

**The Legitimacy of Jesus :**

**An Afrocentric Reading of the Birth of**

**Jesus**

By

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## PREFACE

This study is primarily a contribution to scholarly interpretation of the New Testament Infancy Narratives. It owes much to Jane Schaberg although the present author strongly challenges her argument and reaches a completely different conclusion about the infancy narratives.

I would like to acknowledge the debt I owe to a number of people for their contribution and support in the development of this study.

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**NOMVUZO REVE**  
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## ABSTRACT

The primary intention of this study is to contribute to scholarly interpretation of the New Testament Infancy Narratives. It owes much to Schaberg (1990) who, undoubtedly, has done an extensive study of the infancy narratives. In contrast, it is a challenge to her claim that, studied from a feminist theological approach, the texts dealing with the origin of Jesus, Matthew 1:1-25 and Luke 1:20-56 and 3:23-38 originally were about an illegitimate conception and not about a miraculous virginal conception. It challenges her claim that the intention of the evangelists was to transmit the tradition that Jesus, the Messiah, was illegitimately conceived during the time when Mary, his mother, was still betrothed to Joseph.

My argument is that, looked at from a womanist Afrocentric perspective, these infancy narratives were about the legitimate conception of Jesus and nothing else. They were, rather, aimed at passing down the tradition that Jesus, charged with illegitimacy, was, in fact, conceived legitimately. The charge only served to defame Jesus. In other words, that charge had a social and not a biological value. An investigation of the understanding of Jesus's birth in the Mediterranean world in chapter 4 shows that that charge came solely from Jesus's opponents whether they were Jewish or non-Jewish.

An examination of pre-marital sexual relations and marriage customs among African societies in chapter 4 shows that Joseph could be the biological father of Jesus. He probably made Mary pregnant before or during the betrothal period. Given that, Joseph could not only be the legal father of Jesus but his biological father too.

Chapter 5 and 6 of this study look at Matthew's and Luke's reading of the virgin birth. There is really nothing suggesting that the evangelists intended to write about the illegitimacy of Jesus. They were clearly writing about the legitimate conception of Jesus.



## 0. INTRODUCTION

In her book, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*, Schaberg claims that, in their infancy narratives, Matthew and Luke are writing not about the virgin birth as many scholars want us to believe, but the illegitimacy of Jesus. They seek to transfer to their readers the tradition that Jesus was illegitimately conceived by Mary during the time when she was still betrothed to Joseph. In reaching this conclusion, Schaberg has employed a feminist critical principle as her hermeneutical key. However, she has used a feminist critical principle from a Eurocentric perspective. Although she claims to have used a feminist critical principle, she has failed considerably to acknowledge that African women have a different perception of the world, and therefore their interpretation of Matthew's and Luke's infancy narratives might be different from that of Western feminists. She has failed to acknowledge that feminists, though sharing some similar experiences, have diverging cultures which might lead them to look at various issues in a different way.

It is thus the intention of this study to challenge Schaberg while proving her wrong in her claim that the infancy narratives are about illegitimate conception of Jesus. The present author, indeed, agrees with Schaberg that the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke are not about the virginal conception. However, I strongly disagree with her that they are about illegitimate conception. This paper therefore seeks to show that, looked at from an Afrocentric perspective, Matthew's and Luke's infancy narratives are not about illegitimacy of Jesus but his legitimacy. Moreover, it seeks to demonstrate that in the eyes of an African Joseph was not only the legal father, but his natural father as well.

# CHAPTER 1

## 1. METHODOLOGY

### 1.0 Introductory

Each and every text is closed and therefore we need to open it. In dissecting any text tools are needed for the purpose. Various methods have been suggested to interpret a text. However, there is not a single method which is absolute and final. There is really no absolutism in a hermeneutical exercise. To dissect the infancy narratives in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, and to address the problem stated above, this study will employ an Afrocentric methodology. Within an Afrocentric methodology it will employ a womanist approach.

### 1.1 An Afrocentric Methodology

Before looking at an Afrocentric methodology itself, we need to first define Afrocentricity. Asante understands Afrocentricity to be the unity of African culture. Asante's understanding of Afrocentricity includes two concepts which, themselves, need definition. These are culture and African. He then defines culture as shared perceptions, attitudes and predisposition that allow people to organize experiences in certain ways (1990:17). African culture is thus the sum total of African philosophy, behaviour, ideas and artifacts (1985:4). The word "African" has always been a controversial term. This has been due to many people, Afrikaners in particular, who claim to be Africans. This has created real confusion as to what an African is. Asante has broken this confusion by defining an African or African race "as a gene pool defined by the whole of the African continent including people in all geographical areas of the land from Egypt to South, from Senegal to Kenya... The African race stems from a continental African gene pool and incorporates anyone whose ancestors originated there and who possess linguistic or cultural qualities and traits associated with the gene pool" (1990:17). In describing Africans, Tutu says:

All of us (Africans) are bound to mother Africa by invisible but tenacious bonds. She has natured the deepest things in us as blacks. All of us have roots that go deep in the warm soil of Africa; so that no matter how long and traumatic our separation from our ancestral home has been, there are things we are often unable to articulate, but which we feel in our very bones, things which make us, who are, different from others who have not suckled the breasts of our mother, Africa... Many characteristics of our music, our religion, our culture and so on, today in Africa and America can be explained adequately only by reference to a common heritage and common source in the past. We cannot deny, too, that most of us have had an identical history of exploitation through colonialism and neo-colonialism (1987:47).

As far as Asante is concerned, Africans share a common experience, struggle and origin. It is the two, that is, common origin and struggle which determine African culture. For instance, all of the African people did participate in the mechanized interaction with Europe, and thus share a commonality. Yansane supports Asante's view of cultural unity of Africa, insisting that the universalities in African culture are due to their cultural history of origin (1985:64). Kariamu Asante who has done extensive studies in African aesthetics, as well, strongly believes that Africans share a similar culture. In her study of the relationship between African aesthetics and life, Kariamu Asante has observed that the dance techniques of Africa, Haiti and Afro-America are the same (1985:71). It needs to be emphasised that, for Africans, dance is not just an extra-mural activity, but a way of life. It has cultural and social reality. Therefore, for Africans, sharing similar dances is sharing a similar culture. Boateng, on the other hand, has discovered similarities in traditional education among various African peoples (1985:110-121).

Arguing that African people share a similar culture does not necessarily imply that there are no diverging experiences among Africans. Indeed, there are variations, but they are not as great as Africans' difference from Europeans or Asians. Moreover, some of the differences are due to some extraneous cultural influences of non-Africans (Asante, 1985:11).

For many years, the Europeans who enforce their claim that Africans have diverse cultures, have denied and still deny the unity of African culture which is confirmed by many Africans. These Europeans have even gone to an extent of claiming that Africa south of the Sahara is

"Black Africa" and north of the Sahara is the Middle East. Furthermore, they have argued that ancient Egypt is not in Africa and the people of ancient Egypt were not Africans (Asante, 1985:4). According to these Europeans, it is impossible for Africans to have a united culture since there are too many ethnic groups in Africa. Amazingly, their argument never applies to European culture or Asian culture, and is thus one-sided. When it comes to European culture, irrespective of various ethnic groups that exist in Europe, European culture remains united, according to them. They rather call it Western civilization.

What is most amazing is that there are even Africans who deny cultural unity of Africa. Pobee claims that there is a plethora in "African cultures" and this is partly due to geographical and physical conditions. He claims that there is a gulf between African north of the Sahara and African south of the Sahara, between East Africa and West Africa and this results in different cultures between these regions. Moreover, he argues that there are differences within Africa and these differences are remarkable even within one country, and they are due to tribal backgrounds. For example, the Akan groups of Ghana are mainly matrilineal, on the one hand, while the Ewe and the Ga groups of Ghana are patrilineal, on the other hand. At the same time, among the Akan of West Africa, the spirits of the ancestors are very significant while they are useless among the Masai of East Africa (1987:30). What is most interesting is that, when Pobee repeatedly talks of African cultures and religions, he never talks of Christianities. This makes one wonder if he does not see any remarkable differences within Christianity itself. Is his Christianity as an Anglican similar to that of a Methodist? If so, why do we have so many churches? If not, why not Christianities and not Christianity? Tshibangu, who also claims to be an African theologian continuously talks of African religions instead of African religion (1987:37). The two, just like their European counterparts, have failed to recognize that, right from the earliest period, that is, pre- 70 C.E. there was no one type of Christianity. Brown and Meier have suggested that there were four types of Christianity that emerged after Jesus' death and these are distinguishable within the pages of the Christian New Testament (1983:1-9). The first group consisted of Jewish Christians and their Gentile converts, who insisted on full observance of the Mosaic Law, including circumcision, for all those who believed in Jesus. The second group consisted of Jewish Christians and their Gentile converts, who did not insist on

circumcision but did require converted Gentiles to keep some Jewish ritual observances. The third group was constituted by Jewish Christians and their Gentile converts, who did not insist on circumcision and did not require observance of the Jewish food laws. The fourth group consisted of Jewish Christians and their Gentile converts, who did not insist on circumcision or observance of the Jewish food laws and who saw no abiding significance in Jewish cult and feasts.

The most important question to be addressed now is why was there, and why there is, still, a need for an Afrocentric method? For a long period the history of African people has been studied by the Europeans, and thus from a Eurocentric perspective. Their method neglected the wider picture of the world and insisted that the only way of studying anything is a Eurocentric method. They dismissed all possible new interpretations, new criticism and new knowledge emerging. Their only belief was that the world was universal and, therefore, there is no need to have many methods to interpret it. By so arguing, they neglected the fact that people live in different societies with different cultures. They ignored the reality that Africans' viewpoint is different from that of Europeans. Due to their belief that the Eurocentric method is the perfect method which does not need to be supplemented by any other methods, Eurocentrists employed it in whatever they were studying. Even when studying African societies, they looked at them from a Eurocentric perspective. They never bothered to study them from their own context. By so doing, they were doing what Asante refers to as "European Studies of Africa" (1990:6). What was, and is still most pathetic is that even African scholars who participated in African Studies were and are still doing European Studies of Africa and not genuine African Studies. This was due to the fact that, though they claimed to be Africanists whose studies were centred on African experience, they tended to employ a Eurocentric method. Another negative feature of a Eurocentric methodology was that, when studying African societies it did so from a distance, using computers and boards to predict human behaviour under adverse circumstances. It was thus, in Asante's language, a distant, sterile, abstract, isolated and non-contact method (1990:26). Even when it did go to these societies, it did not see any need to be familiar with their history, language, philosophy and myths. Their social context was totally insignificant. Employing their Eurocentric methodology, which comes from the womb of racist ideology,

Employing their Eurocentric methodology, which comes from the womb of racist ideology, the European scholars' view of whatever was taking place in Africa was negative. They argued that African people had no culture, no history, no dynamism prior to European domination and exploitation. They even went to an extent of degrading Africa by separating some of the states from the rest of Africa, arguing that African societies are being detached, static and isolated from intra-continental interaction. Even the learned editors were concerned with producing an anthology which reflected the colonial situation and met its peculiar requirements. Among those requirements we can mention the fact that there was no serious consideration of Africa that could properly start before the beginning of the European domination. As the late Reginald Couplant (Davidson, 1991:5) affirmed, "up to the middle of the nineteenth century the main body of Africans had had no history, but had stayed for untold centuries, sunk in barbarism so that the heart of Africa was scarcely beating." What this simply meant was that African history could not be fit for scholarly investigation because no such history existed until the arrival of the Europeans (Davidson, 1991:5). Moreover, "having no history of their own "Africans were manifestly children who had grown up". Being "retarded children" they necessarily forfeited any claim to equality of treatment with other humans. Possessing no such claim, they must be taken in hand by superior peoples and shown the path they should tread" (Davidson, 1990:10). The whole argument that Africans had no history was thus aimed at justifying the ethos of colonial "trusteeship".

In response to this fallacy and white racism which have resulted in the suffering of black people, Black theology emerged. As Tutu argues, Black theology has emerged out of the context of black suffering at the hands of rampant white racism (1987:53). Black Theology needs to be credited for its contribution to Black Consciousness. However, it has its own weaknesses. Criticizing the Structural Functionalist approach, Mosala argues that it does not really take us a step forward in the sense that it takes us one step forward and two steps backward. It does so due to its failure to constitute a criticism that aims at transforming present practices, the remaining life against the backdrop of precious discursive and political practices against the dead past (1986:23). I would not like to say the same about Black Theology. However, though it is taking us one step forward, that step is not complete, because Black Theology's focus is too much on economic and political liberation of a Black

person and less on the liberation of the mind of a Black person. It is only concerned with social discrimination and oppression, and an identity crisis occasioned by black theologians' exclusion from the privileges of white culture despite their secret admiration of and class qualification for it (Mosala, 1989:25). By so doing, it ignores the fact that a Black person's mind as well has been oppressed and thus needs to be liberated.

The Europeans' misleading interpretations of Africa have oppressed a Black person's mind. Black people have been miseducated by the Western people. Western colleges have miseducated African students, valorizing European knowledge while trying very hard to devalue African knowledge. They have struggled to keep African people ignorant of themselves. They have used various strategies to distort the realities of African history. For example, they have presented European facts as if they preceded their African antecedents, choosing to focus on isolated European incidents as history while ignoring African history. They identified Africans who defended their lands as warlike (Asante, 1990:163). They taught African students that in Africa, there were no written languages until the nineteenth century. In all, African students were taught the kind of history which was perfectly integrated with the underlying ideologies of industrial society, and thus performed a legitimizing function both of perpetuating this society and justifying the type of relations established with other societies (Asante, 1990:138). Besides the misinterpretation of Africa by the Europeans, as Setiloane has correctly observed, for the majority of Africans living in modern urbanised Africa, it has become so difficult to imagine the lifestyle of the African people prior to Western colonization and civilization. Africans have become so conditioned and brain-washed that even those who are highly educated are often ashamed of the "traditional" lifestyle of Africans, and they see it as 'savage', 'brutal' and everything that is bad. They look at it with the eyes and spectacles of the Western people who have conquered them, taught them their ways and made them slaves to their thought patterns, value systems and spirituality (1986:1).

Having recognised how misleading Europeans' interpretations of Africa were and how much damage Western civilisation has caused to African people, Africanists like Diop, Du Bois, Asante, Mbiti, Setiloane and so forth stood up and called for new interpretations different

imposition of Europe on others. They saw a need for a discipline which would reconstruct the position of Africans in the past as an attempt to restore their place in world history which was cruelly distorted. There was a need for a method which would not only advance knowledge about the present African, but also the past African world. Reconstructing the past of the African world would help make connections between the present and past. As Asante says "it is impossible to reestablish historical linkages without first understanding the relationship of present behaviour to the classical concepts" (1990:67). To reconstruct the past of the African world, there is a need for an anthology which will reflect the deeper truths of African life, its long passage and unfolding through the years, its valid part in the still wider story of human development throughout the world, its distinctiveness from the rest of history (Davidson, 1990:6). As a philosophical undertaking, Diop's "African Origin of Civilization" represents the first breakaway from the traditional European and Eurocentric conceptions of Africa (Asante, 1985:255). Following are the discussions of the Afrocentrists, Du Bois, Diop, Asante, Mbiti and Setiloane, on an Afrocentric methodology.

## **1.2 Afrocentrists**

### **1.2.1 Du Bois**

The evidence from Asante is that Du Bois had an intense love for Africans. However, he himself was not Afrocentric (1988:16). In his studies of the African people he employed not an Afrocentric perspective, but a Eurocentric methodology. In all of his attempts to study and analyze the black people he used a Eurocentric approach and this is what Asante refers to as the Europeans Studies of Africa (1990:116). What this simply means is that, although Du Bois participated in African Studies, he did not do proper African Studies, but his interest in Africa served European Studies. As Asante puts it, "Du Bois was steeped in the traditions of European scholarship" (1988:16).

It is significant to note that, although Du Bois himself was not an Afrologist, he prepared the world for Afrocentricity (Asante, 1988:16). In Asante's language, "he was the protector of an idea who did not fully recognise its power but who would have shouted to see it come"



an idea who did not fully recognise its power but who would have shouted to see it come" (1988:16). Despite the fact that he was not Afrocentric, his intention was that of humanizing the world through the humanising of America (Asante, 1988:16). He challenged the restrictions of Europe and broke from its bonds, and this is apparent in his poems like "*I Am The Smoke King*". He demanded freedom from the constraints of a Eurocentric method which had tended to concentrate on itself, and thus had failed to draw a wider picture. It needs to be emphasised that Du Bois' demand is central to an Afrocentric methodology whose interest is that of acknowledging cultural pluralism which is ignored and even denied by the Eurocentrists. Therefore, although Du Bois could not break out of the tightness of European thought, and although he placed one foot in Europe and the other in Africa (Du Bois, 1971), his attempt to challenge the restrictions of Europe was a step forward. He opened the doors for a new approach, an Afrocentric approach. Through him, Negroes began to reject the idea of the world as belonging exclusively to White people (Du Bois, 1961:ix). He managed to influence people's way of thinking. They began to develop patriotism (Du Bois 1961:vii).

