

The Illegitimacy of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew

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Two of the gospels in the New Testament, Matthew and Luke, start with the story of Jesus' birth, a subject on which the rest of the New Testament is silent. Matthew and Luke both contain a scene in which an angel announces the birth of Jesus to one of his parents; in Matthew the announcement is made to Joseph, in Luke to Mary. The concern of this essay is the scene in Matthew, but we need to be familiar with both scenes to follow the discussion. The two scenes are quite different and each one needs to be understood in its particularity. Please note the italicized Greek words, as these will be crucial to the argument in this essay.

The Birth Announcement to Mary (Luke 1:26-35 NRS)

The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a girl (*parthenos*) betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The girl's name was Mary. He entered and said to her, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord be with you."

But she was deeply disturbed by these words, and wondered what this greeting could mean.

The angel said to her, "Don't be afraid, Mary. You see, you have found favor with God. Listen to me: you will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of David, his father. He will rule over the house of Jacob forever; and his dominion will have no end."

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I'm still a virgin?"

[*literally*: “since I do not know a man”]

The angel replied, “A holy spirit will hover over you, and the power of the Most High will cast its shadow on you. This is why the child to be born will be holy, and be called son of God.”

The Birth Announcement to Joseph (Matthew 1:18-25)

The origin of Jesus the Anointed is as follows: While his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before she moved into his house, she was found to be pregnant by a holy spirit. Although her husband Joseph was a righteous man, he did not want to expose her publicly; so, he planned to break off their betrothal quietly.

While he was thinking about these things, an angel surprised him in a dream with these words: “Joseph, son of David, don’t hesitate to take Mary as your wife, since she is pregnant by (*ek*) a holy spirit. She will give birth to a son and you will name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” All this happened in order to fulfill the prediction of the Lord through the prophet:

Look, a “virgin” [*parthenos*] will conceive a child
and she will give birth to a son,
and they will name him Emmanuel

(which means “God is with us”).

Joseph got up and did what the angel told him: he took Mary as his wife. He did not sleep with her until she had given birth to a son. Joseph named him Jesus.

Christianity has always understood Matthew’s infancy narrative to involve a virgin birth. After all, Matthew proclaims that Jesus’ birth fulfilled the prophecy that a virgin would conceive and give birth to a son. Moreover, Matthew’s report of an angel’s revelation to Joseph inevitably reminds us of Luke’s scene of Gabriel’s revelation to Mary, which plainly affirms that she will conceive while still a virgin. Since the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke, though different, are usually blended together in the Christian imagination, it is only natural for us to assume that the annunciations in Matthew and Luke are, in effect, different scenes from the same story and that they therefore mean the same thing.

But Matthew did not know Luke’s account, nor did Matthew’s original readers. For the sake of argument then, let’s pretend that all traces of Luke’s gospel have been lost and the only Christmas story we have is Matthew’s. (The other two canonical gospels, Mark and John, do not have stories of Jesus’ birth and show no traces of the belief that he was born to

a virgin.) What happens if we read Matthew on his own terms, without presupposing Luke's narrative?

If we do that, it is not at all apparent that Matthew is talking about a virgin birth. Until a few years ago I understood Matthew to say that Jesus had no human father, but in the course of doing research for my book *Born Divine* I gained two insights that led me to question this apparently obvious interpretation.¹ First, I discovered that the Greek word *parthenos*, traditionally translated as "virgin," did not mean what we do when we describe someone as a virgin. (More on this later.) Clearly that insight is important, because Matthew's use of the word *parthenos* in his quotation of the prophecy is a crucial element of the traditional consensus that he proclaims the virgin birth. The second insight occurred as I worked through ancient Greek and Roman stories about miraculous births, tales that verified what I previously suspected: that the motif of a child fathered by a god but born to a human mother was fairly common in the pagan world and served as an explanation for the extraordinary qualities of seemingly superhuman heroes. Since the gospel writer Luke was a Gentile, accounting for Jesus' conception in this way would hardly be incongruous since stories of gods begetting sons with human women were part of his cultural world. But for Matthew, whose religious sensitivities were acutely Jewish, the very idea of a virgin birth, i.e., of God fathering a child, would have seemed theologically dangerous because of its strong associations with pagan mythology. Besides, the thought of God involving himself sexually with a woman would have been highly disturbing, if not utterly blasphemous, to the Jewish imagination. (Luke, who believes that God was the sole cause of Mary's pregnancy, is nevertheless cautious to describe God's role in a totally non-physical way. In Luke 1:35 the angel explains to Mary, "The holy spirit will hover over you and the power of the Most High will cast its shadow over you.")

