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Trans-Formed by the Spirit: How the Doctrine of Miraculous Conception Reveals Jesus to Be an Intersex Trans Man

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Abstract

This article is a queer reading of the doctrine of miraculous conception and an exploration into how applying an intersex lens to these conception texts can liberate an intersex Jesus. In it, I explain the basics of intersex and otherwise queer theologies, before looking at sex difference in the New Testament through the figures of eunuchs, and conducting an intersex reading of Jesus' conception and biology. I argue that, if we believe Mary to be a virgin at the moment of Jesus' conception, with no external male influence, then Jesus is necessarily a chromosomal 'female' (and therefore intersex, due to his 'male' physical appearance). I then discuss the ways in which his biology can transcend prescriptive roles of sex, mirroring how his social behaviour transcends prescriptive roles of gender. What this queer reading of Jesus can tell us relates to a gender-expansive view of deity – troubling rigid Church institutions by celebrating the breaking of binaries that constrain us.

Keywords

Queer theology, trans theology, intersex, Jesus, Biblical masculinity, eunuchs

The biological makeup of Jesus is a fascinating topic, but one which sees little investigation because of its inherent unknowability – it is an unfortunate fact that we cannot travel back in time and take a biopsy of Jesus, or book him an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scan. However, there are biblical indicators of what the miraculous conception in Luke and Matthew can tell us about his genesis and his biological paternity. For example, it is reasonable to assume that Jesus had a penis. After all, Luke tells

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us he was circumcised in accordance with Jewish law, 8 days after his birth (Lk. 2.21). But what might the view of Mary as a virgin at the time of Jesus' birth mean for his biology? Was he genetically and chromosomally 'male', 'female' or something else? In this article, we delve deep into intersex and transgender theologies, potential depictions of intersexuality throughout the New Testament, the birth narratives of Luke and Matthew, and the doctrine of miraculous conception. Our aim is to consider the following: if the Son of God was conceived through a miracle by the Holy Spirit, does this reveal him to be intersex?

Part I. What Is Intersex?

First of all, we need to define what we mean by the term 'intersex' and discuss the lens through which we will use it to interpret Jesus' birth. While this term does not appear to have one consistent definition,[1] 'intersex' tends to refer to a naturally occurring biological phenomenon wherein an infant is born with atypical sex characteristics. There are many intersex conditions, ranging through hormonal, chromosomal and phenotypical (physically expressed) differences. This sometimes results in genitalia that cannot be neatly categorised into binary sex as we understand it – bodies that 'do not fit current definitions of maleness or femaleness'.[2] As seen with genital anomalies, intersexuality *can* manifest as a physical difference, but many intersex people may not actually know that they are intersex because their differences are chromosomal or otherwise less obvious. There is ongoing medical debate about which conditions qualify as being intersex – do hormonal irregularities caused by conditions like polycystic ovarian syndrome qualify, for example? – but the important message gleaned from these debates is that biological sex is not as cut-and-dry as we have been socialised to believe. With most contemporary societies operating within 'a binary model of sex' where people must be 'either male *or* female', the very existence of intersex people is disruptive to this seemingly fundamental belief about the overall normative societal body.[3] Perhaps naturally, the response to the perceived threat that intersex people embody is to deny their existence altogether, 'disappear' them through corrective surgery,[4] or to make their atypical characteristics a taboo subject to speak about. And, in no small part thanks to the Church,[5] this is what has happened over the years. In fact, it could easily be asserted that the 'natural diversity of physical genders has been *systematically eradicated*, such that the dualist worldview of male and female renders biological fact invisible'.[6] Many do not know that intersex people exist at all, certainly not in so many different forms

1. Gross S (1999) Intersexuality and scripture. *Theology and Sexuality* 11(1): 65.
2. Cornwall S (2014) Sex otherwise: Intersex, Christology, and the maleness of Jesus. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30(2): 23.
3. Cornwall S (2015) *Intersex, Theology, and the Bible: Troubling Bodies in Church, Text, and Society*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1.
4. Cornwall (2015) *Intersex, Theology, and the Bible*, 4.
5. Gross S (1999) Intersexuality and scripture, 68.
6. Reay L (2009) Towards a transgender theology: Que(e)rying the Eunuchs. In: Isherwood L and Althaus-Reid M (eds) *Trans/formations*. London: SCM Press, 151 [emphasis mine].

and with so many different combinations of atypicality. Even among those with the general understanding that gender and sex are different concepts, these concepts are usually depicted in opposition to one another. Gender is presented as changeable, while sex is presented as rigid and unmoving; the word 'biological' becomes 'synonymous for "unchangeable" and "natural"'.[7] However, put simply, this is not true. The existence of intersex people does not only threaten the male / female sex binary, but invalidates it completely. Contrary to popular belief, sex cannot be a binary, since 'any exception to a dualistic model necessarily undermines the model in its entirety'.[8] If people naturally come in many different physical, phenotypical, chromosomal and hormonal forms, then we must face the fact that biological sex is entirely socially constructed. Sex and gender are *both* spectrums. This is a difficult concept for many people to understand, since it goes against what they have been socialised to believe, but intersex ambiguity inherently 'threatens the existence of a dominant, patriarchal, heterosexual culture', and should not be ignored or rendered invisible.[9]