### 1.2.2 Diop

Diop describes an Afrocentric method as a discipline which aims at restoring the collective national African personality which was distorted by colonialism (1967:xiii). It is, in other words, a discipline which is interested in explaining the African people's history and studying their language. For a long time, this has been done by the Western people. However, whenever it is done by Africans the Western people perceive it to be stupid. They accuse such Africans of having ridiculous ideas. As Diop remarks:

"When they (foreign intellectuals) explain their own historical past or study their languages, that seems normal. Yet, when an African does likewise to help reconstruct the national personality of his people, distorted by colonialism, that is considered backward or alarming" (1967:xiii).

In the process of restoring the collective national African personality, an Afrocentric methodology attempts to correct wrong ideas that were engrafted into the African people's minds by the Western people. It proves wrong such Western ideas as; Blacks are culturally

and historically non-existent; the history of Black Africa is unrelated to that of Egypt; Egyptian civilisation is of Asiatic origin and not of African origin; Black people were not there from the beginning and never existed alone for millennia (1967:xiv; 78, 275). To be successful in verifying these misleading ideas, an Afrocentric methodology has to first conscientise the Black Africans of these misleading ideas. It has to make them aware that all these ideas were aimed at domesticating, atrophying, dissolving or stealing their soul (1967:xv). It should restore the historical consciousness of the African societies and reconquer a Promethean Consciousness. This is necessary precisely because some Black people find it difficult to break with the idea that Blacks are non-existent both culturally and historically (1967:xv; xiv). Moreover, for their knowledge, most blacks rely on textbooks that were produced by Europeans and have no time to consult original sources. Thus, the knowledge they acquire does not, in any way, help them appreciate the gap between the truth and what they have been taught. According to Diop, the black students' reliance on textbooks produced by Europeans is a result of their laziness. As he remarks, "a certain tendency to laziness encourages them to be satisfied with the textbooks and accept stereotyped notions of "infallible authority" from them as if from a catechism" (1967:72).

As a discipline whose main intention is that of writing a history of Black Africa, an Afrocentric methodology is not in a position to submit to what has been taught by foreign disciplines or adopt a compromise. It, rather, has to strive to dominate and master those disciplines by advancing new knowledge. Failing to do so, it runs a big risk of producing nothing else but alienation (1967:xvi).

Diop points out one positive aspect of an Afrocentric methodology which is very important. Unlike the Eurocentric methodology which looks at things from outside and is thus analytical, an Afrocentric methodology sees things from inside. In contrast to the Eurocentrists who cling to explosive, more or less biased microanalysis of facts, Afrocentrists work from inside. Hence, an Afrocentric methodology rejects the Eurocentric methodology whose aim is the fragmentation of the collective historical African consciousness into minute facts and details (1967:275). In terms of Diop, an Afrocentric methodology rejects the Europeans' examination of African societies "under the magnifying glass". Following is Asante's

definition of an Afrocentric methodology.

### ***1.2.3 Asante***

According to Asante, fundamental to an Afrocentric methodology is the commitment to advance new knowledge about the African world. This knowledge is new not only because it has been ignored or misinterpreted by Europeans, but precisely because even the people who claimed to be Afrocentrists tended to be Europeans whose interest in Africa served European Studies (1990:116). As Asante correctly observes, an Afrologist who has a clear perspective of the Watts uprising cannot interpret it as a riot, but should see the political implications inherent in the phenomenon, and would rather interpret it as an uprising or protest (1988:60). At the same time, a real Afrologist cannot interpret the conflict that occurred between Inkatha Freedom Party and African National Congress in 1992 as Black on Black violence. According to Asante the tendency by the African people to do what he calls "European Studies of Africa" was a result not of their racial background, but of the Eurocentric methodology they employed in studying Africa. In its attempt to advance new knowledge, an Afrocentric methodology needs to first acknowledge cultural pluralism which is denied by the Europeans. As Asante says, "for Europeans, to enter into a view, a perspective where they will be able to share with others in a world of plural perspective is to ask them to submit to a revolution" (1990:116). An Afrocentric methodology is therefore freedom from the constraints of a Eurocentric methodology which has tended to concentrate on itself and has failed to draw a wider picture. Above all, it is a challenge to the ruling class ideologies which have abused positions of power and question of knowledge.

Asante points out two principal issues that an Afrocentric methodology focuses on. Firstly, it is concerned with cosmological issues. Under cosmological issues it looks at racial formations, culture and gender. An Afrocentric methodology deals realistically with racial characteristics. Its understanding of race is different from that of a Eurocentric methodology. In contrast to that of the Europeans, its understanding of race does not carry any exploitation connotations. Gender is another issue which is taken into consideration by an Afrocentric methodology. As this method is concerned with social, political, economic and cultural

claim to be the liberators of the poor and yet exclude the most poor people, women, an Afrocentric methodology makes the liberation of women its fundamental part.

Secondly, an Afrocentric methodology looks at epistemological issues. These include language, myths, dance, music, and art. All these issues are predicates of African experience in the whole world. They all have a deep meaning to African people. All these issues have a cultural and social reality for Africans. Hegel, in Asante (1990:107) dismisses African myths and music claiming that they are not part of original history. As far as he is concerned, African myths, folksongs and tradition are "obscure modes and peculiar to obscure peoples". These myths are, to Hegel, obscure simply because they are unknown to Europeans and, therefore, for Hegel, history is only what happened to or what is known to Europeans. On the contrary, what is history to Hegel is not to Asante. For Asante, any appropriate history cannot see some as in history and others as out of history (1990:107).

Asante observes three main positive aspects of an Afrocentric methodology. Firstly, an Afrocentric methodology acknowledges cultural pluralism without seeking any recognition over other methods. Its commitment to centering the study of African phenomena and events in a particular cultural voice of the composite African people, does not mean that it rejects other methods and sees itself as the best method. It is open to all other methods. It encourages freedom of thought, evaluation of all data received by the human person, and the integration of all methods advanced by human beings into the intellectual inquiry. It completely rejects the notion that a certain discipline has all the tools needed to analyze phenomena. However, it stresses that these methods should be challenged. For example, an Afrocentric methodology should challenge a Eurocentric methodology for treating Africans and African contributions as being irrelevant to knowledge acquisition (1990:37).

The second positive aspect of an Afrocentric methodology is that it incorporates all spheres of life. It pays particular attention to social, historical, cultural, political, economic and psychological spheres of life. In that way, it is broad and thus allows Afrologists to look at any subject field they like, but of course, from an African perspective. For instance, if an Afrologist is studying the health problems in African communities, he/she must first have an

understanding of the role played by communal beliefs in various ways. He/she must have a clear understanding of African beliefs on how to eradicate disease, how to mask and minimize pain, and so forth.

Thirdly, in contrast to a Eurocentric methodology, an Afrocentric methodology insists that any researcher must be familiar with the history, language, philosophy, and myths of the people under study. Without cultural immersion, the researcher loses all sense of ethical values and ends up becoming a researcher for the sake of research, according to Asante (1990:27). Furthermore, a lack of cultural immersion results in senseless discoveries in African communities which never assist in humanising the world (1990:25). The Afrocentrists discussed above are Afrocentrists in diaspora and not on the continent. It is due to that that there is a need for definition of an Afrocentric methodology by Afrocentrists on the continent. Those include Mbiti and Setiloane whose discussions will follow immediately.

#### **1.2.4 Mbiti**

When talking of advancing new knowledge about Africa, we really cannot exclude advancing new knowledge about African religion. Religion is part and parcel of the African heritage which goes back many hundreds and thousands of years (Mbiti, 1975:12). For a long period, the African people were subjected to foreign rule and they were made to forget or despise their heritage. Due to their exposure to Western education, urbanisation and industrialisation, they became detached from their traditional environment. They were left in what Mbiti calls "a vacuum devoid of a solid religious foundation" (1969:2-3). As Africans were detached from their religion, around the middle of the twentieth century, the Europeans and Americans began studying African traditional religion. It is from these writers that we get most of our information about African religion. What is disconcerting is that most of these writers have never been to Africa. Moreover, only a few of these authors had done serious field study of African traditional religion. As a result, these writers misinterpreted, misrepresented and misunderstood African religion (Mbiti, 1969:10). They claimed that African beliefs, cultural characteristics and foods were borrowed from outside. They claimed that African people believe in many spirits and thus despised African religion. They claimed that African people

characteristics and foods were borrowed from outside. They claimed that African people believe in many spirits and thus despised African religion. They claimed that African people worshipped ancestors and thus labelled African religion as superstition, paganism and heathenism (Mbiti 1975:16; Idowu, 1973:116, 199). They described African religion as fetishism and even as primitive religion (Parrinder, 1949:7-8). Such European and American scholars even went to an extent of claiming that African people have no religion but magic (Mbiti, 1969:9).

Due to the fact that African people were made to forget their heritage, and their religion has been misinterpreted by the Europeans and Americans, Mbiti suggests that there is a need to rediscover African heritage (1975:6). There is a need to rediscover the experiences of the African people and the way in which they thought before foreign domination. Even conversion to Christianity and Islam should embrace the language, thought patterns, fears, social relationships, attitudes and philosophical disposition of an African (1969:3). Although there are no sacred scriptures from which one can learn about African religion and philosophy, it is not impossible to rediscover African heritage, argues Mbiti. This knowledge can be acquired through the remains of bones, tools, weapons, and later customs, language, oral traditions, rock painting and the art of writing (Mbiti, 1975:2). Supporting Mbiti, Davidson further suggests that knowledge about African heritage can be obtained from the writings of the African people themselves. He argues that from around the seventeenth century a number of West African peoples of the forest zone also began to feel the need for writing, and some more or less rudimentary scripts were invented. Again, at round about the middle of the eighteenth century or soon after, Africans who had been slaves and won their freedom began publishing memoirs in Europe (Davidson, 1990:32). However, to acquire knowledge about African religion, African people are not only dependent on tools, weapons, slaves' writings and so forth. As Mbiti correctly observes, the religion of Africans is not written on a paper, but in the people's hearts, minds, oral history, rituals and religious personages like priests, rainmakers, officiating elders and even kings (1969:4).

As an attempt to rediscover African heritage, there is a need to challenge the existing misinterpretations about African religion. There is a need to challenge the European and

American writers' false claims that African societies worship ancestors and that they do not have religion, but magic. European people, together with those Africans who were misled by their teachings, need to be shown that worship is the wrong term to be applied in relation to ancestors. They also need to be taught that African religion is not magic, but magic belongs to the religious mentality of African peoples (Mbiti, 1969:9).

Some scholars have already advanced new knowledge about Africa. They have already rediscovered the riches of its heritage. Through these scholars, the world is now beginning to realize valuable things which Africa has developed in all areas of human life. Through these scholars, it has become evident that it was Africa which exported ideas, cultures and civilisation to the outside world (Jahn, 1961; Davidson, 1961; Davidson, 1965). Though they are both on the continent, Mbiti and Setiloane differ as to where an Afrocentric methodology should put more emphasis.

### *1.2.5 Setiloane*

For many of us living in modern urbanised Africa, it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine how life might have been on this continent before the advent of Western people and their civilisation. We have become so conditional (and brain-washed) that, even with the best education, we often look back at it with shame as 'savage', brutal' and everything that is bad. We look at it with the eyes and spectacles of the Western people who have conquered us, taught us their ways and made us slaves to their thought-patterns, value systems and spirituality... We have 'internalised' their image of us and see ourselves present, past, and sometimes and even future as they see us (Setiloane, 1986:1).

The point which Setiloane is trying to emphasise in the above quotation is that the African people, and African youth in particular, have been taught to internalise foreign ideologies and worldviews. As a result, they have developed to despise themselves and to hate themselves. Setiloane, then, advises Africans not to be ashamed of their origins. In fact, they should be proud of their origins since they are nobler and respectable than those of the other people who cannot even trace themselves beyond "Adam and Eve playing hide and seek with God in the Garden of Eden".

As far as Setiloane is concerned, the African people have not completely lost memories of their past. However, the problem they are facing now is that of Western culture which presents itself as a superior culture. Since Western culture places itself as a superior culture, many Africans want to identify themselves with it. They seek to be seen as members of a dominating culture. Besides, there are advantages in being a member of a dominating culture (1986:4). For those who have unfortunately forgotten everything about their past, African myths are there to remind them. They are there to explain their origins different from those of the Western view of Adam and Eve. As Setiloane observes, in myths there is something of a communal memory of the group as it has grappled with the questions of its and all human origins, life on this earth, being and even the hereafter (1986:3).

### **1.3 Reading as an African Woman**

Within an Afrocentric methodology, I will employ a womanist approach precisely because the text under study concerns a woman, Mary. In addition, there are many scholars who, though employing an Afrocentric methodology, ignore issues pertaining to women. The approach is womanist and not feminist. Ackermann defines feminism as "the commitment to the praxis of liberation for women from all that oppresses us". As far as she is concerned, feminism does not benefit any specific group, race or class of women. In contrast, many Black women in South Africa dismiss feminism as a bourgeois, North American import and decadent (Ackermann, unpublished). In response, Bertelsmann-Kadalié argues that, dismissing feminism as a bourgeois concept is to lose sight of its complexity and diversity. Moreover, such a dismissal is often based on a combination of ignorance and fear of the unknown (1989:48). Bridegain, too, asserts that those Americans who dismiss feminism as a bourgeois issue are completely off the mark (1989:31).

Black women present valid reasons for dismissing feminism as a bourgeois concept. Feminism is concerned only with white middle-class women. It ignores the particularity of Black women's experiences. Black women in America, for instance, have been struggling for survival in contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, and oppressive, the other black, exploited, and oppressed (Cannon, 1985:30). They have been socially



prescribed, economically imported and politically brow-beaten. They have been victims of slavery in which their masters had total power over them. They have been restricted to the most unskilled, poorly paid jobs. All these issues are not addressed or acknowledged in feminism. In that way, feminism is not "colorized", it does not speak with the tongue of a Black woman. It does not tell the truth about the Black woman's historical existence in North America (Williams, 1987:42). Besides the failure of feminism to acknowledge the particularity of Black women's experience, there is another valid reason for Black women to reject feminism. White women join white men in oppressing black women, and thus in maintaining white supremacy (Williams, 1987:50). Williams remarks, "White women had no intentions of working alongside black women; even if some of them did speak of sexual equality, most did not favour racial equality... Fear of competing with blacks as well as the possible loss of job status associated with blacks caused white workers to oppose any efforts to have blacks as fellow workers" (1985:37).

Even the first women's rights advocates were never interested in social equality for all women, but social equality for white women (Cannon, 1985:44). Since they were less interested in social equality for all women they never challenged racism. As Hooks remarks:

They (the nineteenth century white women's rights advocates) attacked slavery not racism. The basis of their attack was moral reform... While they strongly advocated an end to slavery, they never advocated a change in the racial hierarchy that allowed their caste status to be higher than that of black women or men. In fact, they wanted that hierarchy to be maintained. Consequently, the white women's rights movements, which had a lukewarm beginning in earlier reform activities, emerged in full force in the wake of efforts to gain rights for black people precisely because white women wanted to see no change in the social status of blacks until they were assured that their demands for more rights were met (1981:124).

White women were thus the chief opponents to employment of black women (Giddings, 1984:237). Even women who claimed to be feminists were making racist statements. Hood quotes a leading southern feminist by the name of Belle Kearney who once proclaimed "Just as surely as the North will be forced to turn to the South for the nation's salvation, just so surely will the South be compelled to look to its Anglo-Saxon women as the medium through

which to retain the supremacy of white race over the Africans" (1978:49).

Having recognised feminism's ignorance of the particularity of black women's experience, and white feminists' contribution to the oppression of black women, black women decided to seek for a movement which would use new words, new language and new ideas that fit their experience. Consequently, womanism came into existence. Womanism or womanist theology is a movement which emerged among Afro-American Christian women. Williams defines a womanist as a black feminist or feminist of colour. This movement allows black women to claim their roots in black history, religion and culture (Williams, 1985:67). In contrast to feminist movements, a womanist movement concerns itself with such issues as women's liberation and family liberation from white-male and white-female domination, redistribution of goods and services in the society, ending white supremacy, male supremacy and upper class supremacy in all American institutions (Cannon, 1985:54). These are the priorities for womanists. Of course, issues like rape, domestic violence and women's work which white feminists are concerned with are also central to womanists.

#### **1.4 Justification of an Afrocentric Reading of the Virgin Birth**

Although there are many biblical scholars and theologians who have studied the virgin birth, there is not a single person who has ever looked at it from an African perspective. There is not a single person who has attempted to interpret it in a way that can reflect an African's understanding of it. By employing an Afrocentric methodology, this study will, therefore, be able to disclose its meaning to Africans.

## CHAPTER 2

### 2. THE VIRGIN BIRTH AS READ BY CONTEMPORARY WESTERN FEMINISTS

#### 2.0 Introductory

In chapter one the subject matter has not been dealt with. The whole chapter is concerned with the method to be used in addressing the problem stated in the introduction. It is only in chapter two that the subject matter is being introduced. Chapter two introduces the subject matter by presenting various interpretations of the virgin birth by contemporary Western feminists.

#### 2.1 What is Feminism?

There are quite a number of definitions of feminism given by different feminist theologians. King (1989:25) defines feminism as a socio-political movement with different political orientations like liberal, socialist and Marxist. What this simply means is that the spiritual and political challenge of feminism is much wider than any party-political line and is not restricted to the dominant political orientations of the West (Ackermann, 1985:5).

For Cannon et al, the term feminism means commitment to women's struggles against oppression. As she remarks:

We employ the term feminism as shorthand for our commitment to the infinitely deep value of women's lives ... feminism can best be defined in the course of what we do together - that is, in our praxis. We affirmed that feminism may be understood as a vision of a different reality that can only be seen as it is brought into being (1985:14, 16).