Jews were well aware that God occasionally arranged miraculous conceptions. The Old Testament has six stories about infertile women who were enabled to conceive by divine intervention: Rebecca, Leah, Rachel, the mother of Samson, Hannah, and especially Sarah.² But each of those miraculous conceptions involved intercourse with men. Miracles in the Hebrew Bible often involve human agents whose roles in no way diminish God's power. Abraham's fathering of Isaac was just as much a miracle as Moses' parting of the Sea of Reeds. No matter what a prophet or patriarch might do, a sea cannot be parted nor can an

infertile woman conceive unless God intervenes. So while Matthew had no problem believing that God was responsible for Jesus' conception, the notion that it had occurred without a human father was so overlaid with pagan concepts of divinity that Matthew would almost certainly have had serious theological reservations about it.

I am persuaded that Matthew did not intend to describe a virgin birth. I recognize that this goes against a deeply ingrained Christian tradition and therefore will seem counter-intuitive to many. I am also acutely aware that very few biblical scholars have taken this position. My proposal therefore bears a heavy burden of proof. In this essay I will summarize the arguments for my view and explain my objections to the traditional interpretation. I hope that my hypothesis makes better sense of the evidence than does the current consensus.

MATTHEW IS NOT LUKE

There is nearly unanimous consensus among biblical scholars that Matthew and Luke were unaware of each other's gospel. Therefore, the agreement between them about the circumstances of Jesus' conception seems at first glance to support the traditional interpretation. For while they concur on very little in their stories about the birth of Jesus, both report that Mary became pregnant while she was betrothed and that Joseph was not the father. It's unlikely that Matthew and Luke would have independently created scenarios in which Mary became pregnant without Joseph's involvement. It's doubly unlikely that both evangelists would have then coincidentally placed this occurrence during Mary's betrothal to Joseph. We can safely conclude, therefore, that this information came to Matthew and Luke from an earlier tradition. (That does not guarantee, of course, that this narrative detail is historically accurate; it means only that neither Matthew nor Luke invented it.) Luke certainly thinks that Jesus was born to a virgin (see Luke 1:34). Since Matthew agrees with Luke that Mary's pregnancy began during her betrothal and that Joseph was not involved in the conception, interpreters of Matthew have assumed that he also agrees with Luke in understanding those circumstances to imply a virginal conception.

However, the assumption that Matthew and Luke both knew a tradition about a virgin birth is just that: an assumption. It is a reasonable assumption, but not a necessary one. What Matthew and Luke actually share—and therefore took from tradition—is that

Mary conceived while she was betrothed to Joseph. It might be that both evangelists construed that scenario to indicate a virgin birth, but it might also be that Luke understands it that way and Matthew some other way. Which of these two possibilities is more likely remains to be seen.

BEHOLD A VIRGIN SHALL CONCEIVE

The greatest difficulty for the argument that Matthew does not believe in the virgin birth is posed by his quotation of Isaiah 7:14:

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means “God is with us.” (Matt 1:22-23, NRSV)

It is well known that Matthew’s quotation differs from Isaiah’s original in a key particular: Isaiah speaks of a “young woman” (Hebrew: עלמה *almah*) while Matthew refers to a “virgin” (Greek: παρθενος, *parthenos*). Matthew uses *parthenos* because that is the word he found in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint. From the way Matthew handles quotations from the Old Testament in his gospel, scholars can tell that, although he writes in Greek, he can read Hebrew and make his own translations from it when he chooses. His choice of the Septuagint wording in Matthew 1:23 therefore seems to indicate that he means to tell a story about a virgin birth. At least this is how Christian tradition has understood the Isaiah text. But the issue is not what Isaiah 7:14 has meant to Christians over the centuries; we need to know what it meant to Matthew and his original audience. Here it is especially important to remind ourselves of that distinction.

