

<Text 1>

(Cat, 2)

<On the Divine Generation and Virginal Birth of Christ, from Ambrose and Jerome>

Ambrose on the divine generation, that is, on Christ the Son of God. When was he? What was he? What had he done? What was he doing? Where was he? To whom did he come? How did he come? Why did he come? Response: When was he? He was *in the beginning* (Jn. 1, 1). What was he? He was *the Word* (Jn. 1, 1). What had he done? *All things were made through him, and nothing was made without him* (Jn. 1, 3). What was he doing? *He was the true light, who illuminates everyone coming into this world* (Jn. 1, 9). Where was he? *He was in this world* (Jn. 1, 10). To whom did he come? *He came among his own* (Jn. 1, 11). How did he come? *The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us* (Jn. 1, 14). Why did he come? *Behold, the lamb of God! Behold, the one who takes away the sins of the world* (Jn. 1, 29).¹

Again Jerome. Question: Why was Christ the Son of God born from a betrothed virgin, not a simple virgin? Response: The first reason was so that Mary's origin would be shown through the generation of Joseph.² The second reason was so that she would not be stoned by the Jews as an adulteress.³ The third reason was so that, fleeing into Egypt, she would have solace.⁴ Ignatius Martyr⁵ also added a fourth reason, saying that his birth would be hidden from the devil when he thought Christ was born from a married woman, not from a virgin.⁶

Notes to Text 1

1. Cfr AMBR., *Expos. Luc.*, II, 40 (p. 48, 552/567). The words of Ambrose are repeated verbatim in PS. DIONYS. EXIG., *Exemp.* (p. 98-99, par. 36 – Glorie; p. 81, par. 36 – Schwartz). (CPL 654 lists the *Exempla* under the name of “Anonymus monachus Scythensis”.) In the *Exempla* the passage is also attributed to Ambrose (it follows several other excerpts from Ambrose), so that the composer of Text 1 could have used the *Exempla* or some such florilegium, rather than Ambrose directly.

2. Cfr Mt. 1, 16: *and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ*. Just prior to this, after commenting on the genealogy of Mt. 1, 1-16, Jerome has said: “The diligent reader will question and say: ‘Since Joseph is not the father of the Lord Savior, what does the order of generations up to Joseph have to do with the Lord?’ To whom we will respond, first, that it is not the custom of the Scriptures to compose a genealogy through women, and next, that Joseph and Mary were from one tribe, from which fact by the Law he must marry her as if she was a relative; and also because they were enrolled together at Bethlehem (cfr Lk. 2, 4-5), evidently because they were born from the same tribe.”

3. Cfr Deut. 22, 21 and 24; Jn. 6, 3-5.

4. Three codices of Jerome in the edition cited below (note 6) add “of a husband” (*mariti*) to “solace.”

5. Two codices of my edition of Text 1 omit the name Ignatius Martyr. The reference to Ignatius is to c. 19, 1 of his letter to the Ephesians: “And the virginity of Mary, and her giving birth were hidden from the Prince of this world, as was also the death of the Lord” (transl. by K. Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, Cambridge, MA, 1949, p. 193). PL 26, 24D, note, says that Jerome’s source, however, was Origen, *Homil. VI in Lucam*, rather than Ignatius’ letter itself. Origen says: “I asked myself why God, when once he had decided that the Savior would be born from a virgin, did not choose a maiden without a fiancé, but rather her especially who was already engaged. And unless I am mistaken, here is the reason: he had to be born from a virgin who not only had a fiancé, but, as Matthew writes, was already handed over to a man, although he did not yet know her (cfr Mt. 1, 24), lest her condition would indicate disgrace, when the virgin was seen with a swollen womb. Whence I found noted with elegance in a letter of a certain martyr—I speak of Ignatius, the second bishop of Antioch after Peter, who in the persecution fought the beasts at Rome: ‘The virginity of Mary was hidden from the prince of this world; it was hidden thanks to Joseph, it was hidden thanks to the marriage, it was hidden because she was thought to have a husband. For if she had not had a fiancé and, as it was thought, a husband, this virginity would not have been able to be hidden from the Prince of this world. For immediately the thought would have secretly stolen into the devil: how is this woman, who has not known man, pregnant? This must be a divine conception, this must be a work that surpasses human nature’” (ed. H. Crouzel, F. Fournier, P. Périchon, *Origène, Homelies sur S. Luc (Sources Chrétiennes, 87)*, Paris, 1998, p. 144-146). Ignatius, himself, does not “add” a fourth reason: he only gives the one, above-quoted, statement.

6. Cfr HIER., *In Matth.* I, 18 (p. 10, 72/79). The words of Jerome are also quoted by Hrabanus, *In Matth.* I, 1 (col. 748B), but in small differences between Jerome and Hrabanus, Text 1 comes closer to Jerome. One difference between Text 1 and Jerome/Hrabanus is that for “Why was Christ the Son of God born (natus est) from a betrothed virgin?”, Jerome and Hrabanus have: “Why was Christ the Son of God conceived (concipitur) from a betrothed virgin?”. Bede recognizes the distinction between God being “born” from Mary and being “conceived” from Mary: in his first homily for the Feast of the Annunciation he says: “Cur autem Dominus non de simplici virgine, sed de desponsata viro concipi et nasci voluerit, plurimae a patribus rationabiles causae” (PL 94, 10A).

Commentary on Text 1

The composer of Text 1 brought together two passages (somewhat altered) of two unquestionable authorities, Ambrose and Jerome. The subject of the text, the two generations of Christ, is related to the creedal declarations by which Jesus Christ is “eternally begotten of the Father” (as the Nicene-Constantinople Creed puts it) and “born of the virgin Mary” (as the Apostles’ Creed and N-C Creed put it). The two births of Christ, celestial and virginal, however, are not conveyed by dry theological language, but through two images, taken from the beginning of John’s Gospel and the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel.