Hooks (1984:31) describes feminism as a movement to end sexist oppression which directs our attention to systems of domination and the inter-relatedness of sex, race and class

oppression.

Ackermann defines feminism as the commitment to the praxis of liberation for women from all that oppress them. She remarks about it as follows:

Feminism does not benefit any specific group, race or class of women, neither does it promote privileges for women over men. It is about a different consciousness, a radically transformed perspective which questions our social, cultural, political and religious traditions and calls for structural change in all these spheres (1990:6).

The discussion on womanism in chapter one has clearly shown that feminism does benefit a specific group and that is white women. It does so, basically, due to its tendency to universalise women's experience. It tends to ignore the particularity of black women's experiences. It is probably due to this that Ursula King says "it is difficult to group feminist theologians together for each has her own definite emphasis and individual approach" (1989:169).

Oduyoye remarks:

Feminism has become the shorthand for the proclamation that women's experience should become an integral part of what goes into the definition of being human. It highlights the woman's world and her worldview as she struggles side by side with the man to realize her full potential as a human being. The complex nature of feminism often goes unrecognized as people focus on the demand for linguistic changes... Feminism then emphasizes the wholeness of the community as made up of male and female beings. It seeks to express what is not so obvious, that is, that male-humanity is a partner with female-humanity, and that both expressions of humanity are needed to shape a balanced community within which each will experience a fullness of being. Feminism calls for the incorporation of the woman into the community of interpretation of what it means to be human (1988:121).

Oduyoye thus concludes that feminism is not a female concept. It is for everyone, men included, who is "conscious of the true nature of the human community as a mixture of those things, values, roles, and temperament that we divide into feminine and masculine"

(1988:121). In all, feminism liberates not only women but men as well. It liberates the human community as a whole. When men join feminist movements or women in their struggle for liberation, that is not necessarily an act of solidarity with women but an act of liberation for themselves from entrenched attitudes and structures within a patriarchal society. Men need to be aware that sexism is also a distortion of male humanity. As a result of sexism, men have lost the feminine side of themselves.

## **2.2 The Influence of Social Location on Reading**

For a long time, women have been denied a chance to read any text from a woman's point of view. It is men exclusively who have been doing the interpretation and, unfortunately, their interpretation has been insensitive to issues facing women, especially issues oppressive to women. Men's interpretation has been aimed at maintaining patriarchy. What is most painful is that even women have been trained to read as men, and were thus alienated from their experiences and interests. Fortunately, leading feminists like Fiorenza, Ruether and others broke the silence of women and did away with male strategies of reading. They introduced a new way of reading which reflects the social location of women.

Schaberg, as one of contemporary leading feminists, has proposed five ways in which a woman can read any text (1990:16). Firstly, she needs to expose androcentrism and sexism in the text and its interpretation. However, exposing androcentrism does not imply that a woman should dismiss that text as a patriarchal text. She must defeat it as patriarchal authority by using the very same text as liberator. Secondly, a woman should counter biblical sexism by reinterpreting those texts which have been distorted, and by also highlighting those texts that challenge patriarchal structures, attitudes, images and presuppositions. Thirdly, she must retell and sympathise with the woman victim. Fourthly, a woman must not just read a text but reconstruct biblical history as an attempt to show the role of women in the past. Finally, she needs to examine those texts that critique patriarchy in order to show that God sides with and liberates the oppressed. Fiorenza supports this view suggesting that feminist critical interpretation of the Bible should not just reject the Bible in its totality. Rather, it should make choices between oppressive and liberative texts of the

Bible. It should evaluate and assess the Bible to see its liberative texts. This evaluation and assessment of the Bible results in the Bible no longer functioning as authoritative source, but as resource for women's struggle for liberation (1984:14).

Ruether also contends that the very oppressive Bible can be liberative to women, but only if it can be seen that there is a relationship between feminist critical principle and that critical principle by which the biblical thought critiques itself and renews its vision as the authentic Word of God against corrupting and sinful deformations (1983:23). By biblical critical principle Ruether refers to the prophetic messianic tradition in which God speaks through the prophets or prophetesses as critics of the status quo. God speaks through them to criticise the injustices of the way society is being conducted, especially by the wealthy and powerful. They do not only criticise the status quo, but also point to an alternative social order. Amos 5:21, 5:24 is a good example of such a biblical critical principle. There is, therefore, a clear relationship between the biblical critical principle and feminist critical principle which also critiques the injustices towards women and points to an alternative order. Hence, Trible in West (1990:81) argues that not only has a feminist perspective enlightened the Bible, but the Bible has informed a feminist perspective.

As we can see from Schaberg's proposed ways of reading as a woman, a feminist critical approach is about nothing else but reading sensitive to women's history, suffering, survival, and courage (Schaberg, 1990:16). The hermeneutical key is women's experience.

### **2.3 Feminist Strategies of Reading the Virgin Birth**

Quite a number of women have employed the above approach in their studies of the virgin birth. Among them are Fiorenza, Ruether, Daly, Warner, Kassel, Johnson, Schaberg and many more. These biblical scholars and feminist theologians have come up with new interesting interpretations of the virgin birth. They have advanced new knowledge about the virgin birth. I refer to their interpretations as new knowledge precisely because the majority of scholars who originally studied the virginal conception were men who tended to study it from a man's point of view and thus gave interpretations that would suit the man's world.

It is due to this that there was a need to study the virgin birth from a woman's point of view. Unfortunately, this paper will not be able to offer all of the above mentioned women's interpretations of the virgin birth. It will only be confined to those of Fiorenza, Ruether, Daly and Schaberg.

### **2.3.1 *Fiorenza***

According to Fiorenza, the virgin birth or the Mary myth as she prefers to refer to it, has never provided women with equality and wholeness. It has never had an impact on the hierarchical structures of the church (1961:19). As far as she is concerned, the Mary myth was invented by men and since it was invented by men it never affected the hierarchical organisation of the church. It has never worked as a symbol or justification of women's equality or leadership in the church or society. Instead, the virgin birth demonstrates that "the myth of a woman preached to women by men has served and can serve to deter from becoming fully independent and whole human persons to confine ambitions" (1975:605). Proving that the virgin birth has not been used to promote the liberation of women, she looks at various countries in which the cult of Mary is strong and discovers that in these countries women have not become significantly involved in public and political life. Even in the churches that have the strongest official attachment to Mary like the Roman Catholic Church, women are most strongly denied full participation.

Looking closely at the virgin birth, Fiorenza observes that it connects human capacities like love, nurture, emotionality and care exclusively with mothering which is restricted to women in patriarchal societies. By so doing, the Mary myth does not challenge the patriarchal structures of our societies but rather strives to maintain them.

Fiorenza further observes that the virgin birth causes separation of women in the Catholic Church. Some women have to be the mothers while others have to be nuns. Those who remain virgins are viewed as having made a better choice. They are regarded as holy people. Their holiness is based on their rejection of earthly desires and dependencies. By doing that, the Catholic Church prevents women from being fully independent and whole human beings

(1961:20).

Fiorenza is definitely correct when she argues that the virgin birth has not provided women with equality and wholeness even in the Catholic Church where the cult of Mary is strong. I highly appreciate the Catholic expression of Mary as a tangible figure. I credit the Catholic Church for offering Mary a high place in its church. However, something is missing in Catholic teaching. What the Roman Catholic Church tends to do is to glorify Mary for the sake of her son. Its glories to Mary are secondary in the counsels of God. Mary is not blessed for her own sake, independently of her son. Her blessedness is the direct result of her closeness to her son, who alone is blessed in himself from endless ages. In Grignion de Montfort's language in Smith (1948:513) Mary is the relation to God. Because of this, Mary is never the centre in Catholic teaching. Ashe (1976:10) asserts that Mary's history begins long before Christianity is born. She preserved something pre-Christian. She was worshipped long before she gave birth to Christ, and was thus not worshipped as Christ's mother. Ashe, therefore, suggests that Catholics should worship Mary not only as Christ's mother, but as a divinity in her own right.

### **2.3.2 *Ruether***

For Ruether, the framework in which Mariology is developed is not different from that in which the early Christian symbol of the church as an eschatological bride of Christ and mother of Christians was developed. The early Christian symbol of the church as an eschatological bride of Christ and mother of Christians was developed in a framework which, undoubtedly, is antisexual and antimaternal. In fact, the whole concept of eschatology is shaped by negation of the sexual and maternal roles of real women (1983:143). According to Ruether, "the female roles have been both sublimated and taken over into male "spiritual" power. Male headship power controls the higher conception, gestation, birth and relates this to a transcendent sphere that negate "carnal" maternity of women". The same applies with Mariology in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke. In these narratives, Mary represents the resurrected body and glorified church ascended to Heaven and reigning at the side of Christ (1983:150). As presented in Luke, Mary becomes the first believer who



consents to God's will of making her an instrument of his messianic redemption. She, in contrast to Eve, obeys God's will and is, therefore, the New Eve who reverses the disobedience of the First Eve (1983:150). In the infancy narratives, Mary represents an eschatological church because of her virginity. Due to her virginity which represents a decisive break with carnal sexuality and reproduction, Mary becomes the representative of the church. Moreover, she represents the original goodness of creation before its alienation from the Spirit. This is, according to Ruether, the fundamental theology of the virginal conception in the gospels, and hidden in this theology is the repressed power of femaleness and nature as it exists beneath and beyond the present male dualism. In other words, according to this theology, to escape death and sin a woman needs to do away with sex and birth and thus with nature. In Ruether's terms, male eschatology combines male womb envy with womb negation. Thus, theology of virginal conception is sexist and thus needs to be rejected. Since this theology is unacceptable, Ruether proposes an alternative Mariology which she calls a liberation Mariology.

Ruether's alternative Mariology is grounded in Luke's magnificat where Mary is identified with the New Israel, the Church. In Luke, Mary falls pregnant before she gets married and "this puts her under danger as someone who has been making her own choices about her body and sexuality without regard for her future husband. She may be accused of being a prostitute or a loose woman" and "put away" (Ruether, 1983:153). It is significant to note that Mary herself takes the decision to have the redemptive child. The decision is between her and God, and no third party is involved. Even Joseph, her future husband, is out of the scene. He is not consulted. It then becomes clear that Mary's motherhood is a free choice. Ruether argues that since Mary's birth-giving is a free choice, Mary can symbolise the church which itself expresses a free act of faith. Mary hears the word of God and responds to it, and that has nothing to do with her being a woman and her resultant powerlessness (1961:18). By so doing, she represents the church and, in fact, the original wholeness of humanity. As the representative of the wholeness of humanity, Mary is the new humanity freed from hierarchical power. As Ruether puts it "through Mary's faith, God entered history in the person of Christ to effect a liberating revolution in human relationships" (1983:155).

to put the understanding of the virgin birth in its proper place (1990:199). As far as Schaberg is concerned, both these would reveal to Ruether that the whole story of the birth of Jesus in Matthew and Luke is about nothing else but illegitimate conception of Jesus.

### 2.3.3 *Daly*

Daly has written quite a number of books on the virgin birth, and her interpretations of the virgin birth vary from one book to another. Among her books we can mention *The Church and the Second Sex*, *Beyond God the Father*, and *Gyn/Ecology* and *Pure Lust*.

In *The Church and the Second Sex*, Daly argues that Mary is presented as an ideal woman who kneels before her son and freely accepts her subordinate role. In that way, Mary is portrayed as the outstanding role model for women. According to her, the way Mary is presented has "devastating effects" (1975:61). At the same time, Mary is presented as a unique woman who does not really connect with real women (1975:68). In this way, Mary becomes an impossible model for women. She appears so precisely because the whole concept of the virgin birth or Mary symbol, as Daly calls it, is a man-made symbol. As she remarks "the Mary symbol is the product of the brains of a celibate clergy who are hoping to capture the essence of womanhood through this man-made symbol". She therefore concludes that Mary's image in the infancy narratives prevents men from acquiring a realistic view of women (1975:160-164).

In her book, *Beyond God the Father*, Daly observes a prophetic dimension in the way Mary is portrayed. This prophetic dimension lies not in Mary's Magnificat as many scholars have pointed out, but with Mary herself. Mary is a remnant of the ancient Mother Goddess (1974:84). In terms of Daly, "Mary is not only in some distant reflection of an almost completely forgotten and denied past, but also the percussor of a new age in which women are becoming God" (1974:90-94, 84). ... "The big silence that covered up the universally matriarchal world is about to be broken: we are on the verge of a new coming of female presence" (1974:93-96). Mary becomes "the ultimate reality, divine spark of being", the one who "affirms the life-loving being of women and nature" (1978:xi) Mary, thus, functions to

presence" (1974:93-96). Mary becomes "the ultimate reality, divine spark of being", the one who "affirms the life-loving being of women and nature" (1978:xi) Mary, thus, functions to free the power of women's self.

On the contrary, in *Gyn/Ecology* and *Pure Lust*, Daly strongly asserts a different conceptualisation of Mary. While Mary is portrayed as a Goddess, this does not erase the fact that she has been turned into an instrument of men. In the virgin birth, Mary becomes a model rape victim (1984:104-106). She is violated at the conception precisely because she is denied a self-determining existence. She is further raped at "the annunciation" in which she affirms her need for male acceptance (1984:106). In that way she becomes very useful as a model for women in a patriarchal framework. The rape which Daly talks about is not physical rape, but metaphoric rape. In contrast to Schaberg, she argues that the New Testament Infancy Narratives are, indeed, about virginal conception but that virginal conception itself is a rape.

#### **2.3.4 Schaberg**

Schaberg asserts that, in their infancy narratives, the writers of Matthew and Luke do not intend writing about the miraculous or virginal conception as they appear to be or as many biblical scholars want us to believe. They rather intend to write about illegitimate conception of Jesus. Their aim is to transfer the tradition that Jesus was illegitimately conceived during the time when his parents were still not living together. They want to inform their readers that Joseph is not the biological father of Jesus, and Jesus is thus an illegitimate child who is legitimated through Joseph. Supporting her argument, Schaberg examines various passages in both Matthew's and Luke's infancy narratives. Unfortunately, this paper will not look at all these passages but will select only a few, give a brief summary of what they are all about, and present Schaberg's interpretation of them. In Matthew, on the one hand, she looks at 1:16, 1:18b and 1:20. On the other hand, in Luke she examines 1:34; 1:38; 1:46 and 2:5. I will start off with the passages from Matthew, and thereafter examine those from Luke.

### **2.3.4.1 Schaberg's understanding of Matthean infancy narrative**

In Matthew 1:16, instead of writing "Joseph begot Jesus" in his genealogy, Matthew prefers rather to write "of her (Mary) was begotten Jesus called the Christ". He avoids the expected formulaic statement "Joseph begot Jesus". According to Schaberg, Matthew's avoidance of that formulaic statement is his way of emphasising that Joseph is not the biological father of Jesus and, therefore, Jesus is an illegitimate child who is legitimated through Joseph.

In 1:18b Matthew emphasises that Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came to live together, she was found pregnant. For Schaberg, Matthew's emphasis that Mary's pregnancy was discovered before she and Joseph came together is a suggestion that she was impregnated by somebody else and not her husband, Joseph. This is further confirmed by Joseph's reaction to Mary's pregnancy in 1:18, where he decides to divorce her quietly. According to Schaberg this suggests that he suspects that Mary was either raped or she committed adultery.

The theme of Mtt 1:20 is that, after Joseph had taken the decision to divorce Mary secretly, the angel appeared to him saying "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit". The angel's speech to Joseph seems to imply that the cause of Mary's pregnancy is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has impregnated her. However, Schaberg comes up with a completely different interpretation. She suggests that when Matthew talks of Mary's conception through the Holy Spirit he does not refer to Mary's mating with the Holy Spirit, but rather refers to the involvement of the Holy Spirit, by protecting her. It is this involvement of the Holy Spirit which qualifies Jesus to be the Son of God and not divine begetting. As far as Schaberg is concerned, the conception itself is normal. It is a result of sexual intercourse just like all other conceptions, although Matthew is silent about the biological father of Mary's child. However, the cause of Mary's pregnancy is rape which makes Mary a victim who, together with her child, needs protection.

#### **2.3.4.2 Schaberg's understanding of Lukan infancy narrative**

In Luke 1:34 the writer presents the angel telling Mary that she will give birth to a son. Mary responds by asking, "How can this be as I do not have sexual relations with a husband?" Mary's question implies that though betrothed, she and Joseph are not yet living together. As the home-taking has not yet taken place, Mary and Joseph presumably have not or are not having sexual relations presently. Schaberg argues that Mary's question is Luke's way of conscientising his readers that Joseph will not be the biological father of Mary's child, and therefore the child will be illegitimate.

In 1:38, after being told by an angel that she will conceive through the Holy Spirit Mary responds by saying, "May it be to me as you have said". According to Schaberg, Mary consents not to the act that will cause her pregnancy. She does not consent to the fact that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and impregnate her. Her consent is rather to empowerment in the midst of humiliation. What she accepts is God's will to overcome sexual humiliation.

In Luke 1:46 the author presents Mary's Magnificat in which Mary talks as the representative or prophetess of the poor. This view has been agreed upon by many biblical scholars. In contrast, Schaberg argues that Mary does not only represent the hope of the poor, but represents the hope of the poor as a woman who has suffered and has been vindicated as a woman. Her prophecy comes out of her experience of being raped. Schaberg insists that Luke has included the Magnificat to communicate the tradition that Mary had been violated and made pregnant, but God vindicated her. He protected her together with her illegitimate child. He even recognised and caused her child to be recognised as God's son and Messiah. There was, then, a radical overturning of social expectations. Mary, who was oppressed and violated was, in contrast, liberated. She triumphed over her enemies.