It will help if we put the shoe on the other foot. Instead of asking what Matthew 1:23 could intend other than the virgin birth, let’s ask this: Does the verse by itself make us think that Jesus was virgin born? In other words, if we read this verse without assuming that we already know what it means, would we conclude that it described a virgin birth? Perhaps; but only if two conditions were met. 1) The word “virgin” in Matthew would have to mean what we mean by it today. 2) “The virgin will conceive” would have to mean that she would conceive *and still remain a virgin*. Neither of these conditions holds up under scrutiny.

Scholars all but universally assume that when Matthew says, “the *parthenos* will

conceive,” he means, “the virgin will conceive.” A survey of Greek literature, however, shows that *parthenos* does not by itself denote what we mean today by “virgin.” Rather, it means a sexually mature young woman who has not yet had her first child. In the Septuagint it often means simply “young woman.” In those few passages in which it refers to virgins, that meaning must be inferred from the context. In those rare passages that draw attention to the woman’s virginity, *parthenos* is qualified with an added phrase: “a *parthenos* who has not known a man” (using the familiar biblical euphemism “know” to refer to sexual intercourse). After Luke introduces Mary as a *parthenos* (Luke 1:27), he makes sure his audience knows that this *parthenos* is a virgin by letting them overhear Mary’s strange question to the angel who tells her she will have a son: “How can this be since I have not known a man?” (Luke 1:34). Coming from a betrothed woman looking forward to starting a family with her husband, the question is utterly illogical. Its only purpose is to inform Luke’s audience that Mary is not yet sexually active (as betrothed people often were) and that she will conceive before sleeping with her husband. Two passages in the Septuagint prove that a woman who was *not* a virgin could be called a *parthenos*. In Genesis 34:3 the term refers to a rape victim after she has been violated and in Joel 1:8 it refers to a young widow: “Lament like a *parthenos* dressed in sackcloth for the husband of her youth.” The Greek literary data (scriptural and otherwise) show that a woman stops being a *parthenos* after having a baby, not after having intercourse. Thus in his Letter to the Smyrneans (13:1), Ignatius of Antioch, a second-century Christian bishop, used the term to refer to widows who have no children.

In short, *parthenos* can mean “virgin,” but only if the context demands it. This is perfectly illustrated by Matthew’s only other use of *parthenos*: in the parable of The Ten Bridesmaids (Matt 25:1-13). Five of the women in the parable are foolish and five are wise; all are called *parthenoi* (the plural of *parthenos*), but the parable clearly has nothing to do with virginity. In Matthew 1:23, then, is *parthenos* used in its general sense (young woman) or in its restrictive sense (virgin)? The word can legitimately be used in either way, but we should assume it is used in its general sense unless the passage indicates that Matthew intends otherwise.

Even if, for the sake of argument, we suppose that in 1:23 Matthew understood *parthenos* in the special meaning of “virgin” the meaning of “the virgin will conceive” is still

not clear. The “will” in “will conceive” produces ambiguity. Does Matthew mean that Mary will remain a virgin *after* the conception, i.e., that she will conceive without sexual intercourse?

The normal sense of “the virgin will conceive” connotes nothing miraculous. Someone who is now a virgin will conceive, but by then she will no longer be a virgin. We effortlessly understand such similar statements as “that bachelor will get married” and “that applicant will be hired.” In expressions like these, the “will” marks the event after which the description of the person can no longer apply. Well then, is Matthew using “the virgin will conceive” in this normal sense or is he describing a miracle? As before, the words by themselves can have either meaning, and so our decision about what Matthew means has to be made on other grounds.

What all this shows is that *nothing in Isaiah 7:14 would have required Matthew to understand it as the prediction of a virgin birth.* He *could* so interpret the text, but only if he read that meaning into it by both 1) taking *parthenos* in a specialized sense, and 2) construing “will conceive” to point to a miracle. In short, Matthew could find a virgin birth in this prophecy only if that was what he was looking for.