A key figure in the field of intersex theology in recent decades has been Susannah Cornwall, whose work has been instrumental to this particular intersex exploration of Jesus. Not only does Cornwall look at the figure of Jesus himself, positing that 'it is not possible to assert with any degree of certainty that Jesus was male as we now define maleness',[10] she also studies the history of intersexuality and the ways in which intersex people have interacted with the Church since its early days. A key question that she asks is this: why have intersex people always been so othered and pathologized? The simplified reason has to do with strict gender roles and intersexuality's deviance from the norm. Cornwall explains it like this: 'In societies that operate according to gendered norms, genitals act as "shorthand" ciphers for how children should be socialised and reared. Genitals that do not send a clear message therefore create problems for broader assumptions about social relations'.[11] This is true today and was equally true some two thousand years ago in the ancient world in which Jesus lived. Essentially, people are automatically socialised and categorised according to their genitals, making genital ambiguity a threat to the established order. Especially in recent times, attention has continually been drawn to the poor treatment of intersex infants in the name of protecting this established order, usually through the hard work of intersex advocacy groups.[12] Despite their constant activism, though, infants with visible genital differences are still frequently subjected to unnecessary surgeries in order to normalise their genitals and to make them 'less exceptional', with purely aesthetic concerns in mind.[13] Cosmetic surgeries such as this are

7. Preves SE (2002) Sexing the intersexed: An analysis of sociocultural responses to intersexuality. *Signs* 27(2): 526.
8. Cornwall S (2009) 'State of mind' versus 'concrete set of facts': The contrasting of transgender and intersex in Church documents on sexuality. *Theology & Sexuality* 15(1): 17.
9. Reay L (2009) Towards a transgender theology, 151.
10. Cornwall S (2012) Intersex and ontology: A response to the Church, women bishops and provision. *Lincoln Theological Institute* 15(1): 3.
11. Cornwall S (2015) *Intersex, Theology, and the Bible*, 2.
12. Preves SE (2002) Sexing the intersexed, 527.
13. Cornwall S (2015) *Intersex, Theology, and the Bible*, 2.

often secretive and non-consensual, with the 'impetus to control intersexual "deviance" stem[ming] from cultural tendencies toward gender binarism, homophobia, and fear of difference'.[14] While it is clear that there have always been intersex children being born,[15] the medicalisation of these infants has perhaps never been so pervasive as in the past few decades. For example, intersex characteristics are regularly 'perceived to need treatment despite inconclusive evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of current treatment protocol',[16] purely for the advantage of practising physicians to be able to maintain their own binary worldviews about biological sex. As Kessler discovers in his 1990 study of leading physicians and paediatricians in the field, 'the nonnormative is converted into the normative, and the normative state is considered natural. The genital ambiguity is remedied to conform to a "natural," that is, culturally indisputable, gender dichotomy'.[17] This study is incredibly revealing of the insidious nature of the age-old fear of difference, with physicians making irreversible changes to infants' bodies under the guise of objective medicine. What this really betrays is how much doctors and physicians can be swayed by their cultural 'assumptions about gender', which they then 'impose [. . .] on the patients they treat'.[18] It highlights the real motivation behind these surgeries: cultural presuppositions about gender and sex, not objective medicine. In the face of bodily evidence that the dualistic male–female binary is not sufficient, these medical professionals still wilfully ignore this evidence in favour of protecting the status quo, regardless of how the intersex infant will grow up to feel and identify.

While the focus of this article is ostensibly the biology of Jesus and his potential intersex status, it is important to mention that, in modern spaces, not all people who could technically be classed as intersex identify that way. Many of them simply identify with the sex that they were assigned based on some of their more visible sex characteristics, and would not align themselves with the intersex or wider LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or sometimes questioning) and others) communities.[19] Equally, though, there are many intersex people who consider themselves a part of these same communities for the ways in which their body threatens the normative gendered paradigm.[20] After all, they share many commonalities with the ways in which queer bodies threaten these norms through both attraction and gender identity – and many intersex people 'have reclaimed their scars as sites of subversive, queer identity',[21] while others 'cope with stigma by organising themselves to transform a stigmatised identity into one

14. Preves SE (2002) Sexing the intersexed, 524.
15. Kessler SJ (1990) The medical construction of gender: Case management of intersexed infants. *Signs* 16(1): 3.
16. Preves SE (2002) Sexing the intersexed, 524.
17. Kessler SJ (1990) The medical construction of gender, 24.
18. Kessler SJ (1990) The medical construction of gender, 4.
19. Cornwall S (2010) *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ: Intersex Conditions and Christian Theology*. London: Routledge, 9.
20. DeFranza MK (2015) *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God*. Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 7.
21. Cornwall S (2010) *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ*, 53.

of dignity and pride'.[22] This queers the popular cultural notion that sex and gender identity are one and the same, whereas, in reality, gender identity is 'multi-faceted and multi-dimensional'.[23] The concept of gender also 'changes over time' and is 'dependent on the cultural reading of any one individual or community'.[24] In addition, some intersex people identify as transgender. For example, if an intersex person underwent corrective surgery on an oversized clitoris to make it into a smaller one and was then socialised as a woman, later realising they were a transgender man, their intersections of intersex and trans identities would both have informed their experiences.[25] A key term to know when discussing these diversities in gender identity is 'cisgender' – an adjective that describes someone who comfortably identifies with their assigned gender at birth (the opposite of 'transgender', which describes those who do not).[26] An argument could be made to say that all intersex people are trans to a certain degree, by virtue of the fact that they are not unproblematically cisgender. In this view, anyone who is not cisgender is therefore necessarily transgender, with other identities such as non-binary, genderfluid and intersex falling under this larger umbrella.