In 2:5 Luke tells us of Joseph's travelling from Nazareth to Bethlehem with the pregnant Mary, "his betrothed". Schaberg stresses that Luke's reference to Mary as "Joseph's betrothed" is aimed at emphasising that Joseph is not the biological father of Jesus. Luke

seeks to emphasise that during the time when Mary was pregnant, she was still betrothed to Joseph and there was thus no sexual intercourse which had taken or was taking place between them. Jesus was therefore an illegitimate child who was conceived outside marriage.

#### **2.4 Evaluation of Western Feminist Reading**

A Western feminist reading has, undoubtedly, been an eye-opener to all women. It has played a very big role in conscientising women about the oppressive elements of biblical texts. Moreover, it has provided women with reading strategies to deal with oppressive biblical texts. The main problem with Western feminist reading is that, although its hermeneutical key is women's experiences, it fails to acknowledge that though women share some similar experiences, they have diverging cultures which might lead them to see various issues in different ways. It fails to acknowledge that African women have a different perception of the world. This is not surprising precisely because the proponents of this methodology are themselves products of a Eurocentric methodology which itself rejects that there are diverse plural views of the world. They are part and parcel of a Eurocentric methodology which neglects the fact that people live in different societies with different cultures. They are a product of a methodology which ignores the reality that Africans' viewpoint is different from that of Europeans.

Employing a Western feminist methodology, Schaberg reaches the conclusion that the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke are about the illegitimate conception of Jesus. This is a purely Western perspective. This view does not reflect an African woman's understanding of the birth of Jesus. It is due to such ignorance by Western feminist reading that the present author has chosen to employ an Womanist Afrocentric methodology. This is an approach which allows whoever is employing it to view the world from the standpoint of an African woman. It allows women to read a text through the eyes of an African woman. It is, therefore, a challenge to the Western feminist reading which ignores an African woman's history, religion and culture.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **3. READING THE VIRGIN BIRTH THROUGH AFRICAN EYES: LEGITIMACY AND ILLEGITIMACY IN AN AFRICAN SETTING**

#### **3.0 Introductory**

An examination of pre-marital sexual relations and marriage customs in African societies can be very helpful in understanding the birth of Jesus. The significance of such an examination assumes that it will reveal to us if there were any chances of sexual intercourse taking place between Joseph and Mary before they came to live together. Above all, it will show us if there is any possibility of Joseph being the biological father of Jesus.

#### **3.1 Premarital Sexual Relations in African Societies**

In African societies, premarital sexual relations were condemned, and girls were expected to be virgins at the time of marriage (Mair, 1969:12). As a way of preventing encounters between boys and girls, once they approached the age of puberty, they were kept apart as much as possible. Boys spent most of their youth and early manhood at the cattle-posts out in the veld, while girls always remained under the direct control of their mother, even sharing the same hut with the mother at night until they got married. Meetings between young people were therefore restricted mainly to the rare occasions of a boy's visits home (Shapera, 1939:39). If by any chance an unmarried woman fell pregnant, she was subject to all sorts of humiliation, stripped off her ornament, shunned by the other girls, and even publicly mocked by the singing of obscene songs outside her home at night (Mair, 1969:12). Among the Nandis, if a girl is found to have lost her virginity, that causes a great shame and anger to both the girl and her parents. In some instances, such a girl would be speared to death while those who have remained virgins would be rewarded with cows or sheep (Mbiti, 1969:127). Among the Pedis, on the other hand, the marriage of a girl found not to be a virgin could even be cancelled (Mair, 1969:12). Sex restrictions in African societies are not always effective. Sometimes they are effective and sometimes they are not (Stephens, 1963:

245).

In contrast to sex restrictions, many societies permit sexual intercourse before marriage. As Murdock observes,

... nonincentuous premarital relations are fully permitted in 65 instances, and are conditionally approved in 43 and only mildly disapproved in 6, whereas they are forbidden in only 44. In other words, premarital license prevails in 70 percent of our cases. In the rest, the taboo falls primarily upon females and appears to be largely a precaution against childbearing out of wedlocks rather than a moral requirement (1949:265).

Moeno also argues that premarital sexual relations of a limited nature were permitted in most of the African traditional communities. Among the Xhosas this practice was known as "ukusoma" while among the Zulus it was known as "ukuhlobonga". Apparently, the Vendas and Basothos also allowed the practice. It is significant to note that these premarital sexual relations were limited to external intercourse so that the young girl might not be pregnant (1969:25). According to Sabiela, sexual permissiveness operates as a necessary condition in the causation of teenage unwed mothers (1990:22). The Nandis also permit premarital love affairs. For example, during their initiation ceremony of girls, the boyfriends supply them with a hat of beads and thigh and ankle bells so as to make sure that they are properly and beautifully dressed for the occasion (Mbiti, 1969:127).

### **3.2 Marriage Customs in African Societies**

Seabela defines marriage as a set of customs for the establishment of the family and as such provides the basis for the distinction between legitimacy and illegitimacy (1990:22). Conklin gives four main functions of marriage in society. These are: sanctioning sexual intercourse, sanctioning human production, supporting and maintaining the children, and maintaining marriage partners themselves (1984:250-252).

Among the African societies, youth was not given a chance to choose their marriage partners,



and that was the responsibility of their families (Goode, 1982:52). The reason for this was that, to Africans, marriage held a socio-economic significance for the partners' families (Longmore, 1959:85).

Although in some parts of Africa parents choose marriage partners for their children, in other parts the choice is made by the young people themselves. They are permitted by their custom to choose the people they wish to marry and thereafter inform their parents and other relatives (Mbiti, 1975:100). The social gatherings, dances and communal work make it possible for the young people to choose their partners. In addition, their knowledge of other people in the immediate neighbourhood also gives them the opportunity to choose their life partners.

The Udhuk permit young men to choose their marriage partners. When a boy decides to marry a particular girl, he goes to meet her on the path and present his intentions. In response, the girl pretends to be shocked and then her friends chase the man away. At home the girl puts her bed against the back wall of the house. Then, at night the young man visits the home when everybody is asleep. He puts his hand through openings in the wall until he reaches the girl. In response, the girl feels the hand of the young man and identifies him by the ornaments round his hand. If she still rejects him, she cries aloud so that the parents can wake up, and the young man runs away. However, if the girl accepts the young man's offer for marriage, she keeps quiet and the two continue to converse, but whispering. From then, the young man visits the girl more often. When the relationship is strong, the girl begins wearing beads which soon make the parents want to know who the suitor is. If they approve, then the two can continue seeing each other in public, and this leads to marriage (Cerulli, 1956:23).

Among the Xhosas, before marriage there is a betrothal. Soga defines a betrothal as the handing over to the bride's parents of an animal, ox or cow (1931:228). In ancient times the bridegroom's parents or family would only leave an assegai when an agreement had been reached as a sign of betrothal. The bridegroom could be known or unknown to the bride. If known, there is no evidence that the two were prevented from seeing each other. They

presumably made appointments to see each other and there were no spectators during their meetings.

Among the Pondos, there is apparently nothing associated with the betrothal except for a private agreement which takes place between the young man and the girl of his choice (Soga, 1931:229). When having decided to complete their engagement by marriage, the two would go off together to the young man's home. The impression one gets from the Pondo marriage custom is that a man is known to the woman he intends to marry. They can hardly make a private agreement if they do not know each other. As they know each other prior to marriage and even get a chance to meet and reach private agreement, the two can have sexual intercourse which might result in the girl's pregnancy.

Another African marriage custom is the one called "ukunyuka nengalo" in Xhosa which literally means "to climb with the arm". This refers to a custom in which, if a man impregnates a girl, he decides to marry her. He might decide to marry her before or after giving birth to the child.

### **3.3 Children Born out of Wedlock in African Societies**

Malinowski, in Hartley (1975:3), argues that all societies have a principle of legitimacy. However, he insists that the universality of this principle does not imply that all members of the society will always conform to it under any circumstances. As far as he is concerned, there are variations in commitment to the norm amongst different societies, and these variations are influenced by the social and cultural environment of a given society in the sphere of sexual behaviour. In his examination of the principle of legitimacy in African societies, Goode has concluded that the function of the principle of legitimacy is that of determining the social placement of the child and facilitating proper care and socialisation of the child by the family as a primary agent of socialisation (1982:34). He then argues that giving birth out of wedlock is a violation of a cultural norm which is the principle of legitimacy. Analysing the principle of legitimacy, Seabela suggests that it is a social and cultural instrument or mechanism used to control human sexuality in relation to parenthood.

According to this principle, human reproduction should take place within marriage. Therefore, childbirth out of wedlock is illegal and a child born in such a manner is illegitimate. Marriage is thus the contract which makes a child legitimate, and thus the only vacant link between sexuality and parenthood (1990:22). Consequently, Seabela defines a legitimate child as the one whose birth has been in conformity with the institutional norms governing human reproduction in the society. On the other hand, he defines an illegitimate child as the one who is born out of wedlock (1990:22). According to him, children born out of wedlock are a result of deviance which, to him, is the human behaviour which does not conform to the norms operative in a particular social situation at a certain point in time in a group or society. They are a product of deviant behaviour since childbirth out of wedlock is a violation of institutional norms governing human reproduction. Seabela further argues that violation of the principle of legitimacy has a bearing on the role obligations of family members. Since the principle of legitimacy is aimed at determining the social placement of the child in the family and the entire society, and facilitating proper socialisation which is an important means of transmitting culture, primarily by the parents, illegitimacy may imply that a child is brought up in an incomplete family and thus receive inadequate socialisation (1990:23). Bouding also supports the view that the family is normally thought of as an instrument for the maintenance of social stability (1978:33). According to Seabela it is not only the children who suffer the consequences of the violation of the principle of legitimacy, but also the unwed mothers. They experience conception, pregnancy and consequent motherhood being teenagers. Moreover, they experience difficulties in meeting motherhood obligations which are, according to Osofsky, providing the material and emotional needs of the child (1968:14). Chesser seems to agree with Seabela when he suggests that a child born out of wedlock is in great danger of real unwantedness (1947:40).

In contrast to Seabela, Nangoli argues,

there is no translation in African languages for the word "illegitimate". A child born of a man and a woman is God's child like any other. The nonsense of "out of wedlock" therefore illegitimate doesn't apply in African society (1987:41).

Nangoli is correct in asserting that in African societies there is no such an understanding of a child born out of wedlock as being "illegitimate". In African societies, if a young girl

conceives out of wedlock, her child belongs neither to her nor to the man who has impregnated her, but to the parents of the girl. It adopts the mother's surname. It undergoes all the rituals of the girl's family. Even if the girl gets married at a later stage, that child remains at home, being treated as the sister or brother of the girl. In fact, the child is regarded as the son or daughter of the girl's parents. It calls them mother and father and not grandmother and grandfather. However, there are instances in which the child goes with the girl when she gets married. That child becomes the child of the girl's husband and is not in anyway different from those born within marriage. There is no such a thing as the biological, natural or legitimate father in African societies. The husband is the father to all the children of his wife.

As the child belongs to the parents of the girl, it has the right to inherit from them just like any other child. If the child is the only boy at home it has the right to assume the duties of "inkulu" (firstborn), after the death of the parents. If the child is a girl and happens to get married, all of her lobola goes to the parents who have been giving her all the care she needed.

Since the child born out of wedlock belongs to the parents of the girl, as the above discussion has indicated, it becomes clear that a child born out of wedlock in African societies, receives all the material and emotional needs of a child. Therefore, Seabela is wrong when he argues that a child born out of wedlock does not receive sufficient socialisation. Furthermore, in African societies, it is the community that has to protect the child, feed it, bring it up, educate it and thus incorporate it into the wider community, and not necessarily the parents. In other words, the birth of a child is not the concern of the parents exclusively, but of many relatives including the living and the departed (Mbiti, 1969:110). As Mbiti puts it, "Nature brings the child into the world, but society creates the child into a social being, a corporate person". In addition, the evidence from the National Council on Illegitimacy is that, what Seabela perceives to be the problem facing the unwed teenage mothers is not. Its research shows that about a third of all women studied by the National Council in New York had managed to look after their children without any public assistance. They did not have any problems with rearing their children. The only existing problem had to do with the needs

of families who lived in poverty and not necessarily with the fact that the mothers were unmarried when they gave birth to their firstborns (1970:41, 50).

Amazingly, there are black graduates and even professors who claim that there are "illegitimates" in African societies. These black academics argue that there were "illegitimates" in African societies from long ago. According to them, children born out of wedlock were understood to be "illegitimates", but there was a strong sense of secrecy among the elders. The elders knew and acknowledged that such children were illegitimate, but they were hiding that information from them. This certainly shows that degrees from universities are not indications of one's sensitivity and responsiveness to black cultural data (Asante, 1988:63). Moreover, Asante is correct when he suggests that the problem with these Africans lies not with their background, but with the perspective they employ. Though they are Africans and some of them even claim to be Afrologists, they use Western and intellectual perspectives (1990:116).

There are three kinds of children whom the Western people and some black people regard as "illegitimates". The first type is "*isizananina*" in Xhosa and Zulu, "*Le tla le pepuwe*" in Sotho, which literally means one who comes being carried on the back of his or her mother. The second type is "umgqakhwe" in Xhosa literally meaning a child born during the time when the mother is married, but the father is not the mother's husband. The third type is "ivezandlebe" which means a child born of a married woman, but after the death of her husband. It is significant to note that, these names are not acceptable to the people they are ascribed and to the society at large. Whoever is ascribing these names to anyone is insulting that person and can be taken to the traditional court. Again, these names are never used by a friend, but by an opponent or enemy. Whenever they are used there is hatred and conflict involved. It is, therefore, important for us to ask the question of who ascribes these names to these children before we can start claiming that they are illegitimate children.

According to my experience, as an African woman from rural areas, these names are mainly used in polygamous families. When a man is married to more than one wife, you find many

instances when one wife charges the other wife's children of being illegitimate. This, indeed, is a result of the conflict between the two wives. As Mbiti correctly observes, there are frequent quarrels and fights among the wives and children of polygamous families. These quarrels are often caused by the husband's neglect of some wives while favouring others (1969:143). The point I wish to emphasise here is not that polygamy is good or bad, but that there are quarrels in polygamous families and it is these quarrels which lead to the use of the word "illegitimate". Stephen (1963:57) also observes that polygamous women are jealous. Due to this jealousy, there is a lot of quarrelling and hatred between co-wives. Remarking about his co-wives Gusii, a man from Kenya, says:

each wife tends to be the husband's darling when she is the latest, and to maintain that position until he marries again... This tendency in itself causes jealousy among the wives. In addition, any inequality in the distribution of gifts or money, or in the number of children born and died, or the amount of education received by the children, adds to jealousy and hatred. A woman who becomes barren or whose children die almost always believes that her co-wife has achieved this through witchcraft or poisoning. She may then attempt retaliation (Stephen, 1963:57).

Commenting on polygamy a Siwai man says:

there is never peace for long in a polygamous family. If the husband sleeps in the house of one wife the other one sulks all the next day. If the man is so stupid as to sleep two consecutive nights in the house of one wife, the other will refuse to cook for him saying, "so and so is your wife, go to her for food. Since I am not good enough for you to sleep with, then my food is not good enough for you to eat". Frequently the co-wives will quarrel and fight (Stephen, 1963:57).

Sinu, a Siwai man tells the following story about his maternal uncle:

he formerly had five wives at one time and the youngest one was always raging and fighting the others. Once, she knocked an older wife senseless and then ran away and had to be forcibly returned. Since then all but one of those wives had died and there is peace in Jeku - not a single polygamous family. Formerly, there was no sleeping at night, the co-wives were continually shouting and throwing things at one another. Kanku (Sinu's maternal uncle) had absolutely no control over them (Stephen, 1963:59).

I must again emphasise that the above quotations are not in, any way, aimed at discussing whether polygamy is good or bad, but are aimed at demonstrating that the word "illegitimate" is always used in a situation of crisis. In A C Jordan's book, *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya* (1940), where the word "ivezandlebe" is often used, there is conflict between two different groups. There is conflict between Dabula's group and Dingindawo's group. The conflict is over chieftaincy. Dabula, and his group, wants Zwelinzima to be the chief of the Mpondomise(s), while Dingindawo who is currently an illegitimate chief wants to retain his position.

### **3.4 Legal aspects of illegitimacy in the South African Setting**

Spiro (1950:447-8) gives seven legal definitions of an illegitimate child in South Africa. The first definition is that, it is a child whose father and mother were never married persons. Secondly, it is a child born before the marriage of the mother and a person other than the natural father. Thirdly, a child born before the marriage of the natural father and a person other than the natural mother. Fourthly, a child born after the marriage of the mother and a person other than the natural father. Fifthly, a child born after the marriage of a natural father and a person other than the natural mother. Sixthly, it is a child born after the dissolution of the marriage of the mother and a person other than the natural father. Finally, a child born after the dissolution of the marriage of the natural father and person other than the mother.