But if Matthew did not quote Isaiah 7:14 to signal a miraculous virgin birth, why did he include it? After all, the statement “a young woman will conceive and give birth to a son” is fulfilled every time a boy is born to a young mother. Since in their normal sense these words do not point to anything special about the birth of Jesus, something else in Isaiah 7:14 must have caught Matthew’s attention and fired his imagination, something else that highlighted for him how God was at work in the life of Jesus. I propose that the real reason for Matthew’s use of the Isaiah text is revealed by the context in which he introduces the prophecy. First, observe that it comes immediately after the explanation of Jesus’ name in 1:21, and then notice the precise symmetry between 1:21 and the quotation of the prophecy in 1:23:

She will give birth to a son
and you will name him Jesus,
for he will save his people from their sins. (1:21)

She will give birth to a son
and they will name him Emmanuel,
which means “God is with us.” (1:23)

The verbatim similarities in the first two clauses of each verse – the Greek words are identical except for the “you” and the “they” – show that Matthew wrote 1:21 to mirror the words of Isaiah in 1:23 and then added explanations of the meanings of “Jesus” and “Emmanuel” to ensure that his Greek-speaking audience would understand the symbolism of these Semitic names. Matthew’s primary interest in Isaiah 7:14 was not the word *parthenos*, but the rich symbolism of the name, Emmanuel. For Isaiah, the birth and unexpected survival of the child Immanuel in the house of David would be a sign that God was protecting his people and keeping faith with his promises. For Matthew, the birth of Jesus and his unlikely adoption by Joseph into the lineage of David was likewise a sign that God’s plan to save Israel was about to be fulfilled.

CONCEIVED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

It might seem to refute my argument that Matthew says Mary was pregnant “by (Greek: *ek*) the holy spirit” (Matt 1:18 and 1:20). Doesn’t that indicate a virgin birth? It could appear so, because in descriptions of conception or pregnancy, the preposition *ek* (which literally means “out of”) is a common way in Greek of denoting the natural father, as in “A was begotten by (*ek*) B.” Matthew’s use of *ek* signals that God, through his holy spirit, is responsible for the conception of Jesus.

But Matthew’s proclamation that Mary is pregnant “by the holy spirit” does not necessarily claim that Jesus has no human father. It is true that *ek* is a grammatically correct way to point to the man responsible for a pregnancy, but that is not the only way the expression functions in the Greek language. Moreover, there are good reasons to think that Matthew is *not* using this phrase to exclude a biological father for Jesus. Here we need to go slowly and examine several texts in detail. This may seem like a great deal of fuss over a two-letter word, but understanding the precise nuance of the *ek* is crucial to discerning the meaning of Matthew 1:18-25.

Four considerations lead to the conclusion that Matthew’s use of “begotten by the holy spirit” does not imply a virginal conception.

1. The Gospel and First Letter of John repeatedly assert that Christians are “begotten by (*ek*) the spirit” or “begotten by (*ek*) God.” Obviously, neither usage of *ek* connotes the

absence of biological fathers.

To those who believed in the light, it gave the right to become children of God.

They were not born from sexual union, not from physical desire, and not from male willfulness; they were begotten by (*ek*) God. (John 1:12–13)

Everyone who does justice is begotten by (*ek*) God. (1 John 2:29)

Love is from God, and everyone who loves was begotten by (*ek*) God. (1 John 4:7)

No one begotten by (*ek*) God sins; instead, the one begotten by (*ek*) God watches over him. (1 John 5:18)

2. The Hebrew Bible refers to kings as sons of God. One passage goes so far as to have God tell the newly-crowned king, “Today I have begotten you” (Psalm 2:6-7). Obviously, such passages do not imply that those to whom they refer are virgin born. Several other passages name God as the direct cause of specific pregnancies, when it is clear that the women have had intercourse with their husbands.

