 175). If you have ever read a book of biblical scholarship you will know that if you make a statement that sweeping, you had better have a long list of scholars who really do agree with it, and then you need to list the ones who disagree. Then you typically go over the evidence, weighing each. Miller doesn't bother to do either. In fact there are many liberal scholars who agree with that statement, and even a small number of conservative ones. But all? Or even most? Hardly. Why is he being so deceptive here? And why won't he once bring up the arguments of the other side? Truly ridiculous: bringing in Apollonius as if his story influenced the gospels. When it is very clear the gospels created the Apollonius story. More of the ridiculous: "The narratives of Luke and Matthew are mutually contradictory and irreconcilable" (p 176). If they are so irreconcilable, then it's

a funny thing how every kindergarten class can put them together for a Christmas play. Utterly ridiculous: Miller's s chapter of the Gospel of Thomas in which he argues that "some early Christians were thinking through the implications of their belief that Jesus was both human and divine" (p 275). Come, come. Hasn't he read any recent scholarship? Sure, some scholars around 1970 thought Thomas had an early dating. Perrin and other scholars have proved that Thomas is derived from Syrian sources after 150 AD, which means Thomas was written over a hundred years after the gospels and it was written by Gnostics, not Christians. Christians condemned it at the time. Why would it give us any evidence about Christians?? Painfully ridiculous: Miller argues that Paul's discussion of Abraham's two sons in the Letter to the Galatians, in which he says one son of Abraham was fathered through the flesh and the other through the spirit is "by itself a strong clue about how Jews and early Christians understood the language of divine begetting" (p 227). This is a truly enormous mistake on many levels. First, Paul is using typology. All the firstborn sons in the Old Testament, save one, were not the one favored by God. It was always the second child. Um, rather like God's covenant with his firstborn Jews and then the later Christians--at least as seen through the eyes of Christians. This is clearly typology. And clearly Paul is talking about the Jews and the Christians. Trying to find some hint about how Paul thought about Christ's birth is a connection apparent only in Miller's mind. Very, very poor scholarship.

A book that raises and solves most frequently asked questions of NT scholars. It deals, for example, with the historicity of virginal birth, the infancy narratives, other pagans sons of God and the historical/theological questions about it. Born Divine definitively will make its contribution to the field of biblical studies.

Miller analyzes the Gospels' birth narratives not with faith and conviction, but with evidence and rational argument - and the result is undeniably devastating for some of the most wide-held Christian beliefs. His arguments against the view that Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies, for example, are simply a knock out blow to traditional views. What's so nice about this book is that Miller never "pounds the table" in trying to get you to believe something. He simply offers up the evidence as an invitation for people to think about these things for themselves - an approach that will undoubtedly be both brand-new and challenging to many readers. This book is so important! I wish it were compulsory reading for anyone growing up in our western culture.

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