Spiro then identifies four kinds of children who are legally understood as illegitimate children. Those are, simple illegitimate children, adulterine illegitimate children, incestuous illegitimate children and children born as a result of artificial insemination with semen of person other than the husband of mother. Spiro defines all these kinds of illegitimate children as follows: (1) Simple illegitimate children are those who are born of unmarried persons who by law might have been married lawfully to each other. (2) Adulterine illegitimate children are those born in adultery by a married woman. (3) Incestuous illegitimate children are those whose natural father and the mother are related in the forbidden degrees. The fourth kind needs no definition.

The mothers of all these different illegitimate children have all the rights and duties which a parent has. If the mother happens to be a minor herself, a guardian who has to maintain the child is instituted. The mother has a claim against the natural father to make a contribution towards or to provide the maintenance of the illegitimate child.

### **3.5 Reading the Virgin Birth Through African Eyes**

According to the gospels' infancy narratives, Mary got pregnant during the time when she was betrothed to Joseph. Taking into consideration the above African pre-marital relations and marriage customs, we can assume that during the time when Mary was betrothed to Joseph they knew each other. They were already having an affair, which means they were seeing each other. The betrothal did not stop them from seeing each other and their affair continued. As they were seeing each other without anyone observing them, they could have had sexual intercourse whether they were permitted to do so or not, and this could be the cause of Mary's pregnancy. The point I am trying to make is that Joseph might have made Mary pregnant before or during the betrothal period, and when he finally married her she was already pregnant. She was already carrying his baby. Therefore, since the biological father of Mary's child could be Joseph, the man whom she finally married, we cannot refer to Jesus as an illegitimate child. Joseph could hardly continue to marry a woman who was impregnated by another man. If he knew that Mary's child was not his, he could simply refuse to marry her as it is evident in Soga that, in African societies, Xhosas in particular, a man could refuse to marry his betrothed if he had a just cause for his refusal (1931:229). Mary's pregnancy by another man could definitely be a just reason for Joseph's refusal of Mary. The fact that he decided to marry her irrespective of her pregnancy suggests that he might have been the cause of her pregnancy.

The evidence from the gospels' infancy narratives is that Joseph discovered Mary's pregnancy before they came to live together. In Matthew 1:18 it is said "This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with a child through the Holy Spirit". The narrator does



not make it clear who found Mary's pregnancy. Presumably, Joseph did and if so, Joseph was definitely having contact with Mary. How could he possibly discover Mary's pregnancy, himself, if he was not having contact with her?

The above argument as advanced by Schaberg, that Schaberg's argument "Mary got pregnant before she came to live with Joseph, suggests the illegitimacy of the birth of Jesus", is incorrect in the eyes of Africans. To Africans, the fact that Mary fell pregnant before she came to live with Joseph does not, in any way, suggest that the baby she conceived was not Joseph's. The baby belonged to Joseph who ultimately married her and became her husband, and was thus legitimate. Even the South African customary law understands such a child to be legitimate (Spiro, 1950:447).

Further, the fact that Mary fell pregnant before she came to live with Joseph does not mean she was an adulteress. She did not conceive from another man, but from her husband to be. In fact, even if she had conceived from another man she could not be regarded as an adulteress because the marriage process was not yet through. The existence of a betrothal agreement does not necessarily mean that a marriage will follow (Soga, 1931:228). A betrothal does not mean marriage. If a betrothal does not mean marriage, a girl can have another man or another man can be involved with a betrothed girl. It is, in fact, evident in Soga that among the Xhosas, even if a girl was already betrothed, another man could present himself and when told that she was already betrothed to someone else he would respond by saying "she is not married yet, what pledge has he given that he means marriage?" (1931:228). If the man was told that the man who had betrothed the girl had given one cow as a pledge, he could offer two and could possibly be given preference over the one who offered one cow. However, this depended on the character of the man and the quality of his family, and not on the number of cattle offered by the second suitor.

For Schaberg, Joseph's reaction to Mary's pregnancy in Matthew 1:19 gives the impression that he never had sexual relations with Mary, and he thus suspected that Mary's pregnancy was due to adultery or rape. This kind of reaction is familiar among the African societies. There are many instances in which a man denies pregnancy of a girl knowing very well that

he is the cause of that pregnancy. Men often deny pregnant girls when they feel that they are not ready to take care of the child, when they have an interest in another girl other than the one who is pregnant, and when they are scared of their parents who might refuse to pay damages for the pregnant girl. In cases of denial, what is usually done is to wait until the baby is born. If the baby resembles the father or any other member of the father's family, the pregnancy is accepted even though it was previously denied. The baby's failure to look like any of the members of the father's family might mean a complete denial of the baby. The point I wish to emphasise is that within an African perspective, the fact that Joseph reacted to Mary's pregnancy by deciding to divorce her, does not in any way imply that he was not the father of the child who was conceived by Mary. It does not, in any way, suggest that he suspected rape or adultery as the cause of Mary's pregnancy. He could react that way even if he knew very well that he was the cause of Mary's pregnancy. However, the reasons for such a reaction were best known to him. Probably, Joseph was aware that the betrothal did not grant him license to have sexual relations with Mary, and therefore it was morally wrong for him to have sexual relations with her during the betrothal period. The best solution for him was, then, to distance himself from that pregnancy.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **4. THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN WORLD**

#### **4.0 Introductory**

Chapter two and three have dealt with the interpretations of the birth of Jesus by the contemporary Western feminists and Africans. However, their interpretations do not shed any light as to how Jesus' birth, in the Mediterranean world, was understood. They have not given us any hint as to how the Jewish world, the Greco-Roman world and the early church understood the birth of Jesus. It is due to this that chapter four seeks to trace the understanding of the birth of Jesus in the Mediterranean world.

#### **4.1 The Jewish World**

The evidence from Brown is that the Jews did charge Jesus with illegitimacy due to his being born early after his parents had come to live together (1977:534). Moreover, it is apparent in the Christian writings, both canonical and non-canonical, that Jesus was, indeed, charged of illegitimacy. This charge is evident in John 8:31, Mark 6:3, John 8:19, Act of Pilate and the Gospel of Thomas.

##### **John 8:31**

John 8:31 begins a debate between Jesus and "the Jews who had believed in him". However, the people whom Jesus converses with are, in verse 48, called the Jews. The debate between the Jews and Jesus is about authentic sonship. The Jews claim to be the descendants of Abraham, but Jesus questions their claim. He even implies that they are not Abraham's true children, but sons of the devil (verse 44). The Jews understand Jesus to be accusing them of illegitimacy (Haenchen, 1984:31-32, Schnackenburg, 1968:327-73). In response, the Jews say "we were not born of fornication". The implication of the Jews' response is that while

they, themselves, were not born of fornication, Jesus was, and he was therefore illegitimate (Wead, 1970:61-62). In reaction to Jesus' challenge to their religious or spiritual legitimacy, the Jews challenge his physical legitimacy (Schaberg, 1990:157).

### **Mark 6:3**

In Mark 6:3 Jesus is referred to as the Son of Mary and this is, according to Schaberg, a hint of the illegitimacy charge. As the narrator says "those who heard Jesus teach in the Synagogue in his own country were astonished saying "where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands! Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us? And they took offense at him". The title "Son of Mary" ascribed to Jesus in Mark 6:3 is, for Schaberg, a hint of the illegitimacy charge (1990:160). She suggests that because it is not usual for a man to be identified by his mother's name. In contrast, the evidence from McArthur (1973:39-47) is that there is no evidence that the practice of identifying an illegitimate son by the name of his mother prevailed in first century Judaism. The examples in the Hebrew Bible and in early rabbinic literature of a man identified through his mother do not clearly demonstrate that this was a customary way of designating illegitimate children or sons of prostitutes. It is only with later Jewish legal principle that a man is illegitimate when he is called by his mother's name, for a bastard has no father (Stauffer, 1957:118). However, there is no proof that this principle was in operation during the first century while at the same time, there is no proof that it was not (Schaberg, 1990:161). It is significant to note that, in Samaritan and Mandaean usage, the designation "Son of Mary" did have the pejorative sense of Jesus' illegitimacy (Stauffer, 1957:125-126). For example, in the Samaritan Chronicle II, Jesus is said to be illegitimate because Joseph had sexual relations with Mary before the betrothal, an act regarded as adultery (Schaberg, 1990:161). Jesus is then called Son of Mary (verse 58, 92). This information about Jesus' illegitimacy apparently comes from "the Judaists (verse 2) and from "the Pharisaic community" (verse 58). Brown also argues that the title "Son of Mary" needs not be linked to a charge of illegitimacy. He suggests that the designation of Jesus as "the Son of Mary", in the context of the story in which it appears, is that Joseph was dead and

Mary was the only living parent who was well known to the villagers. However, he emphasises that this is not a way of suggesting that the son of a widow was identified by his mother's name, since an official record would still have identified him as "Jesus, the Son of Joseph". According to Brown, therefore, the title "Son of Mary" is neither official nor genealogical, but contextual (1977:540).

### **John 8:19**

In John 8:19, when Jesus talks of his Father, the Jews respond asking him, "where is this father of yours?" Given the fact that there were rumours about Jesus' birth, the Jews could be asking, "where is this father of yours who is known only to you and not to the other people?". This would be a clear charge of illegitimacy.

### **Acts of Pilate 2:3**

The author of the Acts of Pilate presents the charge by the elders of the Jews before Pilate. The charge is that Jesus was born of fornication. The other Jews who were standing by, the devout men, denied that Jesus came of fornication, saying: "for we know that Joseph was betrothed to Mary and he was not born of fornication". This group is said to be proselytes and disciples of Jesus, meaning "born children of Greeks" who have become Jews (Schaberg, 1990:159). This second group is simply Jewish Christians, and what we have here is the dispute between the Jews and Jewish Christians. It is a dispute between the Jews who reject Jesus as their Messiah and Jewish Christians to whom Jesus is the Messiah.

### **Gospel of Thomas**

In the Apocryphal Gospel of Thomas 105 there is a saying: "He who knows the father and mother will be called the son of a harlot". Schaberg suggests that if this saying refers to Jesus, its meaning may be "he who recognizes his father (God) and mother (the Holy Spirit) is nevertheless said (by his opponents) to be the son of a harlot" (1990:164). She further suggests that in this saying, Jesus was not only regarded as illegitimate, but his mother was

regarded as a prostitute or whore. In the Gospel of Thomas it is not clear whether this charge came from the Jews or Christians. However, Schaberg herself suggests that the charge came from Jesus' opponents whether they were Jews or not. Moreover, the evidence from Meyer (1984:107) is that the charge that Jesus was the son of a prostitute was among the Jewish charges against Jesus.

It is then clear that the people who ascribed the title "Son of Mary" to Jesus were his opponents, the Jews and the Pharisees, in particular. McArthur thus suggests that the phrase "Son of Mary" was a deliberate insult reflecting on the legitimacy of Jesus (1973:52-53). Schaberg, as well, correctly observes that in both Mark 6:3 and John 8:41, the charge appears on the lips of those who do not fully comprehend Jesus or are hostile to him. In addition, she observes that even outside the New Testament Infancy Narratives the charge that Jesus was illegitimately conceived comes solely from the Jews (1990:192).

The most important question which needs to be addressed now is whether the Jewish community as a whole rejected and thus charged Jesus with illegitimacy. Sandmel suggests that the Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah because their expectations did not materialise. The Roman empire was still in control, the line of David was not restored, and the scattered Jews were not restored to Palestine (1965:33). Sandmel's argument creates the impression that the Jews who rejected Jesus were those who felt oppression from the Roman rulers, that is, those who were members of the lower classes. According to Lenski's proposed social structure in Crossan (1991:43-44), the agrarian societies, Rome included, had nine social classes, the first five composed of the upper classes while the last four was composed of the lower classes. The lower classes were: the Peasant class, Artisan class, Unclean and Degraded class and Expendable class. These are the classes who felt pressure from the upper classes. They are the classes which, according to Sandmel rejected Jesus as the Messiah and presumably the classes who charged Jesus with illegitimacy. If Jesus was opposed by the Jews who came from the lower classes, as Sandmel wants us to believe, what was the attitude of those Jews who were part of the upper classes towards Jesus? Is Sandmel trying to suggest that the Jewish elite accepted Jesus?

All the evidence in Horsley (1989) suggests that the Jewish elite worked hand in hand with the Roman rulers to oppress the poor Jews, and they, together with the Roman rulers, opposed Jesus. After conquering Judea, Herod struggled to maintain law and order in his own realm. He was also striving to implement the Roman policy or defend the Roman interests. He even adopted such titles as "Admirer of the Romans", "Admirer of Caesar" and others. His adoption of these titles clearly indicated that he was following Caesar's footsteps. In fact, it is apparent in Horsley that, during Herod's reign, there was a triple demand of tithes, tribute and taxes due to his vast expenditures for court, army, multiple palaces, building projects, new and rebuilt cities and gifts to imperial figures. Consequently, the Jewish people were left absolutely poor. Being conscious of his, and as part of his tyranny, Herod prohibited any forms of meetings by the people, or walking together. He even passed repressive laws that were in direct confrontation with the Torah. Those included the law saying "house breakers should be sold into slavery and be deported from the kingdom". This law was completely against the Torah which forbade the selling of fellow Jews into slavery (1989:47).

Despite his oppression of the Jewish people, Herod claimed to be the king of the Jews. Because of this claim, the proclamation of the child to be born (Jesus) as the king of the Jews posed a threat to Herod. He inquired of the chief priests and scribes where the child was to be born. As far as Horsely is concerned, Herod's inquiry indicated that he was not the divinely anointed king of the Jews and the shepherd of God's people of Israel. He was rather an illegitimate king. Herod even commanded that all new born boys be killed.

High Priests and Scribes who were also part of the ruling class saw Jesus as a threat. Apparently, after being imposed as the king of the Jews by the Romans, Herod chose and placed his sycophants in the high priesthood. He did not place legitimate priests from priesthood families. By so doing, he avoided any threat to his regime. He manipulated the high priests and their operations of the temple apparatus as instruments of his domination. To secure their illegitimate positions, the high priests collaborated with Herod and Roman governors in oppressing the Jewish people. As beneficiaries of Herod's tyranny, the high priests and scribes were, like Herod, threatened by the birth of the new king of the Jews.

In Matthew 4:2 they allegedly advised Herod as to the Scriptural traditions about the place where the Messiah was to be born. Their advice indicated their strong support of Herod's killing of Jesus.

Jesus' concept of the kingdom of God which was central to his parables sharpened the conflict between himself and the Roman governors and their agents. The kingdom which Jesus was announcing was provocative. His kingdom, which included the nobodies and undesirable in the here and now, was definitely a radically egalitarian one, and as such, it rendered sexual and social, political and religious distinctions completely irrelevant and anachronistic (Crossan, 1991:298). His kingdom was the kingdom against social inequalities and the oppression of the poor. As Yoder remarks, "Jesus was not just a moralist whose teachings had some political implications, he was not primarily a teacher of spirituality whose public ministry unfortunately was seen in a political light, he was not just a sacrificial lamb preparing for his immolation, or a God-man whose divine status calls us to disregard his humanity. Jesus was, in his divinely mandated (i.e. promised, anointed, messianic) prophethood, priesthood, and kingship, the bearer of a new possibility of human, social, and therefore political relationship (1972:62-63).

The people who were in direct confrontation with Jesus were, therefore, the Jewish elite. They are obviously the ones who charged Jesus of illegitimacy. Their charge of illegitimacy was meant to defame Jesus as a deviant. In their study of Matthew's gospel, Malina and Neyrey (1988:12) argue that in the Gospel of Matthew, Christ is evaluated in different ways by various people. They refer to this as Christology from the side. On the one hand, his followers acclaim him as a prominent person; his opponents, on the other hand, defame him as a deviant. Both these groups ascribe different titles and behaviours to Jesus so as to indicate who he is. On the one hand, Jesus' opponents ascribe negative labels to him in order to show that he is a deviant. In terms of Malina and Neyrey, this group ascribe behaviour or conditions that result in Jesus' being out of normal place. They emphasise that Jesus is the rule-breaker and an outsider different from others in the group. They call on all the people to see that Jesus is not what he appears to be, but is otherwise and in essence of a lower species. Above all, Jesus' opponents give him a new identity, that of a deviant



(1988:62). On the other hand, Jesus' followers describe the attitudes and behaviour that acclaim Jesus as a prominent person. To them, Jesus is a new person totally different from what is described by his opponents. Jesus' followers do not only change him, but they re-interpret, re-constitute and re-construct him so as to show that he is really a prominent person (1988:104).

What comes out from Malina and Neyrey's study of Matthew's gospel is that a person never acclaims his/her opponent, but he/she defames the opponent as a deviant. The Jewish elite who saw Jesus as a threat to their regime and who were his opponents were certainly the ones who charged Jesus of illegitimacy. It is unlikely that the poor Jews who themselves felt the oppression imposed by the Jewish elite could, together with their oppressors, oppose Jesus. If at all they opposed him, their reasons for doing so were definitely different from those of the Jewish elite.