Essentially, intersex people are those who are born with a body that does not conform to the 'either / or' dualistic model of sex. To use the words of the apostle Paul, they are 'neither male nor female' (Gal. 3.28, KJV) in the most basic sense. While terms like 'intersex', 'cisgender' and 'transgender' constitute a modern understanding of how sex and gender operate, there have always been people born with atypical sex characteristics, and they have always identified in a myriad of ways. This knowledge is foundational to our intersex approach to Jesus' conception.

Part II. Eunuchs: The Presentation of Ambiguous Sex in the New Testament

> Although it is anachronistic to project contemporary constructions of sexuality and gender identity back onto communities which understood them very differently, it is important to recognise that even Christians have not always understood maleness and femaleness, masculinity and femininity as either-or, mutually-exclusive categories in exactly the ways that we might suppose.[27]

This observation by Susannah Cornwall may be surprising to many. Did Jewish people and early Christians not share modern reservations about sex and gender? Of course they did, to a degree, but this reservation was much more about maintaining a patriarchal social order than it was about maintaining a worldview of binary sex, with Burrus calling

22. Preves SE (2003) *Intersex and Identity: The Contested Self*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 132.
23. Reay L (2009) Towards a transgender theology, 153.
24. Reay L (2009) Towards a transgender theology, 153.
25. Reader's note: This article uses 'trans' and 'transgender' interchangeably.
26. Henderson-Merrygold J (2020) Reading biblical embodiment cispiciously. In: Page S-J and Pilcher K (eds) *Embodying Religion, Gender, and Sexuality*. London: Routledge.
27. Cornwall S (2009) 'State of mind' versus 'concrete set of facts', 8.

gender relations in antiquity 'a dynamic spectrum or gradient of relative masculinities'.[28] Gender was much more of a social and legal issue than a biological one, with masculinity needing to be 'earned publicly', regardless of anatomy.[29] Despite this being a primarily social concern, though, issues of biology still prevailed – intersex people have always been born, after all. In ancient Rabbinic Judaism, there is even recorded acknowledgement of intersexuality with the use of terms *tumtum* and *androgyne* referring to examples of figures that we now recognise may have had atypical sex characteristics.[30] In addition, biological ambiguity as it relates to sex and gender is also evident in the New Testament in the form of the eunuch.

The social category of eunuch is not one that we see in today's culture, but it was an important one in the ancient Greco-Roman contexts. To be a eunuch was to be a 'gender-liminal' figure. Like modern queer and intersex people, they 'upset the male / female binary'.[31] These ambiguous figures were often those who were castrated or otherwise 'emasculated': for example, unmarried, childless or impotent.[32] The figure of the eunuch was considered 'highly problematic' – a man, who 'because he is a male figure, threatens the very idea of masculinity'.[33] These liminal figures problematised binary social categories and showcased the idea that gender is not something that 'flow[s] unproblematically from a set of biological facts: rather, it is performed'.[34] In relation to sex and the performance of gender, there were very strict rules and codes in first-century Judaism that had to be followed wholly and completely, with no room for the ambiguity that eunuchs represented. Therefore, the fact that the body of a eunuch was a site of ambiguity 'did not merely symbolise the loss of virtue and power, it explained it'.[35]

Eunuchs feature twice in New Testament writings; once in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 and once in the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 19. The latter example comes after Jesus is challenged by Pharisees about Jewish teachings on divorce and is a very strange section, which invites two main readings. One reading requires the passage of Matthew 19.12 to be read alongside 19.3–9 in line with 'the established ontological fields of heterosexuality, marriage, and masculinity'.[36] The other reading leads

28. Burrus V (2007) Mapping as metamorphosis: Initial reflections on gender and ancient religious discourses. In: Penner T and Stichele CV (eds) *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses*. Boston, MA: Brill, 4.
29. Moore W (2021) A godly man and a manly god: Resolving the tension of divine masculinities in the Bible. *Journal for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies* 2(2): 75.
30. Gray H (2012) Not judging by appearances: The role of genotype in Jewish Law on intersex conditions. *Shofar* 30(4): 137.
31. Wilson BE (2014) 'Neither male nor female': The Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8.26–40. *New Testament Studies* 60(3): 406–407.
32. Reay L (2009) Towards a transgender theology: Que(e)rying the Eunuchs, 150.
33. Moxnes H (2003) *Putting Jesus in His Place: A Radical Vision of Household and Kingdom*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 74.
34. Cornwall S (2015) *Intersex, Theology, and the Bible*, 2–3.
35. DeFranza MK (2015) *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God*. Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 76.
36. Moxnes H (2004) Jesus in gender trouble. *CrossCurrents* 54(3), 38.

to a certain troubling of gender essentialisms through the fundamental inclusion of eunuchs and through Jesus' classification of them. In this unusual passage, Jesus tells his disciples that there are three distinct categories of eunuchs: 'there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven' (Mt. 19.12, NRSV). By the very mention of these gender troubling figures, Jesus is essentially 'welcoming un-men to become his followers'.[37] This gives his followers permission to not conform to the expected sexed and gendered patterns of their contexts and may in fact actively encourage his disciples to become eunuchs 'for the sake of the kingdom of heaven'. In terms of their physical social location, the young men who followed Jesus would have already become 'displaced persons', representing 'a provocation to the very order of the community'.[38] When they voluntarily 'left everything' (Lk. 5.11) to follow Jesus, they moved 'out from a secure male place into an uncertain zone of ambiguity and suspicion'.[39] Disciples listening to his teachings here might very well be 'called to adopt this gender troubling position that affronts ideal masculinity' along with Jesus himself.[40]