John’s Gospel begins with Jesus in heaven, as the divine eternal Word, who then descends and comes among us. John leaves no room to doubt that the second Person of the Trinity is the very same Person who appeared, a full-grown man, on the banks of the Jordan, being pointed out by John the Baptist as the one capable of taking away the sins of the world.

Matthew’s Gospel begins with the genealogy of Joseph, husband of Mary. Through the question of Mary’s status as a virgin betrothed to Joseph, we first see Jesus in our mind’s eye as a baby threatened in a human mother’s womb, and as a defenseless infant fleeing the wrath of Herod.

The reader is taught the two natures of Christ—divine and human, in a single person—Christology in a nutshell—by bringing together these two biblical images.

Text 1 was astonishingly popular—at least it survives in six Carolingian manuscripts written in quite different areas of France. One manuscript is now in Montpellier, although we do not know where it was originally written; another manuscript, now in Albi, was written in southern France. One might speculate that the text was composed in relation to Spanish Adoptionism, which spread to the area of

southern Gaul and involved Carolingian theologians from the north, south, east, and west of the empire writing against its teaching. The orthodox position was that Spanish Adoptionism was a kind of Nestorianism (Christ's divine and human natures were so separate that he seemed to be two persons). Spanish Adoptionism said Christ was the adopted son of God, not the natural son of God, in as much as one was speaking only of his human nature. But the orthodox response was no, he is always the true Son of God, because you cannot separate his two natures. The composer of Text 1, by bringing together Ambrose on Christ's divinity and Jerome on Christ's humanity, brings together the two natures of Christ in his one same person, refuting the idea that he could be called the adopted son of God in the same way as we are adopted children of God, even though he was fully human, like us.

If Text 1 was written against Spanish Adoptionism, it might seem puzzling, however, why its composer replaced the word "conceived" in his source with the word "born": Jerome (and Hrabanus) have: "Why was Christ the Son of God conceived (concipitur) from a betrothed virgin?", whereas Text 1 has: "Why was Christ the Son of God born (natus est) from a betrothed virgin?". For Mary not only to have given birth to God, but also to have conceived God, meant that there was never a moment in her womb when the baby was a mere man, awaiting his assumption by God. "Conceived" is more anti-Adoptionist. Why would the composer of Text 1 have chosen "born" instead of "conceived"? Perhaps he was trying to link Christ's "heavenly" birth with his earthly birth. But perhaps a better reason is that "born" echoes Origen's words: what is at stake here is the devil discovering the God-man. The composer of Text 1 is thinking about the time when Mary's womb would have been very swollen and she would not be able to hide her pregnancy (not the time of her conception, when the devil could not tell she was pregnant). By the time Mary was ready to give birth she was a married woman, and no one would suspect there was anything unusual about the pregnancy. (Matthew's gospel does not say exactly when Joseph married Mary, but it was some time between Jesus's conception and his birth.) "Born" instead of "conceived" intensifies the drama and the risk to Mary surrounding Christ's human birth. To the mind of the person

reading or hearing Text 1, “born” brings to the imagination the complete humanity of Jesus coming forth between a woman’s knees.

Thus we see the creativity of the Carolingian composer who found a way, through biblical pictorial images, to teach the people how to perceive Christ according to orthodox belief. One might even speculate as to whether there is a connection between Text 1 and the image controversy: Donald Bullough says that “a well-established tradition of depicting Christ, the Evangelists, and so on” stopped for a while in the 790s.¹ He notes that some years ago a German scholar, Schnitzler, argued that the criticism of images in the *Libri Carolini* directly influenced artistic activity in the Frankish court in the mid 790s.² Could the composer of Text 1, upset with the silence imposed on images, have “painted” orthodox belief for his audience? In any case, whatever influence court activity may or may not have had on the composer of Text 1, the power of mental images to convey the faith was not lost on this composer. It might be noted that one of the earliest mss of Text 1, Paris, BnF, lat. 1603, Bullough dates, “after 798, apparently ‘Hofnahe.’” (He believes Paris 1603 served as a *vade mecum* of a rural parish priest.) What might appear to a modern manuscript cataloguer to be an incomplete fragment is, in fact, an imaginative work. Its survival in 6 mss (a very high number for texts in the catalogue) attests its effectiveness.

The proof that Text 1 is not simply a fragment that got attached to one group of creed commentaries is that in the six mss in which Text 1 survives, in only two of them it is grouped with all the same creed commentaries: In Albi, BM 40 and in Paris, BnF, lat. 1603 it is grouped with (it follows) *Cat*, n. 44, 95; in Montpellier, BI, Section Médecine 387 it is grouped with (it follows) *Cat*, n. 245, 99, 200; in Einsiedeln, SB 27 it is grouped (after 200, before 144) with *Cat*, n. 195, 73, 99, 200, 144, 122a, and in Verdun, BM 27 it is grouped with (it precedes) *Cat*, n. 195. This means that every time Text 1 was re-copied, the manuscript compiler made a decision about Text 1 as a distinct text.

¹ D. A. Bullough, *Carolingian Renewal: sources and heritage* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1991), 57.

² *Ibid.*, 57.

The subject matter of Text 1 is quite focused. It is on the two births of Christ. There is no mention of the Holy Spirit, nor would you know God is a Trinity from this text. Perhaps that is why it is always found together with other creed commentaries that do treat the Trinity.