## **4.2 The Greco-Roman World**

### **4.2.1 *Justin Martyr***

Justin Martyr, a Gentile native, makes the following five statements about the birth of Jesus:

- 1) Mary conceived without sexual intercourse and this is what makes her remain a virgin. The cause of her pregnancy was the power of God and not sexual intercourse. Justin Martyr obviously agrees with the Catholic scholars official dogma on the virgin birth. The Catholic scholars believe that, since Mary was conceiving not just any human being, but God, she had to conceive through the Holy Spirit. According to Hanke, a Catholic scholar, Mary conceived through the Holy Spirit because the child who was in her womb was not an ordinary human being, but rather Jesus Christ who is represented in the Scriptures as being born of a virgin. Jesus was conceived through the Holy Spirit because he was divine, and was supernaturally manifested through the virgin Mary to take away the sins of the world (1963:57). For Hanke, therefore, Jesus Christ does not become the Lord above all the people until he is born

of the Holy Spirit. In fact, Hanke even suggests that Jesus Christ's saviourhood is dependent upon the miraculous virgin birth. Gromacki also argues that to confess the deity of Christ is to confess the virgin birth and vice versa (1974:189).

Justin Martyr also seems to share a similar understanding with the Catholics that Mary conceived without losing her virginity. According to the Catholics Mary retained her virginity intact before the birth, in the birth and after the birth of Jesus Christ. Mary's perpetual virginity is understood by the Catholics and presumably Justin Martyr primarily as a witness to the unique relation of Jesus Christ to God since he had no father, but God. Furthermore, Mary's perpetual virginity has great importance for her and her ministry among her Son's people. Mary's perpetual virginity, which Justin Martyr, together with the Catholics, believes in is rejected by the majority of the Protestants and by both the Liberals and Conservatives. They reject it asserting that there is no indication in the Bible that Mary remained a virgin after giving birth. Moreover, Luke 2:7 which says "and she brought forth her first-born son", gives an impression that Mary had more children after Jesus. In response, the Catholic scholars argue that Luke 2:7 does not in any way suggest that Mary had more children after Jesus, for among the Jewish people an only son was also known to be the firstborn and had special privileges and duties (Otti, 1962:207). Mary's perpetual virginity is also dismissed by the Holy Writ in Otti (1962:205) which looks at it from a natural science point of view. In fact, the Holy Writ does not reject the virgin birth itself, but the miraculous side of Mary's virginity which is believed by both Justin Martyr and the Catholics. According to the Holy Writ, Mary's perpetual virginity does not mean there was no injury and opening to her hymen and womb. There was an injury to Mary's hymen, but, according to the modern natural science, that did not destroy her virginity. The point the Holy Writ is trying to make is that Mary indeed remained a virgin after giving birth to Jesus Christ, but that was not miraculous. It could and can still happen to anyone and not Mary per se.

- 2) Mary was of Davidic descent. The origins of Mary are not dealt with in the canonical gospels. The pseudo-gospels, the gospel of James in particular, does provide us with

information concerning who Mary's parents were. In James' gospel, it is clear that Mary was of Davidic descent (Vorster, 1986; Cartlidge & Dungan 1980:107-117). In his gospel, James presents a man by the name of Joachim and his wife, Anna, praying to God to get a child for Anna is barren. Their prayer is heard and Anna gives birth to a girl whom she names Mary. When Mary is about a year old, her father gives a great feast where he invites high priests, scribes, elders of the council, and all the people of Israel (6.4). In this feast the priest blesses Mary saying "O God of our father, bless this child and give to her a name famous forever in all generations". At the age of three, Mary is taken to the Temple of the Lord. On her arrival at the Temple of the Lord, the priest again blesses her saying "the Lord your God has magnified your name in all generations, in you, at the end of day will the Lord God manifest his deliverance to the children of Israel" (6). Mary then grows in the Temple of the Lord like a dove being fed and she receives food from the hand of an angel (8.2).

Mary's story in James' gospel clearly confirms that she was of Davidic descent. In both blessings, the priest emphasises that Mary's presence will be of great importance to the Israelite nation. Through her, the Lord will manifest his deliverance to the children of Israel. As a descendant of David, Mary is to save primarily the people of Israel who are also of Davidic descent. Mary's story in the gospel of James also provides us with more information as to why God chose Mary to mother Jesus, the saviour. God chose Mary not because she was the model disciple, ideal believer who completely abandoned herself to God's will in absolute self-surrender. He did not choose her because she was the representative of the people of God at prayer. God rather chose her because she was his own daughter, who knew His purpose. Since she was God's daughter she was uniquely conceived through the Holy Spirit. She grew up in the Temple of the Lord being fed like dove and receiving her food from the hand of an angel. Being God's daughter who knew God's purpose, Mary was chosen by God to mother Jesus so that he could inherit the knowledge of God's purpose right from her womb.

- 3) Isaiah 7 predicted the unique virginal conception: Justin Martyr regards the virginal conception as a fulfilment of God's plan. In other words, the virginal conception was not a sudden decision which God took, but was the fulfilment of the promises that were made by God to the ancestors of Israel. Mary formed the link between ancient Israel and Christ, and co-operated in bringing about the transition from the time of Christ on earth to that of the Church (Somerville, 1972:188).
- 4) Though the manner of Jesus' birth is human, Jesus is undoubtedly the divine Son of God. Even though Mary gave birth to him in an ordinary way, yet his wisdom makes him worthy to be called the Son of God. Although Justin Martyr, himself, does not acknowledge that Mary is the Mother of God, he presumably shares the Catholics' belief that Mary conceived and bore the Second Person of the Divinity according to human nature. This is indicated by his willingness to acknowledge both the true humanity and divine nature of Christ.
- 5) Mary's conception of Jesus should be contrasted with Eve's conception of disobedience and death. Again, Justin Martyr seems to share the Catholics' understanding that Mary played an active role in salvation. She participated in the distribution of grace which was lost because of Eve. She, through her birth of Christ, restored salvation which was lost through Eve. She reversed Eve's disastrous action. As de Satge puts it "A virgin's disobedience is saved by a virgin's obedience... Through Eve man found his grave, through Mary he was called to heaven" (1976:120-121). Mary is thus the antitype of Eve and, therefore, is rightly called the Second Eve in the same sense that her divine son is rightly called the Second Adam (Smith, 1948:525). Mary's function as mediatrix which is confessed by Justin Martyr and Catholics is denied by the Protestants who argue that Christ is the one and only mediator. Responding to the Protestants, the Catholics assert that Mary's function as mediatrix does not, in any way, set her up as an independent or rival source of mediation. Rather, it defines more closely her Son's mediatorship and the way it works (de Satge, 1976:119).

Schaberg claims that Justin Martyr does not allude or directly combat the tradition of the illegitimacy of Jesus. For instance, in Dial 78 he is retelling Matthew's narrative and adds to it that Joseph supposed Mary was impregnated by intercourse with a man, that is, from fornication. However, he was commanded in a vision not to put her away (1990:185). Again, in Dial 48, Justin refers to the Jewish Christians who maintained that Jesus was born "a man from men". However, there is really no indication that these Jewish Christians held the view that Jesus was illegitimately conceived. Furthermore, Schaberg herself suggests that if Justin knew of some who held the view that the Messiah was conceived illegitimately, we would expect him to mention and refute this opinion (1990:186). The fact that he does not mention that opinion seems to indicate that he was not aware of any people who, ever, charged Jesus of illegitimacy.

Justin Martyr is clearly writing about the virginal conception and not illegitimate conception of Jesus. Whether he was aware of such a tradition or not, in his work he is not interested in incorporating that tradition. In response to Justin Martyr's concern and belief in the virgin birth, Schaberg contends that in early Christian circles alternative traditions to Jesus' illegitimacy were found. These included the Gnostic understanding of Jesus' non-human origin or the claim that Joseph was his natural father or belief in a virginal conception (1990:195). According to Schaberg, during the second century, the belief in the virgin birth dominated the Christian doctrine of Jesus' origin, and this was the Christian way of erasing the illegitimacy tradition, . As far as she is concerned, there was a need for the erasure and replacement of the illegitimacy tradition, the reason being that it could not be passed down within a patriarchal form of Christianity. Schaberg argues that, within a patriarchal structure of Christianity, the illegitimate conception of Jesus was a scandal which was so deep, an origin which was so unfitting that it had to be repressed.

#### **4.2.2 *Origen***

Origen believes in a miraculous conception of Jesus. He believes that Jesus was conceived miraculously by the Holy Spirit. His mother conceived him without intercourse with a man. Without having been conceived by the Holy Spirit, Jesus could hardly save humankind. As

he says "it is not reasonable that he who did so much for human race should not have had a miraculous birth" (Schaberg, 1990:167). Origen further emphasises that Jesus' miraculous conception did not come as a surprise, but was predicted long ago by the prophets. It was a fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecy.

In reaction to Celsus who argues that Mary was corrupted and impregnated by another man, and not her betrothed husband Joseph, Origen rejects Celsus' argument viewing it as invented stories that are meant to overturn the story of Jesus' miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit. He continues to argue that unfortunately for Celsus, his stories failed to shame Jesus. Despite such stories, Jesus, being the Son of God, managed to defeat them. Irrespective of such blasphemies, Jesus managed to shake the whole world. He even defeated the shame of the crucifixion which was imposed on him.

Schaberg correctly points out that Origen is aware of the illegitimacy tradition. However, Origen's consciousness of the illegitimacy tradition does not determine his belief in illegitimate conception of Jesus. He himself believes in a miraculous conception. In his critique of Celsus, Origen points out clearly that the illegitimacy tradition was aimed at shaming Jesus. Obviously, not everybody wanted to shame Jesus, but only his opponents. His followers were honouring him.

### **4.3 The Early Church**

Brown (1977:354) suggests that while Jesus' birth unduly early after his parents had come to live together might have supplied evidence of illegitimacy to his opponents, to Christians it suggested a miraculous conception while his mother was a virgin, taking place in the period after marriage, but before she came to live at Joseph's house. He thus concludes that the gospel writers intended to write about the virginal conception and not illegitimate conception. In addition to Brown's argument, there is really no evidence from the late first and the second centuries C.E. indicating that Jewish or Gentile Christians ever accused Jesus of illegitimate conception (Schaberg, 1990:192). As Schaberg has correctly observed, the charge on illegitimacy, both inside and outside the New Testament Infancy Narratives,

appears on the lips of those who do not fully comprehend Jesus or are hostile to him.

#### **4.4 Summary**

The above discussion does not, in any way, dispute the fact that Jesus was charged of illegitimate conception. It strongly agrees that Jesus was accused of being illegitimate as evident in both the canonical and non-canonical writings discussed above. However, the above discussion calls the readers' attention into the following crucial question: "If Jesus was charged of illegitimacy as that hint is plausible in John 8:39, Mark 6:3, Acts of Pilate and so forth, who charged him of illegitimacy?" The above discussion has provided us with the answer. The answer is, it is his opponents, whether they were Jews or Gentiles.

## CHAPTER 5

### 5. MATTHEW'S READING OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH

#### 5.0 Introductory

Matthew opens up his gospel with Jesus' genealogy. Amazingly, the genealogy in Matthew is not the genealogy of Jesus' descendants. Unlike Adam's genealogy we find in Genesis 15 which is a genealogy of his descendants, Matthew's is a genealogy of Jesus' ancestors. Brown suggests that this is so because in Christian salvific history there can be no genealogy of Jesus' descendants because history has reached its goal in Jesus. Through Jesus, Jewish messianic hopes have been fulfilled (1977:67). Matthew's inclusion of Jesus' genealogy has raised a crucial question, and that is how significant it is in his infancy narrative, and in fact, in his gospel as a whole. In his genealogy, Matthew traces Jesus' origins from such Jewish figures as Abraham and David. By so doing, Matthew wants to emphasise that Jesus is the heir to the promises made to David and kept alive in Judaism. In addition, he is the heir to the wider promise of blessings to the Gentiles made through Abraham. Kingsbury (1989:43) maintains that Matthew's genealogy is intended to show that Mary's child can legitimately be called the Son of David and his birth fulfils a promise to the house of David. It then becomes clear that Matthew's genealogy is not "a record of man's biological productivity but a demonstration of God's providence" (Brown, 1977:68). It is a reflection of the working out of God's plan of creation in a history of salvation. As Brown puts it, "Matthew uses his introductory book of genesis to stress Jesus' insertion into a history and a people".

What is more amazing is that, in his genealogy, Matthew has included four morally dubious women as Jesus' ancestresses. Those women are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. Following are the stories of these morally dubious women.



## 5.1 The presence of morally dubious women in the birth account

### 5.1.1 *Tamar*

In the book of Genesis 38, the story of Tamar goes as follows: She was taken by Judah to marry his son Er. Er, Tamar's husband, was wicked in Yahweh's sight and due to this Yahweh killed him. Tamar was, therefore, left a widow. According to the Jewish custom, Er's brother was supposed to take over as Tamar's husband and produce a male descendant for his brother. However, Er's brother, Onan, refused. He, instead, practised coitus interruptus. Consequently, Yahweh slew him as well. Er's younger brother, Shelah, had to take over and do what Onan had refused to do, but this time it was not Shelah himself who refused to perform the duty of levirate marriage but his father, Judah. Judah feared that he might lose his third son too. He suspected that Tamar had something to do with the deaths of his two sons, Er and Onan. He then decided to get rid of Tamar by sending her back to live in her father's house as a widow. Having realised that Judah was trying to get rid of her permanently, Tamar decided to act on her own as an attempt to save her situation. She disguised as a prostitute and tricked Judah into having intercourse with her and she fell pregnant. Tamar's pregnancy was discovered and Judah pronounced that her crime deserved a death sentence. Tamar deserved severe punishment because she fell pregnant during the time when she was betrothed to Shelah, Judah's third son. Tamar responded by disclosing the cause of her pregnancy who was her father-in-law, Judah. Judah did not deny Tamar's pregnancy, but admitted announcing that Tamar's action was not a crime but a blessing. As a result of what she did, the line of Judah was continued.

Tamar's action, which seemed to be a crime, turned out to be an act of righteousness. Moreover, Tamar's children, who seemed to be "illegitimate children", turned out to be legitimate children. This is even evident in the biblical genealogies where Tamar's children are referred to as Judah's legitimate sons. Schaberg argues that this is the reason why it was significant for Matthew to include Tamar in his genealogy. She included her because she had something in common with Mary, Jesus' mother, whom he was about to tell her story. She, like Mary, gave birth to illegitimate children who were then legitimised, according to

Schaberg. The only difference pointed out by Schaberg is that, in contrast to Mary's story, in Tamar's story there was no Godly intervention. Tamar acted on her own to secure her place in the patriarchal social structure. She risked her life so as to give birth to a son who would continue the line of Judah, and in fact that of her husband. Through her own act she managed to secure her rights as a woman and wife of Er, and to demonstrate that she was a righteous woman. On the contrary, the evidence from the Targums is that also in Tamar's story there was God's intervention. This is made clear by the heavenly voice in response to Judah's admission that Tamar's pregnancy was due not to fornication, but to himself because of his refusal to give his third son, Shelah, to her. The heavenly voice responds saying, "Both of you are acquitted at the tribunal. This thing has come from God" (Schaberg, 1990:24).

### 5.1.2 *Rahab*

Biblical scholars have widely agreed that the woman Matthew is talking about is Rahab who appears in Joshua 2,6. Following is the story of Rahab: She was a Canaanite staying in Jericho, and she was a harlot. One day when Joshua was about to destroy the city of Jericho, he sent two men to spy out the city. They went to the house of Rahab, the harlot, and lodged there. Out of so many houses in Jericho they chose that of a harlot and surprisingly she received them. There is no clear reason as to why they chose her house and why she received them. However, the highest probability is that they were attracted by her reputation and her occupation as a harlot made her to accept them. Another thing which is amazing is that these two men did not condemn Rahab for being a harlot. Probably they chose not to condemn her because she was apparently accepted as an outcast who survived in an institutionalised status outside her family, beyond the normal social structure and its boundaries and rules. However, the two men's silence remains surprising because the Old Testament discouraged unions with prostitutes, though it tolerated prostitutes if their sexual activity did not disrupt the paternity system. Presumably, Rahab's prostitution was harmless to the paternity system and that is probably the reason why the two men, being Israelites, did not scorn on Rahab's harlotry.

Rahab hid the spies and sent their pursuers off on a false trail. In return for hiding them, Rahab demanded that they promise her that when they came back to destroy the city of Jericho they would not harm her and her father's house. She wanted to secure her family. When the spies came back with the army to conquer the city of Jericho, they kept the promise. In fact, they told Joshua about the promise and he was the one who honoured the promise. Rahab together with the entire family were saved. She survived the destruction and conquest of her city by being unfaithful to her king and her own people. She was rather faithful to her household and to the Israelites and their God.

It is not clear why Matthew included Rahab in his genealogy, precisely because her story, unlike that of Tamar and Mary, does not involve any scandalous sexual act, argues Schaberg. It does not involve any legitimation of an illegitimate child. However, just like Tamar she does act on her own and takes a risk to save herself and her family. Through her, being an outcast, her household as a whole is saved. Her criminal act of defying the king and, in fact, her own people, results in the salvation of her household. Through her criminal act, her household continues to live while escaping the destruction by the Israelites. In Rahab's story as well there is no intervention by God. She acts on her own to save both the spies from being killed by the king and his agents and her household from being destroyed by the Israelites and their Gods. Schaberg suggests that Matthew's inclusion of Rahab might have been due to the fact that he observed, in her profession of harlotry, the paradoxical opportunity of safety and success for Israel, and for her and her family (1990:26). Rahab, being a harlot, something which was perceived to be evil and whose results were perceived to be heathen, unexpectedly performed a good task. She reversed social expectations.