For Reay, in his queer study of eunuchs, Jesus' elucidations on what is one broad social category of sexual ambiguity draws some interesting parallels with contemporary transgender and intersex communities. After all, who else could be more perfectly described as gender-liminal figures 'who have been so from birth' than intersex people? We can expand this with DeFranza's assertions that first-century Jewish officials described infants with ambiguous genitals as '"eunuch[s] of the sun" (*saris khama*) – indicating that they were discovered to be eunuchs at the moment the sun shone upon them'.[41] Intersex infants born with genital anomalies could still be categorised as *saris khama* today. As for 'those who have been made eunuchs by others', Jesus is referring to men who have endured the social disgrace of being castrated, either because they are slaves or through an act of humiliating violence.[42] However, we could now read it through the lens of 'those who are transgender in the broadest sense of this word, [. . .] not conforming to normative definitions of gender roles and identities'.[43] If you are trans, you have been made a eunuch (or, a social outsider) by a rigid cisnormative world – you may have also been physically transformed by gender-affirming surgery; twice made a eunuch 'by others'. Thus, Reay's queer reading of these verses mirrors 'all those marginalised by virtue of their gender expression' in contemporary churches, which troubles these church bodies in a similar way as our reading of Jesus as an intersex figure does.[44]

Interestingly, Jesus even mentioning eunuchs at all brings up the possibility that he himself was being accused of being one. This is damaging to his image both then and

37. Moore W (2021) A godly man and a manly god, 81.
38. Moxnes H (2003) *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 72.
39. Moxnes H (2003) *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 88.
40. Moore W (2021) A godly man and a manly god, 81.
41. DeFranza MK (2015) *Sex Difference in Christian Theology*, 71.
42. Moxnes H (2004) Jesus in gender trouble, 38.
43. Reay L (2009) Towards a transgender theology, 150.
44. Reay L (2009) Towards a transgender theology, 150.

now – the Messiah and Son of God potentially an 'un-manned' man.[45] This is a reading explored by Halvor Moxnes in his 2003 text *Putting Jesus in His Place*, wherein he poses the question of Jesus' masculinity in relation to his physical and social spaces. In the ancient contexts of Jesus and his disciples, their patriarchal roles in their respective households would have been crucial, since 'the ideology and theology of Israel centred around two institutions, the household and the monarchy'.[46] With Jesus especially as the firstborn son, his voluntary absconding from familial responsibilities would have placed his masculine status in significant question. With this in mind, it is not an outrageous suggestion that those opposed to Jesus' teachings could suffer the indignity of accusing him and his followers of being eunuchs. In a culture of men needing to publicly earn their status as men, it is entirely feasible for opponents to have done this to 'denigrate or slander Jesus and his disciples [. . .] to remove them from their position as "real" men' in the community and to undermine their teachings.[47] This slander is only effective since the social status of eunuch was a 'matter of shame', and eunuchs were also 'associated with transgression', usually sexual transgression.[48]

Due to this image of transgression and shame, it would be understandable if Jesus responded to accusations such as this by condemning eunuchs and reasserting his own manly status, protecting himself and his followers from further scrutiny and discrimination. He does not do this, though. Instead of jumping to a defensive position and distancing himself from this undesirable social category, he appears to align himself *more* with it by describing a third category of eunuch – those 'who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven'. If the first two categories incorporate liminal gender expression within their interpretational remit, the third one can be seen as a metaphor referring to the option of vocational celibacy.[49] Considering Jesus was most likely unmarried with no extra-marital excursions,[50] it could be said that *he* was a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. By associating this 'shameful identity' with the kingdom of heaven, even indicating that you could be a eunuch for the sake of this holy kingdom, 'Jesus both rejected [. . .] and confirmed' the slander against him.[51] Confronted with a situation wherein his masculinity and social location is being doubted, Jesus does not refute the accusation as his opponents and disciples would expect him to, instead openly identifying himself with an undesirable social category, while his social status is already under fire. He 'plays around with' the concept of being a eunuch or being perceived as one, intentionally creating an 'ambiguity over the male identity of himself and his followers'.[52] This would have been radical and revolutionary – and another instance of

45. Wilson BE (2014) 'Neither male nor female', 406.
46. Moxnes H (2003) *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 37.
47. Moxnes H (2003) *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 75.
48. Loader W (2012) *The New Testament on Sexuality*. Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 441.
49. Loader W (2012) *The New Testament on Sexuality*, 442.
50. Loader W (2012) *The New Testament on Sexuality*, 449.
51. Moxnes H (2003) *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 88.
52. Moxnes H (2003) *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 89.

Jesus aligning himself with the poor and ostracised in order to make a theological and political statement of compassion. His 'shocking' use of the image of the eunuch is a purposeful tool for reflecting his own 'countercultural stance in affirming the marginalised'.[53] It additionally serves the purpose of 'asserting the identity of some of his followers and their lifestyle option, including his own',[54] conferring an air of religious legitimacy on the social stigma of moving beyond 'the traditional masculine domain in the dominant household system' in this ancient Jewish context.[55] Regardless of whether Jesus can be considered to be biologically intersex, here he is socially intersexed by those around him as well as his intentional alignment of himself with the category of the eunuch.