Adam had intercourse with his wife and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, saying, “I have made a man with the help of Yahweh.” (Genesis 4:1)

Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. He had intercourse with her, Yahweh made her conceive, and she gave birth to a son. (Ruth 4:13)

When Yahweh saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb. . . and Leah conceived and gave birth to a son. (Genesis 29:31–32)

Then God remembered Rachel. He heard her prayer and opened her womb. She conceived and gave birth to a son. (Genesis 30:22–23)

This Jewish way of thinking about God’s role in human conception is further evident in the New Testament when Paul describes Isaac as “begotten according to the spirit” and distinguishes him from Abraham’s other biological son, Ishmael, who was “begotten according to the flesh” (Galatians 4:29).

Such texts show us that Jews (including Jewish Christians like John and Paul) could speak of people as begotten by God or begotten by the spirit without imagining that they were born to virgin mothers. And Matthew is the most thoroughly Jewish author in the New Testament. It is clear that in his Jewish world the concept of divine begetting had

nothing to do with the physical circumstances of conception. Being begotten by God was never understood to exclude being begotten by a human male. In light of this, there is no reason for thinking that Matthew's description of the unborn Jesus as begotten by the holy spirit (Matt 1:18, 20) implies that he had no human father. If in these verses Matthew is referring to a virgin birth, he is using the language of divine begetting to mean something very different from what it means in every other passage in the Bible.

3. The annunciation scene in the second-century Infancy Gospel of James contains a fascinating bit of dialogue relevant to our topic. The angel tells Mary that she will conceive "by (*ek*) the word of God." Mary is puzzled and asks, "Am I going to conceive by the Lord, the living God, the way every woman does who gives birth?" (Infancy James 11:5-6). Mary believes what the angel says, but asks whether she will conceive the way all women do. The angel then explains that she will conceive without a man.

Suddenly an angel stood in front of Mary and said, "Don't be afraid, Mary. You see, you've found favor in the sight of the Master of all. You will conceive by (*ek*) his word."

But as she listened, Mary was puzzled and said, "*Am I going to conceive by the Lord, the living God, the way every woman does who gives birth?*"

And the angel replied, "No, Mary. The power of God will cast its shadow on you. And so the child to be born will be called holy, son of the Most High. You will name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins." (Infancy Gospel of James 11:5-8)

The Infancy Gospel of James was written in a non-Jewish setting long after Matthew's gospel. Yet the author was aware that the expression "to conceive by the word of God" was ambiguous enough, even to his Gentile audience who believed in Jesus' virgin birth, that he needed to narrow its meaning. He has Mary ask her question so that he can have the angel clear up the ambiguity. In short, he knew that the phrase "to conceive by the word of God" did not by itself exclude a human biological father.

4. One more biblical passage is directly relevant to understanding what Matthew means when he writes that Mary was pregnant by the holy spirit. That passage is found in Genesis 38, toward the end of the story of Tamar, one of the four women whom Matthew somewhat incongruously inserts into his genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:3). Tamar, in order to obtain the marital rights denied her by Judah, her father-in-law, became pregnant by disguising herself as a prostitute and luring him into incestuous intercourse. When her

pregnancy is discovered, Tamar is accused of being “pregnant by (*ek*) fornication” (Gen 38:24 Septuagint). Having no idea that he is the father of her child, Judah orders that she be put to death. When Tamar successfully defends herself by proving that she is “pregnant by (*ek*)” Judah, he declares, “Tamar is on the side of justice, but I am not” (Gen 38:25-26). Here we see two uses for the preposition *ek*, the second one to identify the man who participated in the conception, the first one to characterize its moral/spiritual *quality*.

We can be sure that Matthew knew Tamar’s story because he mentions her in the genealogy immediately preceding the annunciation to Joseph. Indeed, the suspicion that Mary is “pregnant by fornication” is exactly what readers are intended to imagine is weighing on Joseph’s mind. What else was he supposed to think? The revelation from the angel directly addresses his anxiety: Mary’s pregnancy is not “*ek* fornication,” as Joseph fears, but “*ek* the holy spirit.” Neither *ek*-phrase is meant to exclude male sexual complicity; rather, both phrases describe *what kind of* conception this is: sinful or holy. The angel tells Joseph, in effect, that regardless of how Mary became pregnant, her condition is now sacred. God has stepped in, has put this pregnancy under his protection, and plans to use it to serve his will. Joseph, a man *of justice* (Matt 1:19), is instructed to *do justice* (i.e., make things right)³ for the woman and her child, for God has chosen this child to be Israel’s savior.