### **5.1.3 Ruth**

Apparently, Ruth was the daughter-in-law of Naomi. Unfortunately, both Naomi and Ruth's husbands died. They were both left widows, and at that time Ruth was childless. As a widow, Ruth became a member of the lowest social structure, one without social protection and honour. As Scott says "A widow does not simply mean a woman whose husband is dead but also one who has no means of financial support and thus needs special protection"

(1989:180-1).

Looking at the unfavourable conditions facing her, Ruth decided to link her destiny with that of Naomi (her mother-in-law) and returned with her to her (Naomi's) homeland, Judah. They, together, settled in Bethlehem where Naomi had a kinsman by the name of Boaz who was attracted to Ruth. Having realised that, Naomi thought of a way in which the two could meet. Fortunately, one night Boaz was winnowing barley at the threshing floor. Naomi advised Ruth to wash and anoint herself, and put on her best clothes and go down to the threshing floor. However, she advised her not to reveal her identity until Boaz finished eating and drinking. Thereafter, Ruth was to observe the place where Boaz was lying, and then uncover the lower part of his body and wait for Boaz to tell her what to do. The motive behind Naomi's advice was to seek a home for Ruth. She wanted to bring an end to Ruth's marital status of being a widow.

Ruth did as Naomi suggested, but rather than waiting for Boaz to tell her what to do, she told him what to do. She requested him to marry her, suggesting that by doing so he would be fulfilling his obligation as a kinsman. Boaz responded by blessing and praising her. Further, he promised to do as she asked, but only if a nearer kinsman would not play that role for her. He then asked her to lie down until morning, and Ruth left before dawn and thus no one could see her encounter with Boaz. It remained a secret between the two of them. Thereafter, Boaz talked to the near kinsman asking him to buy Naomi's property and to marry her. The nearer kinsman refused and Boaz had to take over and marry Ruth. He did, and the elders and all the people were called to witness that Boaz had bought all that belonged to Naomi's husband and sons, Ruth included. The elders blessed Ruth and that was presumably the Jewish custom. It was believed that Ruth was to restore the name of the dead in Boaz's inheritance. Boaz, then, married Ruth and she conceived and gave birth to a son.

Matthew's intention in including Ruth in his genealogy is clear. She, like Tamar, risked an accusation of prostitution and she was praised for taking the risk, observes Schaberg. Another parallel observed by Schaberg is that through her own act, assisted by Naomi, Ruth

managed to reintegrate both herself and Naomi into the social structure. They were reintegrated into the social structure through Ruth's marriage and the legitimate birth of a child, Obed. Due to her boldness and willingness to take a risk, Ruth turned from being a widow who needed security, worth, protection and identity in a male-dominated society into being a married woman who gained salvation which apparently was believed to exist not outside the patriarchal social structure, but within it (1990:27).

#### **5.1.4 *Bathsheba (the Wife of Uriah)***

Bathsheba's story is as follows: She was married to Uriah. David who was then a king inquired about this woman and was then informed that the woman was the wife of Uriah. That information did not discourage David from having an interest in Bathsheba. He sent messengers to bring her to him, and he slept with her. During that time Bathsheba was purifying herself from her menstruation. The implication is that Bathsheba was not pregnant when she slept with David. Therefore, if she could fall pregnant the child would belong not to her husband, but to David. Indeed, Bathsheba fell pregnant and she informed David. Fearing the discovery of adultery, David plotted to bring Uriah home, and by that time Uriah was in the battle. By bringing Uriah home David wanted to make him sleep with his wife so that he could take the responsibility of making Bathsheba pregnant. Unfortunately, David's plan failed and he resorted to killing Uriah which he did successfully. Bathsheba mourned for her husband, and when the mourning was over David sent and brought her to his house. He made her his wife and she bore him a son whom he named Solomon. When David was about to die, Bathsheba, being counselled by Jonathan, reminded him of his promise that Solomon and not Adonijah, his eldest son, would be the king. David promised to do as Bathsheba wished. For a change, David bent to Bathsheba's will. It was no longer Bathsheba who was doing the will of David but vice versa.

The narrator of Bathsheba's story is criticized by many feminists due to his lack of sympathy with Bathsheba. The narrator is not concerned with Bathsheba's feelings, rights and plans. He fails completely to portray that Bathsheba was a victim who was acted upon by David.

In contrast to the three women above, Bathsheba does not act on her own, but is rather acted upon. David overpowers her and she does not react to what David does to her. Instead of reacting she submits. There is no evidence that she submits because she is also attracted to David. At the same time, there is nothing indicating that she had problems with her husband that could lead to her engagement in adultery. In fact, Bathsheba does make lamentation for her husband. That lamentation shows her grief for the death of her husband. It then becomes clear that Bathsheba submits to what David does because she lives in a male-dominated society in which men can do anything they want to do with women. Bathsheba, unlike Tamar, Rahab and Ruth who stand up and challenge the positions they are placed in their societies, is passive. She does not struggle to better her position within the patriarchal framework (Schaberg, 1990:31). The lack of parallels between the story of Bathsheba and those of the other three women raises a problem as to why Matthew inserted her in his genealogy. According to Schaberg, Matthew included Bathsheba because, although she does not better her position within the patriarchal framework she, like other women, gives birth to an illegitimate child who is legitimated. In that way she, like the other three women, has something in common with Mary who also given birth to an illegitimate child but who is legitimated through Joseph, according to Schaberg.

## **5.2 Summary**

As highlighted above, the inclusion of morally dubious women in Jesus' genealogy is a controversial issue. While some scholars, on the one hand, perceive it to be Matthew's way of elevating women, others, on the other hand, reject that view, coming up with their own interpretations. For instance, Schaberg argues that Matthew included these women to transfer his message that Jesus was illegitimately conceived. She observes that all these women were wronged, were party to a sexual act that placed them in great danger, and the result of their stories was reparation of the social fabric and assurance of the birth of a child who was legitimated (1990:20). She therefore concludes that by including these women, Matthew drives his audience to expect a story which is similar to that of these four women. He leads them to expect Mary who gives birth to an illegitimate child, but who, through his mother's betrothal to Joseph is legitimated and becomes the legal son of David and Abraham.

Despite Schaberg's interpretation, there are three widely accepted proposals given by various scholars concerning the presence of four women in Matthew's genealogy. The first proposal is that all these women were regarded as sinners, and Matthew inserted them to foreshadow the role of Jesus as the saviour of sinners. Brown rejected this proposal claiming that the Bible does not make all these women sinners. For instance, in later Rabbinic tradition Tamar is portrayed as a righteous woman (Schaberg, 1990:23). The second proposal is that these women were regarded as foreigners and so Matthew included them to demonstrate that Jesus who was the Jewish Messiah was related by ancestry to the Gentiles. This proposal as well is dismissed by Brown who argued that not all of these women are identified in the Old Testament as foreigners. For example, Bathsheba is not identified as a foreigner, but as the wife of Uriah, just as Matthew does. Another problem evoked by this proposal is relating these four women to Mary since it is generally believed that these women come as a preparation for the role of Mary. Mary was not a foreigner. Moreover, there is no clear indication that the Jews of the first century would have regarded these women as foreigners (Brown, 1977:73). The third proposal is that there is something extraordinary or irregular in these women's union with their partners. Their union with their partners, though it seemed scandalous to the outsiders, continued the lineage of the Messiah. Further, these women played an important role or showed an initiative in God's plan and as a result were considered the instruments of God's providence or of his Holy Spirit. As indicated, for Schaberg these women foreshadow the role of Mary whose pregnancy was perceived as a scandal, since she had not lived with her husband, yet, the child was begotten by God's Holy Spirit, so that God had intervened to bring into fulfilment the messianic heritage. On the contrary, Brown suggested that these women did not foreshadow the role of Mary, but the role of the Messiah who was to bring the Gentiles into God's plan of salvation. He was to bring the people who, though not Jews, were like Jesus in their descent from Abraham.

## CHAPTER 6

### 6. LUKE'S READING OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH

#### 6.0 Introductory

Despite the striking differences between the gospels of Matthew and Luke, Schaberg insists that both two evangelists are writing not about the virginal conception but illegitimate conception of Jesus. In chapter five, it has been proved that Matthew does not, in any way, intend to write about the illegitimacy of Jesus. Can the same be proved about Luke? Is there any indication in his infancy narrative that he wishes to transfer to his readers the tradition that Jesus was illegitimately conceived?

#### 6.1 Differences Between Matthew's and Luke's Account

Although writing about one theme, the conception and birth of Jesus, Matthew and Luke variate on the theme. Despite their agreement on aspects like: Mary and Joseph are the parents of Jesus, are legally engaged or married but not yet living together, Joseph is from the line of David, an angelic annunciation of the birth of Jesus, conception of the child not through intercourse with the husband but through the Holy Spirit, angelic directive about the name of the child, the angel's statement that the child is to be the Saviour, birth takes place in Bethlehem, the child is born during the reign of Alexander the Great, and the child is reared at Nazareth: their diverging intentions and perspectives have forced them to variate on their stories about Jesus. Matthew contains material unavailable in Luke and vice versa. For instance, in Matthew there is no trip by Mary to Judah to see her kinswoman Elizabeth, no greeting by Elizabeth, no journey by Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem to enrol in a census, no mention of swaddling clothes, no mention of a manger, no angelic annunciation to the shepherds and their visit to the child, no circumcision and presentation of Jesus, no purification in Jerusalem, no recognition of the greatness of the child by Simeon and Anna in the Temple, no loss and finding of the twelve year-old Jesus, no parallel accounts of the birth, circumcision, naming and maturing of John the Baptist and Jesus. On the other hand,



in Luke's gospel there is no genealogy of Jesus as part of the infancy narrative, no formula citations, no mention of the Magi, nothing about Herod's massacre of children at Bethlehem, and the angelic annunciation is made not to Joseph but to Mary.

According to Vorster, the differences between the gospels by Matthew and Luke are mainly due to their different purposes. For him, their different intentions forced them to retell Jesus' stories to suit their own interests. Thus, Vorster prefers to refer to their writings as new texts for, "retelling is a kind of text production, a way of creating new texts" (1986:36). The evangelists' different intentions are not the only reason for their disagreements. Fitzmyer argues that the dissimilarities in the gospels by Luke and Matthew are due to the divergent audiences they had in mind (1985:877-881). On the other hand, Talbert contends that dissatisfaction, by either of the authors, with the order of the sources they used is the cause of the differences (1978:32).

While many scholars argue that Matthew and Luke had different intentions in writing their gospels, Schaberg insists that both writers intended to transfer the tradition that Jesus was illegitimately conceived when they wrote their infancy narratives. Schaberg ignores a very important thing, that the infancy narratives are introductions to the main themes of the gospels and are thus harmonious with the authors' theology (Nickle, 1980:113). Cantwell remarks as follows about the infancy narrative of Matthew: "the conception of Christ takes place before the main events recorded in the Gospel, and is simply mentioned as a necessary pre-supposition for understanding them" (1982:304). It is therefore obvious that if the two evangelists had different intentions in writing their Gospels they also had different intentions in writing their infancy narratives. If Matthew wanted to transfer the tradition that Jesus was illegitimately conceived, then that is not what Luke wanted to do, and vice versa. There is ideology behind the infancy narratives and that ideology exists in the text.

## **6.2 Luke's Portrayal of Mary in the Story**

Luke's focus is on Mary's chosenness by God to be Jesus' mother. He presents her as the disciple, the believer, esteemed for hearing the Word of God (Schaberg, 1990:142). She is

the "model disciple", the "ideal believer", who completely abandons herself to God's will in an absolute self-surrender (Horsely, 1989:9). Mary becomes the New Temple and the New Ark of the Covenant treasuring the divine presence. She is the representative of the people of God at prayer, totally consecrated to the divine will (Stuhlmueler, 1964:23). In Mary, the people of God are symbolised overcoming the evil one and achieving the triumph of the final, which starts with God's word to Abraham. In Stuhlmeuller's language Mary becomes something of a corporate personality, embodying in herself the longings and the needs, the triumphs and the joys of all God's poor and lowly ones.

In the Magnificat, in particular, Mary represents the hope of the poor. She preaches as the prophet of the poor who were the victims of various forms of oppression by the Roman governors and Jewish elite (Horsley, 1989). According to Fiorenza, Mary does not only represent the hope of the poor, but she represents the hope of the poor as a woman (1983:142). Schaberg goes beyond Fiorenza by suggesting that Mary represents the hope of the poor as a woman who has suffered and has been vindicated. As for Brown, the Magnificat was originally the hymn which referred to a general salvation in Jesus Christ given by God to the Jew who have turned to be Christians (1977:357). He argues that Mary's praise is focused on the fulfilment of the David covenant through the conception of the Messiah. Mary predicts what will come through the child to be born. Through the conception of Jesus the poor have been saved. The poor have become the victors while the rich have become the victims. There has been, in other words, a reversal of social expectations. However, Brown emphasizes that the hunger and poverty of the oppressed in the Magnificat are primarily spiritual, although he also stresses that we should not ignore the physical realities like persecution, faced by early Christians. Brown's argument is in direct opposition with Horsley's who asserts that Jesus saved the poor not from spiritual, but physical oppression which was imposed on them by the Romans and their agents like Herod.

As mentioned earlier, Schaberg suggests that, in the Magnificat, Mary represents the hope of the poor as a woman who has been vindicated. Unfortunately, there is nothing indicating that in the songs. As Deiss (1972:106) observes, the Magnificat is closely allied to the Canticle of Anna (1 Kings 1:6) which according to him has a warlike and rugged character.

He views Anna's Canticle as a battle song. Despite the warlike character of Anna's song, Deiss insists that Mary drew her inspiration from Anna's canticle. However, since Mary's song was not a song of battle but a thanksgiving, she selected only those lines that were relevant to her theme of humility and adoration while leaving aside all that breathes of scorn and disdain, according to Deiss (1972:108). In contrast to Anna, in Mary the triumph of the humble lies not in domination over their despoiled enemies but in the song of praise that the poor send up to their God. Taking into consideration Deiss' proposal that Mary was inspired by Anna, and Schaberg's argument that in the Magnificat Mary has triumphed over her enemies, one would expect Mary to take Anna's Canticle just as it is. There would be no need for selection since the songs would be sharing the same theme. However, due to the fact that Mary's heart is first of all a heart that sings a praise of God, and her song is not so much of the story of a soul as it is of the story of the salvation of all the people of God, she had to differ from Anna (Farris, 1985:118; Deiss, 1972:124).

Luke's portrayal of Mary as the perfect disciple has led Fiorenza to suggest that he intends to demonstrate that faithful discipleship, not biological motherhood, is the eschatological calling of women (1983:146). Further, Luke favours the discipleship of women more than that of men. His presentation of the disbelieving Zechariah versus the believing Mary clearly indicates that. The same applies at the conclusion of his Gospel in which there is a contrast between the believing women and disbelieving men.

### **6.3 Luke's Portrayal of Joseph in the Story**

Despite his presentation of Joseph as the legal father of Jesus, Luke does not give him an important role. His focus is not on Joseph but Mary. In Luke, the Holy Spirit and not Joseph protects Mary and the child. At the same time, the angel comes and enters into a waking dialogue with Mary and not Joseph. The role played by Joseph is subordinate to that of Mary. The way Joseph is portrayed in Luke's infancy narrative clearly suggests Luke's interest in Mary and not Joseph. Furthermore, it suggests Luke's interest not in Mary per se but in women. Above all, it suggests something about the ideology of Luke. The Gospel of Luke is concerned for the poor. In fact, Luke's Jesus is concerned for the poor, the

infirm, women, and pagans. These groups of people were looked down upon socially and religiously. However, Luke's Jesus identifies with them throughout his ministry. Women introduced the birth episode (Elizabeth, John the Baptist's mother, and Mary's Magnificat are only mentioned by Luke). Mary's song sets the tone of Luke's Christology (Lk 1, 52-53). Tax collectors were regarded as thugs as they extracted surplus tax from the populace, and Jesus does not reject them. Children as well receive Jesus' attention. During the first century the streets of Jerusalem were crowded with street children. Due to humiliating poverty, some parents sold their children because they could not feed them. Pagans are included as subjects in the Kingdom of God (Lk 4:16-30; 10:25-37).

#### **6.4 Luke's Portrayal of Gabriel in the Story**

In Luke 1:27 the angel foretells that Mary will conceive, and Luke tells us that during the time of annunciation by the angel, Mary was a virgin. Many scholars, including Brown, assert that what the angel foretells is the virginal conception. The problem with this assertion is that Luke, himself, does not have any explicit statement that Mary did not have sexual relations with Joseph after the annunciation. The angel in Luke talks about conception which is still to take place, presumably in the usual way. Since Joseph was the man to whom Mary was betrothed at the time, he would presumably be the natural father of the child. At the same time, in the annunciation there is really no indication that the child will be illegitimate. There is completely nothing suggesting that the natural father of the child will be somebody else other than Joseph to whom Mary is betrothed.

In Luke 1:28 the angel greets Mary saying, "Hail, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you". In contrast to various scholars who translate *chaire* as "Hail", Deiss (1972:54) translates the word as "Joy be to thee!" It then becomes clear that the news brought to Mary by the angel has a joyful character. The joy to which Mary is invited is brought by the coming and the presence of Yahweh who is in her womb. The angel also addresses Mary as *kecharitómené* which Deiss translates as "full of grace". According to Dunn (1988:17) *charis* is never merely an attitude or disposition of God, but denotes something much more dynamic, the wholly generous act of God. It denotes effective divine power in the experience

of men and women. On the other hand, Cranfield (1975:65) suggests that *charis* denotes God's undeserved favour. An undeserved favour or God's generous act that Mary has received is that of mothering Jesus who is to save the world, and thus she, herself, has saved the world. Through her the promises that were made to the ancestors of Israel are fulfilled. She has been chosen by God for a special vocation, a mission whose fullness will embrace the entire people of God (Deiss, 1972:70, 72).