However, this reading of Matthew 19 is one that is often under-represented, 'rejected by ancient and modern interpreters', since the mere possibility of Jesus being a literal *or* figurative eunuch troubles his 'sacrosanct' masculinity.[56] Despite this, it is important to look critically at Jesus' masculinity and the ways in which he rejects typical masculine roles expected of him. We need to 'challenge modern presuppositions' about the masculine status of Jesus and others in the Bible,[57] without reading back our modern cultural understandings anachronistically on to these ancient texts. The social category of the eunuch in antiquity 'defied categorisation'.[58] As with the status of intersex people today, eunuchs did not fit neatly into categories of male and female. It is therefore significant to our modern understandings of Jesus that he identified with this liminal position – whether that be metaphorically or literally. Regardless of his actual biology, we can still see Jesus as being metaphorically intersex, since the queer social space of the eunuch in antiquity can be mapped on to the queer social space of trans and intersex people today. In addition, the potential for Jesus' intersex status brings a further implication for us today: 'theological norms grounded in binary maleness and femaleness, and masculinity and femininity as superimposed on them, cannot be absolute or incontrovertible'.[59] In the same way that intersex bodies trouble our conceptions of sex and gender, this critical eye needs to be turned towards institutions like those of medicine and religion with regards to the discourse on sex and gender. Along with turning blind eyes towards topics perceived to be unfavourable like queer and trans issues, these institutions 'too frequently take insufficient account of intersex [issues] and thereby elide broader accounts of what it is to be a sexed human person'.[60] Similarly, our intersex reading of Jesus' birth narratives and biology troubles the modern obsession with his masculinity.

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53. Loader W (2007) Sexuality and the historical Jesus. In: Holmén T (ed.) *Jesus from Judaism to Christianity: Continuum Approaches to the Historical Jesus*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 40.
54. Loader W (2012) *The New Testament on Sexuality*, 443.
55. Loader (2007) Sexuality and the historical Jesus, 40.
56. Reay L (2009) Towards a transgender theology, 156.
57. Moxnes H (2003) *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 89.
58. Moxnes H (2003) *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 89.
59. Cornwall S (2011) *Controversies in Queer Theology*. London: SCM Press, 62.
60. Cornwall S (2015) *Intersex, Theology, and the Bible*, 1.

Part III. Miraculous Conception in the Infancy Narratives

As we approach the infancy narratives in the Bible, we see that there are two accounts: Luke 1.26–38 and Matthew 1.18–25. Both of these narratives tell the story of what has come to be known as the miraculous conception – textually, Mary conceives Jesus without participating in sexual intercourse. In Luke's account, the mechanism by which this happens is described to Mary like this: 'the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you' (Lk. 1.35). In Matthew's more 'explicitly androcentric' account,[61] we do not see Mary's point of view, but instead are told that she is 'found to be with child from the Holy Spirit' (Mt. 1.18). Culturally speaking, this illicit pregnancy should have been devastating for her. As an engaged woman, Mary is 'legally regarded as married' to Joseph, but the second stage of the marriage custom wherein 'the man [takes] the woman to live in his home' has not occurred yet, so sexual intercourse between the two is still forbidden.[62] Since the pair is technically wed, however, Joseph already holds the legal rights concerning Mary, so the discovery of her pregnancy and its implications of adultery are cause for annulling the marriage.[63] Joseph is intending to do this, as stated in Mt. 1.19, but is prevented from doing so by a prophetic dream proclaiming that 'the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit' (Mt. 1.20). This seems to dismiss the idea that any other man had sex with Mary, at least in Joseph's mind, placing the onus of Jesus' conception onto the mystical power of the Holy Spirit. But what does this mean? Did the angel Gabriel engage in carnal relations with the Virgin Mary?

For the writers of these texts and their audiences, accepting the foundational concept of a virgin birth would not have been a significant problem. Especially in a Hellenistic context, stories of miraculous births and conceptions were not uncommon, with abounding tales in the public psyche of Greek heroes and Roman forefathers who had divine parents (e.g. Romulus, Remus and Achilles).[64] Indeed, according to Talbert, early readers of these conception narratives may have viewed the stories of Jesus' 'divine begetting' as somewhat necessary as a way to explain his extraordinary life, with a divine origin considered 'appropriate for their chief benefactor and founder'.[65] In addition, the Lukan language of Mary being overshadowed by the Holy Spirit in Jesus' conception would not be out of place in an ancient Jewish mind-set either, due to their understanding of embryology. As evidenced throughout the Hebrew Bible (e.g. in Gen. 4.1; Job 31.15; Ps. 139.16), conception tended to be understood as a three-party affair in which 'God, the male with his seed, and the female with the blood or fluids of her womb' were involved.[66]

61. Moxnes H (2003) *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 34.
62. Gaventa BR (1995) *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 40.
63. Gaventa BR (1995) *Mary*, 40.
64. Talbert CH (2006) Miraculous conceptions and births in Mediterranean antiquity. In: Levine A-J, Dale AC and Crossan JD (eds) *The Historical Jesus in Context*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 79.
65. Talbert CH (2006) Miraculous conceptions and births in Mediterranean antiquity, 85.
66. Lincoln A (2013) 'Luke and Jesus' conception: A case of double paternity? *Journal of Biblical Literature* 132(3): 651.