Along with Tamar, three other women appear in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus: Rahab the prostitute, Ruth the seductress, and Bathsheba the rape victim (Matt 1:5, 6).

Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac of Jacob, Jacob of Judah and his brothers, and Judah and **Tamar** were the parents of Perez and Zerah. Perez was the father of Hezron, Hezron of Aram, Aram of Amminadab, Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, and Salmon and **Rahab** were the parents of Boaz. Boaz and **Ruth** were the parents of Obed. Obed was the father of Jesse, and Jesse of David the king. David and Uriah’s wife [**Bathsheba**] were the parents of Solomon .

.....

Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of **Mary**, who was the mother of Jesus. (Matthew 1:2-6, 16)

Since women were rarely included in ancient genealogies, it is clear that Matthew was making a point by adding them. But why these specific women? All four of them were

marked by sexual scandal or shame – hardly the kind of women one expects to be highlighted in the lineage of the Messiah.

Then, as soon as the genealogy is finished, Matthew begins his nativity story by describing a situation fraught with the potential for scandal and shame: Mary is pregnant, but not by Joseph, her betrothed. The significance of the women in the preceding genealogy now becomes apparent.

Mention of the four women is designed to lead Matthew's reader to expect another, final story of a woman who becomes a social misfit in some way; is wronged or thwarted; who is party to a sexual act that places her in great danger; and whose story has an outcome that repairs the social fabric and ensures the birth of a child who is legitimate or legitimated.⁴

On the other hand, if Matthew means that Mary's pregnancy was the result of a virginal conception, it is difficult to discern what connection he saw between Mary and the women in the genealogy. Their stories feature no divine interventions and no miracles. If Matthew had wanted to prepare readers for a miraculous birth, he could have mentioned Sarah, mother of Isaac, and Rachel, mother of Joseph – both of whom reportedly conceived through miracles – instead of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba.

VIRGIN BIRTH OR DIVINE FAVOR?

If we read Matthew's infancy narrative against its own Jewish background and not in the light of assumptions we might bring from Luke or the later Christian tradition, we find good reasons to conclude that Matthew was not talking about a virgin birth. First, nothing in the normal sense of Isaiah's prophecy points to such an event. The context in which Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14 indicates that his interest is focused on the symbolism of Emmanuel's name, not on the circumstances of his conception. Second, in Jewish contexts generally, and in biblical usage specifically, the language of divine begetting *never* suggests a virgin birth. Conception "by the holy spirit" indicates not the absence of a human father, but rather God's favor or blessing upon a normal human conception. Third, the women Matthew mentions in his genealogy of Jesus prepare us for sexual irregularity and a woman whose plight is set right, but clearly not for a miraculous virgin birth.

All this adds up to a strong case that Matthew did not have a virgin birth in mind when he wrote his gospel. The traditional view that his account describes a virgin birth has

no real basis in the text of his gospel, but derives largely from subsequent assumptions that he and Luke were telling the same story. But Luke's report that Jesus was born in the manner of pagan sons of God, the offspring of a human mother and a divine father, would have been repugnant to a pious Jew like Matthew. If we read Matthew 1:18-25 on its own Jewish terms, we have no reason to take it as a story about a virgin birth. Rather, Matthew's account of Jesus' conception was meant to show that even though his birth involved circumstances that might have been viewed by outsiders as less than honorable, it was nonetheless an act of God vital to the unfolding epic of the people of Israel.

NOTES

¹ Robert J. Miller, *Born Divine* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2003).

² Rebecca (Genesis 24:20-21), Leah (Genesis 29:31-32), Rachel (Genesis 30:22-23), mother of Samson (Judges 13:2-24), Hannah (1 Samuel 1:1-20), Sarah (Genesis 18:1-15, 20:1-7)

³ In biblical terms, a "just" man (*dikaios* in Greek, often translated as "righteous") is not only one who observes the Law. He is a righter of wrongs. In biblical language, to do justice is to intervene on behalf of the oppressed and the vulnerable and make things right for them, as God did in freeing the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt.

⁴ Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 33.