Horsley has argued that the presence of Gabriel in Luke's infancy narrative has political implications. Apparently, Gabriel appeared in the context of revelatory visions where the people were encouraged to be persistent in their traditional covenantal commitment and resist their imperial oppressors for God was definitely to vindicate them and bring their domination to an end soon. Accordingly, Horsley assumes that the inclusion of Gabriel in the infancy narratives has political connotations. His annunciation of the birth of the Messiah is the direct opposition to the Roman rulers as well as their agents. Horsley thus concludes that infancy narratives, in both Matthew and Luke, are about politicoeconomic and religiopolitical conflict between Jesus and the political rulers. This conflict does not end with the infancy narratives but continues throughout the gospels.

### **6.5 The Parallel Births in the Story : John the Baptist and Jesus**

In his infancy narrative, Luke has a story of John the Baptist which precedes and parallels that of Jesus' birth. According to this narrative John's father, Zachariah, was a priest. Brown suggests that Malachi 3:1 is frequently associated with John the Baptist and his text is more concerned with John's prophetic message to the priests. He thus concludes that it has been due to this association of Malachi 3:1 with John the Baptist that has resulted in the creation of a priestly descent for John the Baptist. The problem with Brown's proposal is that Matthew and Mark as well do apply the text of Malachi to John the Baptist, but they never derive from it any hint of John the Baptist's priestly lineage. Therefore, the Malachi text has nothing to do with Luke's presentation of John's father as a priest. Brown further suggests that the narrative of John the Baptist's birth parallels that of Old Testament parents, Elkanah and Hannah, Abraham and Sarah and others. This parallelism places the

annunciation of John the Baptist's birth in continuity with the birth of famous figures in the salvific history of Israel (1977:269), Concerning the parallelism between John the Baptist and Jesus' births, Brown argues that it is Luke's way of teaching us that Jesus' origins were in Israel and that his coming involves a new creation or a renewal of the covenant made with the patriarchs. John the Baptist's story prepares the story of the conception of Jesus who is to be the Lord, who is to bring salvation and thus fulfil the promises in the Old Testament. This is evident in Lk 1:41-45 where the two pregnant mothers, Elizabeth and Mary, encounter each other. Elizabeth praises Mary as "the mother of the Lord", and in addition to that, John the Baptist jumps with gladness in Elizabeth's womb.

Another observation made by Brown is that, in his infancy narrative, Luke always presents Jesus as the one superior to John the Baptist who was also conceived in an extraordinary manner. This superiority is meant to emphasise that Jesus was not conceived naturally. As the superior of John, the miraculous element in Jesus' conception had to be greater than that of John. John was, on the one hand conceived by aged, barren parents, both male and female, while Jesus, on the other hand, was conceived without a male partner. All in all, for Brown the parallel stories of John the Baptist and Jesus are aimed at showing that Jesus was virginally conceived. He even claims that when Elizabeth in Luke 1:45 says of Mary "fortunate is she who believed that the Lord's words to her would find fulfilment", she was referring to the virginal conception and not a natural conception. As far as he is concerned, the belief was unnecessary if Mary was to conceive just like any other young girl.

For Mosala, the parallel stories of John the Baptist and Jesus have different implications. He argues that Luke presents John's parents as priests and their relationship with Mary, Jesus' mother, as an attempt to deal with the embarrassing social-class origins of Mary. As he puts it, Luke attempts to sell the story to the Jewish priests. According to Mosala, "the invocation of the priestly connection through the use of Zachariah represents a particular emotive enunciation, not a historical statement. It is, however, the contradiction between "the historical" and use of "the historical" in an ideological discourse that provides a lever for a hermeneutical appropriation of that text in spite of itself" (1989:185). According to Mosala, as Luke was addressing the ruling class it was too difficult for him to trace the origins of

Mary together with Jesus from the poor. As a result, he suppressed the social revolutionary class origins of Mary. As Mosala says "he rather presents Mary as the priestly first lady than as a key symbol of a revolutionary movement to overthrow the dominant oppressive structures of the church and society" (1989:169). Mosala further asserts that even Luke's inclusion of Joseph as Jesus' legitimate father is intended to invoke royal connection for Jesus, and his invocation of the Davidic royal connection was also meant to suppress Jesus' unacceptable low-class origins (1989:171).

Mosala's argument that Luke presented Zachariah as the parent of John to invoke priestly connection for Jesus is dismissed by Brown and Horsley. Brown, on the one hand, argues that Zachariah did not live in Jerusalem, but in the hill of Judea, and this betrays the knowledge that Zachariah was a priest. Therefore, Luke included Zachariah and Elizabeth with no intentions of invoking any priestly connections for Jesus, but the two were the representatives of the best in the religion of Israel, and as a remnant which received the good news, they personified the continuity in salvation history (1977:268). Horsley, on the other hand, contends that Zachariah was not among the ruling high priests. He was an ordinary priest who lived and worked in the towns and villages. He was, therefore, part of the Jewish populace. According to Horsley, this is apparent in the Benedictus in which Zachariah prays that they be saved from their enemies, (1989:99). Horsley also challenges Mosala's claim that Luke's presentation of Joseph as Jesus' father was an attempt to invoke royal connection for Jesus. He argues that Joseph was a carpenter and for him, Joseph was a carpenter because he, like many other wage labourers and carpenters, was displaced from his ancestral land because of debts, famine, war and other factors. He thus suggests that Joseph and Mary represent not a royal family but the thousands of rootless people in ancient Jewish Palestine cut loose from their ancestral lands and villages by the Roman conquest or by indebtedness resulting from the intensive economic exploitation by Herod that compounded the demands for Temple dues and Roman tribute (1989:72).

The story of Elizabeth, John the Baptist's mother, in Luke's parallel stories plays a very crucial role in Luke's infancy narrative as a whole. After the angel's annunciation, Mary had a natural desire to visit Elizabeth as an older relative who could be the confidante of her

thoughts (Deiss, 1972:89). Since they were related, and were not just relatives but both pregnant women and it would be easy for Mary to confide in Elizabeth. As Deiss puts it "the bonds of kinship and the similarity of their circumstances were conducive to an easy and very natural exchange" (1972:89). Elizabeth would help Mary deal with her problem while Mary, in return, would help her by offering the womanly services customary at such times since the evidence from the narrative itself is that Elizabeth was already six months pregnant.

Schaberg is concerned that the infancy narratives of both Matthew and Luke are about illegitimate conception of Jesus. Unfortunately, Elizabeth's speech does not seem to reflect that view. It does not give an indication that Mary's child is a product of such a bad experience as rape or adultery. Elizabeth, in her speech, is not sympathising with Mary, but the two are sharing the joy-filled secrets of their approaching motherhood. The whole narrative is a joyful and utterly appealing one (Deiss, 1972:90). Furthermore, Elizabeth's words are not just praise to Mary, but a prophecy about the child in Mary's womb. Elizabeth, like Mary, Zachariah, John the Baptist and Simeon who are filled with the Holy Spirit is also filled with the Holy Spirit. Deiss suggests that Elizabeth's filling with the Holy Spirit is under Luke's impetus and inspiration that the people filled with the Holy Spirit act and prophecy (1972:90). As Elizabeth's words are a prophecy one would, at least, expect her to mention the bad experience that has been undergone by Mary. However, Elizabeth's words do not, in any way, give a hint that Mary's pregnancy has been due to violation by a man or adultery. John's leaping as well is a sign of joy (Deiss, 1972:90). It hails the advent of the messianic age (Brown, 1977:341).

When Elizabeth said Mary is blessed among women she did not say that because Mary had triumphed over the man who had violated her as Schaberg wants us to believe. Mary is a woman of victory because of her being the mother of the Messiah. As Deiss remarks, "her hour of triumph is her bringing forth of the Christ (1972:96). Moreover, Elizabeth's words "how have I deserved that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:43), are a reference to the sixth chapter of the Second Book of Kings in which David made the decision to transfer the ark from the house of Abinadab to Jerusalem (Deiss, 1972:90). During the event, "David and all Israel played before the Lord on all manner of instruments made of



wood, on harps and lutes and tumbrels and cornets and cymbals" (2 Kings 6:5). Then David cried out "How shall the ark of the Lord come to me?" (2 Kings 6:9). Deiss thus assumes that in 1:43 Luke is suggesting a typological identification of Mary with the ark of the covenant and thus with the Temple. By such an assumption, Deiss simply suggests that Elizabeth's words have a liturgical connotation. In fact, he does argue that the verb *anathónein* has a specific link with the liturgical celebration of the Levites before the ark of the covenant (1972:93). Laurentin also observes Mary's identification with the ark of the covenant and the Temple. In his study of the parallels within the unitary structure of Luke 1-2, he remarks:

These two chapters are the literary vehicle, as it were, of Jesus' "going up" to the Temple of Jerusalem. And the "going up" of the ark to Jerusalem is precisely what is described in account of 2 Kings:6. Like the station of "the mother of the Lord" at the house of Sachary represents a stage in the course of the ascent to the city. In both cases, the sojourn is of three months duration, and in a house which because of its presence there receives a blessing. The connection of the visitation scene with 2 Kings 6 hence gives definitive substance to the two key ideas of development: Jesus is ascending to his place, the Temple of Jerusalem; Mary who is carrying him is the type of the ark of the covenant (1964:81).

In contrast to Deiss and Laurentin, Brown dismisses any identification of Mary with the ark of the covenant. He warns that one needs to be careful in drawing an identification from such echoes of an Old Testament scene. For him, it is the Ark's power to kill that causes David to ask his question, a motivation quite different from that of Elizabeth's question. The Ark's eventual journey to Jerusalem after three months is different from Mary's return home. He therefore, suggests that the connecting link in the Lucan reminiscences may be David rather than the ark. When David goes to Araunah the Jebusite to purchase the threshing floor that will eventually become the site of the Temple in Jerusalem, Araunah asks "what is this, that my lord the king has come to his servant?" (2 Samuel 24:21). To Brown, this question as well resembles Elizabeth's question, but it does not concern the Ark (1977:344-5). The present author is not in a position to challenge any of these scholars concerning their identification of Mary with the ark of the covenant. Whether Luke thinks of Mary as the ark of the covenant or not, the joyful character of Elizabeth's words is undeniable. Her speech

does not indicate that Mary's pregnancy is due to rape or adultery. I, therefore, assume that the point which Deiss and Laureutin wish to emphasise, in their identification of Mary with the ark of the covenant, is that Elizabeth's words embody celebration. The identification itself might be incorrect but the reason for such identification is correct.

## **6.6 Is the Gospel Story Authentic?**

Originally, the Christian preaching consisted of nothing concerning the conception and the birth of Jesus. It was rather concerned with his death and resurrection. The deeds and words of Jesus were another concern of Christian preaching (Hendricks, 1984:1). These sayings and miracles came down to the Christian preachers from various traditions of Jesus' ministry. It is from these very traditions that the two evangelists, Matthew and Luke, composed their own accounts of Jesus' ministry. As these traditions had nothing about Jesus' conception and birth, the evangelists had nothing to provide to the readers about Jesus' birth. Since the evangelists were dependent on these traditions, they had nowhere else to go and trace Jesus' birth. In addition to that, Christians did not show any interest in the origins of Jesus. Interestingly, today Matthew and Luke begin with Jesus' conception and birth and this raises two crucial questions: Why did they decide to insert the stories about Jesus' birth, and where did they get information about Jesus' birth?

At a later stage, an interest developed in Jesus' early years in Nazareth and his birth in Bethlehem (Hendricks, 1984:2). Christians wanted to know more about Jesus. They wished to know who his ancestors were, his family, the place in which he was born and so forth. The evangelists were faced by this curiosity and they were obliged to respond. They responded by composing the infancy narratives (Brown, 1977:28). The infancy narratives were thus Matthew's and Luke's answer to a growing interest in the person of Jesus which ultimately extended beyond the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, into the earlier years of his hidden life (Hendricks, 1984:2). It is, therefore, undeniable that the canonical gospels are, like the non-canonical gospels, creations of the writers (Vorster, 1986:36). The infancy narratives, in both the canonical and non-canonical gospels were not historical facts, but compositions of the authors. Interestingly, Horsley insists that the infancy narratives are

about the whole of life, political and economic as well as religious, material as well as spiritual. As far as he is concerned, the infancy narratives are not myths but they have historical and political dimensions. He thus concludes that any interpretation of the infancy narratives as myths has abandoned any attempt to maintain or recover any implications the Christian stories might have for the real world of politicoeconomic or general historical life (1989:9). On the contrary, Brown maintains that the infancy narratives are not about historical events. According to him, what Horsley refers to as historical events is, in fact, a rewriting of the Old Testament themes or scenes (1977:36). Elaborating on his argument, he looks at Matthew's story of the Magi who saw the Davidic Messiah as its rising. For Brown, this story is an echo of the Old Testament story of Balaam, the magus from the East who saw the star rising out of Jacob. The same applies with the story of Herod who seeks the life of the infant Jesus and kills the male children. This story is, for Brown, the reapplication of the Old Testament story of the wicked Pharaoh who sought the life of the infant Moses and massacred the male children of the Israelites. Hendrick, who refers to the infancy narratives as midrash, certainly denies the historicity of the infancy narratives. He rather views them as compositions that explain the birth and life of Jesus Christ for first-century Christians (1984:7).

Brown provides two more reasons why Matthew and Luke composed the infancy narratives. The first one is that the infancy narratives were a response to the Jewish accusation that Jesus was illegitimate as he came from Galilee. The virginal conception gave a convincing explanation as to why Jesus, being the Messiah, came from Galilee, according to Brown. The second reason is that the two authors aimed at developing Christology. Prior to the production of the gospels, the only event which was associated with the divine proclamation of Jesus' identity was his resurrection. It was only through his resurrection that Jesus was proclaimed the Son of God whose task was to save humankind. Matthew and Luke felt that the infancy narratives could play a very significant role in conveying the message that Jesus was the Son of God.

Brown's suggestion that the infancy narratives served to proclaim Jesus' identity raises a problem. The problem is that, later in the ministry of Jesus, nobody seemed to know his

origins. Even his disciples had difficulties in understanding Jesus. According to Brown, this problem is due to the evangelists' failure to reconcile the infancy narratives with the main body of their gospels, which is a result of what Brown refers to as "the backward process of Gospel formation and Christological development". However, Brown emphasises that for Matthew and Luke the infancy narratives were necessary and appropriate to the career and significance of Jesus. He then concludes "giving them (infancy narratives) less value than other parts of the Gospels is to misread the mind of the evangelists for whom the infancy narratives were fitting vehicles of a message they wanted to convey" (1977:38).

What has come out of this discussion is that the gospel story is not authentic but is Matthew's and Luke's composition intended to respond to the Christians' interest in the origins of Jesus. There is nothing suggesting that the two evangelists sought to transfer the tradition that Jesus was illegitimately conceived. Even Brown's proposal that the infancy narratives were a response to the Jewish accusation that Jesus was illegitimate does not really indicate that such an accusation had a biological value. The accusation was based on Jesus' origins in Galilee and not his illegitimate conception. Moreover, Brown's proposal is not explicit about the source of such an accusation. He just states that it was from the Jews, not making it clear whether those Jews were Jesus' followers or opponents. Above all, if Luke's infancy narrative was a response to the Jewish charge that Jesus was illegitimate as Brown suggests, it presumably sought to demonstrate that Jesus whom the Jews accused of illegitimacy was, in fact, legitimate.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

In the above research the following discoveries have been made:

1. As Nangoli has correctly argued, among African societies there is no such a thing as an "illegitimate child". A child born of a man and woman is a gift of God irrespective of the marital status of the mother. It does not matter whether a child is born in or out of wedlock, it remains a legitimate child. Jesus was therefore legitimate, according to Africans.

2. A survey of the pre-marital sexual relations and marriage customs among African societies has shown that it is highly possible for a man to have sexual intercourse with a woman during the betrothal period or even before that. Therefore, it has become clear that Joseph could be the biological father of Jesus. He probably had sexual intercourse with Mary before or during the betrothal period and impregnated her. For this reason, when they finally came to live together Mary was already pregnant. In that regard, Joseph was not only the legal father of Jesus, but his biological father too.
3. Jesus was, indeed, charged of illegitimacy. However, although Jesus was charged of illegitimacy as Schaberg correctly observes, that accusation had a social value rather than a biological value. This is made clear by the fact that all the people who charged Jesus of illegitimacy were his opponents. None of his followers ever accused him of illegitimacy. The word "illegitimacy" was thus meant to defame Jesus.
4. Among the Western feminists who have studied the birth of Jesus, it is only Schaberg who has interpreted it as being about illegitimate conception of Jesus. Even Daly, who has suggested that the New Testament Infancy Narratives are about a virginal conception which is rape does not perceive any illegitimacy connotations in the infancy narratives. The rape she talks about is symbolic.
5. The readings by Matthew and Luke of the birth of Jesus have shown no indication that they were writing about illegitimate conception of Jesus as Schaberg suggests. The two were, rather, writing about legitimate conception which was followed by happiness. For instance, all the hymns of Lukan infancy narrative were about happiness and joy and not grief.

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