In a situation where all three parties are seen to be active in the conception of a child, it would make sense to a Hellenised Jewish audience that, in Jesus' case, the male agent is 'replaced' by a divine one in order to make him – the figure that is dually human and divine.[67] However, we now understand biology in terms of gametes, ovaries and semen, in a way usually detached from spirituality. For modern Christians with a more scientific understanding of procreation, God is now seen as the 'generally creative source of life', as opposed to a physical agent in conception.[68] Therefore, neither biblical accounts 'satisfy modern curiosity regarding the way in which the Holy Spirit is responsible for the conception of Jesus'.[69] Yet, many Christians – generally evangelicals and fundamentals – believe that Jesus was born to a virgin. So, how can that work? If God mysteriously fertilises the egg in Mary's womb through a miracle, what does this mean for the child's biology? This is the question we will explore in the next section.

Part IV. Jesus: Chromosomally Female but Phenotypically Male?

The following reading of Jesus' biology follows the principle that Jo Henderson-Merrygold calls a hermeneutic of 'cispicion' – a term coined by her combining the words 'suspicion' and 'cisgender'. Essentially, we are reading 'against an assumption of cisgender characters' and directing our attention instead to 'gender inconsistencies in the character's story'.[70] By abandoning our preconceived assumptions of gender, we can read whichever text is capturing our focus with a deeper and broader lens. This hermeneutic of cispicion has been used in the past for several characters throughout the Christian canon such as Adam,[71] Jacob[72] and Joseph.[73] In this case, though, our cispicion is turned towards Jesus.

Generally speaking, at a genetic level, people have one of two configurations of sex-determining chromosomes – XX and XY. Put simply, the presence of an XX chromosomal pattern will yield a female body type, and a combination of X and Y will yield a male body type.[74] Although a baby with XX chromosomes will likely be a girl, and a baby with XY chromosomes will be a boy, this is not necessarily the case for intersex infants. In the words of Susannah Cornwall:

> an intersex person may have testes, XY chromosomes, a vagina, clitoris, and breasts. They may have ovaries, XX chromosomes, and a clitoris large enough to look more like a penis. They may have XXY chromosomes, or a mixture of XX and XY chromosomes.[75]

67. Lincoln A (2013) 'Luke and Jesus' conception, 654.
68. Lincoln A (2013) 'Luke and Jesus' conception, 651.
69. Gaventa BR (1995) *Mary*, 41.
70. Henderson-Merrygold J (2020) Reading biblical embodiment cispiciously.
71. Gross S (1999) Intersexuality and scripture. *Theology and Sexuality* 11(1): 70–71.
72. Henderson-Merrygold J (2020) Reading biblical embodiment cispiciously.
73. Drinkwater G (2009) 'Joseph's fabulous technicolour dreamcoat'. In: Drinkwater G, Lesser J and Shneer D (eds) *Torah Queeries: Weekly Commentaries on the Hebrew Bible*. New York: New York University Press, 53.
74. Gross S (1999) Intersexuality and scripture, 66.
75. Cornwall S (2015) *Intersex, Theology, and the Bible*, 1.

The possibilities and combinations of atypical sex characteristics are vast and varied and undermine the dualistic binary view of biological sex. One of the more common intersex conditions is Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS), which occurs when a 'male' foetus with XY chromosomes does not respond to androgens such as testosterone and the child has 'unremarkably feminine morphology with female genitalia'.[76] Depending on how reactive to androgens they are will determine whether the genitalia are ambiguous or not, but the majority of infants diagnosed with AIS will be socialised as girls and will not consider anything to be 'male' about them – despite their chromosomal makeup and internal organs. Similarly, there is a much rarer, opposite condition called Congenital Adrenogenital Hyperplasia (CAH). With CAH, the infant is chromosomally 'female', with female internal organs, but 'the adrenal glands produce a hormone which has a masculinizing effect on people with the XX chromosomal pattern'.[77] This can sometimes result in 'virtually complete masculinisation of the genitalia and of the body from puberty onwards'.[78] Thus, there is biological precedent for someone to have XX chromosomes – usually the biological blueprint for female morphology – but appear to be unremarkably male. Since the doctrine of miraculous conception positions Mary as a virgin, there is no male sperm for the Y chromosome to be passed on. Therefore, Jesus necessarily has XX chromosomes. Does this mean that Jesus has CAH? Can we viably read him as being intersex in this way?

Cornwall says cautiously that it is 'not impossible' for Jesus to have experienced this quirk of biology, but other scholars such as Virginia Mollenkott and Edward Kessel are more convinced that the foundation of miraculous conception necessitates the figure of Jesus to be intersex. Kessel is known for his radical and thorough dissection of Jesus' conception in 'A Proposed Biological Interpretation of the Virgin Birth' (1983). He begins with the foundation of the virgin birth, which is known in biological terms as 'parthenogenesis' – an entirely natural process observed in various animals and theoretically possible in humans.[79] Kessel hypothesises that a 'non-sexual God was incarnated into the human race as a female' in the figure of Jesus through this divinely actioned parthenogenesis.[80] Indeed, if we take the scriptures literally about Mary's status as a virgin (Lk. 1.34), then Jesus' conception, gestation and birth can all be described as parthenogenetic, made possible through the 'agency of the divine Spirit' and seen as a 'direct, non-sexual act of creative power'.[81] Kessel concludes that since human beings have the same patterns of 'sex determination found in other mammals [. . .] Jesus was conceived as a chromosomal female'.[82] If Mary truly was a virgin, and Jesus was conceived without the aid of any male sperm, this must be the logical conclusion. However,

76. Cornwall S (2014) Sex otherwise, 23.
77. Gross S (1999) Intersexuality and scripture, 67.
78. Gross S (1999) Intersexuality and scripture, 67.
79. Kessel EL (1983) A proposed biological interpretation of the virgin birth. *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 35(4): 130.
80. Kessel EL (1983) A proposed biological interpretation of the virgin birth, 133.
81. Lincoln A (2012) Contested paternity and contested readings: Jesus' conception in Matthew 1:18–25. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 34(3): 213.
82. Kessel EL (1983) A proposed biological interpretation of the virgin birth, 133.

Kessel goes on to say that a process of 'sex reversal' is what leads to Jesus living a life as a man.[83] He does not hypothesise that Jesus was intersex at all – potentially due to the era in which he is writing and a lack of awareness about intersex conditions. Despite Kessel's article being a product of its time, though, we can take the next theoretical step in his logic and consider the radical possibilities of Jesus' divine intersex body.

The supposition of Jesus as a chromosomal female brings us to our next hurdle – we know that Jesus was not a woman in appearance. For example, we know that he had a penis; Luke 2:21 mentions his circumcision, appearing to pass without incident 8 days after he is born. The custom of circumcision successfully fulfilled 'protocols of ethnic masculinity', marking Jesus as 'prestigiously' male and therefore ritually distinguished from women and gentiles.[84] As noted by Karen King, circumcision literally inscribed 'onto his material flesh' where he fell in categories of sex, gender, status and ethnicity.[85] Thus, his presumably unremarkable circumcision renders him socially and legally male. Other cultural markers designate him as an unremarkable infant male, too – for example, Mary and Joseph take Jesus to Jerusalem to be 'designated holy to the Lord' (Lk. 2.23), as Exodus dictates is custom for firstborn boys (Exod. 13.2). In addition, as it is never mentioned in any accounts of his life, we can assume that Jesus grew up as a typical boy and hit all of the normal male stages of development (hair growth, voice deepening, etc.). Therefore, we can infer that Jesus was a phenotypical male. Here, we have two contradictory determinations. Is Jesus unproblematically and phenotypically male? Or did he grow from a chromosomally female embryo? The theological tension between these two conclusions can be released through an intersex lens, since it is through this lens that we realise these conclusions do not need to be mutually exclusive. It is instead entirely possible for Jesus to appear straightforwardly male and yet still have female biological attributes – in modern parlance, his biology could be described in terms of Congenital Adrenogenital Hyperplasia or a similar condition. According to Kessel, Jesus was 'androgynous' in this unique way, 'fully retaining the chromosomal and cytological femaleness received at conception'.[86]

In *Omnigender* (2007), Mollenkott mirrors this intersex reading of Jesus with a similar reading of God in Genesis, who creates a sexless being in Adam – both male and female, and neither.[87] With this in mind, it is therefore instinctive for a 'biologically unsexed' gender-full God to create Jesus equally both and neither,[88] 'encompassing the breadth of "natural" human gender and sex diversity'.[89] If God can be conceptualised 'beyond anthropomorphism as neither male nor female',[90] why can we not do the same

83. Kessel EL (1983) A proposed biological interpretation of the virgin birth, 133.
84. King KL (2019) Jesus. In: Dunning BH (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of New Testament, Gender, and Sexuality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 417.
85. King KL (2019) Jesus, 417.
86. Kessel EL (1983) A proposed biological interpretation of the virgin birth, 133.
87. Mollenkott VR (2007) *Omnigender: A Trans-Religious Approach*. Cleveland, MI: Pilgrim Press, 106.
88. Moore W (2021) A godly man and a manly god, 79.
89. Reay L (2009) Towards a transgender theology, 154.
90. Althaus-Reid M (2000) *Indecent Theology*, 55.

for Jesus, despite his embodied divinity? Cornwall uses intersex people to evidence that God has 'chosen to embody Godself in multitudinous and various human gendered particularities',[91] but the same could be said of Jesus as well. As an intersex figure, Jesus embodies femininity and masculinity all at once – necessarily accepting and rejecting them both. He is both and therefore neither; an exception to binary categories that necessarily invalidates them.

Part V. An Intersex Saviour – Does It Matter?

But does this even matter? In his ministries, Jesus presents himself as someone who is 'transgressing the commonly accepted religious and legal boundaries of his day'.[92] Through actions like performing miracles on the Sabbath (Mt. 12.1–14) and talking to Samaritan women (Jn. 4.7–30), he 'pushes the boundaries of conventional behaviour'.[93] However, he also pushes the boundaries of conventionally *gendered* behaviour – he honours and teaches women (Lk. 10.38–42), and even appears first to a woman post-resurrection, before any of his male disciples see him (Jn. 20.11–18). By not interacting with women in the expected way, he is threatening his own masculine status by challenging his role and performing it badly. Furthermore, by leaving his hometown and 'eschewing marriage and family, Jesus cedes the masculine roles of father and husband' – and he does so voluntarily, for the sake of his ministry.[94] He knows that this may be damaging to his image, but he does it regardless. With this in mind, even without the possibility of him being regarded as a eunuch, and even without our intersex interpretation of his birth, it can be said that 'an exclusively male Christ is insufficient'.[95] But, as we have seen in our interpretation of Matthew 19, he *intentionally* aligns himself with the undesirable social category of the eunuch. He subverts the criticism of his gender-transgressive behaviour by asserting the holiness of the marginalised. Jesus gives

> a picture of people and life in the Kingdom that was very different from the ideal patriarchal household [where] the eunuch, the barren woman and the child without status are all lifted up [. . .] blessed and accepted into the Kingdom.[96]

He purposefully and continually demonstrates radical thought and compassion, painting a socially 'unsettling picture' by aligning himself with the ambiguously sexed and gendered category of the eunuch.[97] By abdicating his 'socially privileged position' in order to challenge the 'dominant social order of the patriarchal household', Jesus brings his

91. Cornwall S (2010) *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ*, 8.
92. Cheng PS (2012) *From Sin to Amazing Grace: Discovering the Queer Christ*. New York: Seabury Books, 102.
93. Cheng PS (2012) *From Sin to Amazing Grace*, 102.
94. Levine AJ (2019) The gospels and acts. In: Dunning BH (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of New Testament, Gender, and Sexuality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 301.
95. King KL (2019) Jesus, 413.
96. Moxnes H (2004) Jesus in gender trouble, 42.
97. Moxnes H (2003) *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 74.

gender identity under suspicion.[98] Not just his gender identity either – but his 'possession of the biological sex' traditionally associated with the male role that he is rejecting and challenging.[99] The image of the eunuch 'destabilises all male images of Jesus [. . .] to keep alive the ambiguity' surrounding him; 'he is not "fixed" in a defined or self-declared position'.[100] This, combined with our intersex interpretation of his birth, creates an image of Jesus as ambiguously gendered and ambiguously sexed – mirroring the ambiguity inherent in his nature as a figure both divine and human (Col. 1.19).

Of course, Jesus does not *need* to have necessarily been intersex in order to be an effective and universal saviour for all. He does not *need* to be ambiguously sexed to understand ostracization and social malady. These things are not integral to his nature. But, in a world wherein rigid male-dominated church institutions tell us you have to be either male *or* female – and these categories ascribe roles that you must perform to perfection or risk ostracization – any reading of Jesus that troubles his masculinity is important to consider. In this reading, we have considered his teachings in Matthew 19 and the narratives of his birth in Matthew 1 and Luke 1 to come to the following conclusion. Effectively, Jesus' biology challenges the biological construct of gender, while his actions challenge the social construct of gender. His social status as a eunuch represents a 'renunciation of masculinity',[101] and his biological status as intersex represents a renunciation of sexed maleness.

In our modern cultural setting, this interpretation is fairly experimental theology, especially since the studies into the historical Jesus have generally always been the enterprise of Western cisgender heterosexual White men, framed by the contexts of 'imperialism and nationalism in [19th century] Europe'.[102] In our contexts, where the modern Church reinforces the gendered dichotomy that 'looms so large in the idealised model of the family',[103] it is both radical and provocative to suggest that Jesus was not the perfect cisgender male that the Church holds him up to be. In a faith based on an image of Jesus that is gendered incredibly male, 'the gender issue is not just "an issue" to be added onto the list of issues within ethics and anthropology, but it changes Christian reflection and discourse in a ground-breaking way'.[104] This is why it is so vital to make these arguments – to conduct queer and trans readings of our holy texts and its figures. Sally Gross mentions that fundamentalist Christians are among those especially 'threatened' by the biological phenomenon of intersexuality, which then leads to the offering of scriptural grounds for the condemnation of intersex people, as being 'at odds with the will of God as expressed in the order of creation'.[105] If we respond to this tension with credible and interesting queer readings of the texts that these fundamentalists demand literalist

98. Reay L (2009) Towards a transgender theology, 155.
99. Brisson L (2002) *Sexual Ambivalence: Androgyny and Hermaphroditism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity* (trans. J Lloyd). London: University of California Press, 41.
100. Moxnes H (2004) Jesus in gender trouble, 42.
101. Moxnes H (2004) Jesus in gender trouble, 42.
102. Moxnes H (2004) Jesus in gender trouble, 32.
103. Gross S (1999) Intersexuality and scripture, 68.
104. Moxnes H (2004) Jesus in gender trouble, 31.
105. Gross S (1999) Intersexuality and scripture, 68.

approaches to, we can demonstrate that intersex people are just as divinely created as those who are unambiguously male or female. After all, the whole foundation of this particular reading rests on us taking a literalist approach to the passages that describe Mary as a virgin at the point of Jesus' conception. If we approach Luke 1.34 assuming that Luke only has Mary presented this way for the sake of a narratological or metaphorical point, the rest of this reading is made redundant. It is significant that queer readings can be found even in response to biblical literalism. By reading them, broadening our worldviews and moving beyond the socially constructed binaries that hold us back, we can experience the world in newer, richer ways. Contemporary representations of Jesus as transgressively intersex, queer, 'gender-bending, and gender-inclusive' are vital in 'enabling new social, theological, and artistic imaginations'.[106] Queer, trans and intersex bodies 'already map onto the mixed-up, much-inscribed Body of Christ';[107] reading Jesus in a queer space just reinforces this truth. If we counter the hostile atmosphere of cisheteronormative Church institutions with unconditional support for the queer, trans and intersex communities, we can begin to undo the damaging dualist worldviews that necessitate ostracising the 'other'.

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106. King KL (2019) Jesus, 422.
107. Cornwall S (2009) 'State of mind' versus 'concrete set of facts', 8.