

'Behold, A Virgin Shall Conceive . . .'

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Has it ever seemed strange that Jesus Christ, our Savior, was born of a virgin? It is easy to pass off the virgin birth (Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38; 2:4-7) as a necessary part in the physical purity of the One who would be the sacrifice for mankind's sins, as well as a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. A moment's consideration, though, raises a few downsides to such an unusual situation—ones God, however, considered not important enough to concern Him.

The most obvious negative is the certain stigma and thus likely rejection of Jesus as illegitimate. Cultures throughout history have shunned and demeaned children born out of wedlock, branding them as born in sin and hindering their ability to succeed in life. If they are not given up for adoption, illegitimate children often face low-class-citizen status even within their own families, particularly from step-fathers and step-siblings. It is a singularly rotten way to start out in life. Jesus had to face an accusation of illegitimacy at least once during His ministry (see John 8:41), and at the top of His accusers' list of reasons must have been Deuteronomy 23:2, "One of illegitimate birth shall not enter the assembly of the Lord."

Another problem with the virgin birth is its lack of believability to carnal-minded people. One can almost hear the snickering and see the winking of the typical earthy recipient of this kind of news: "Yeah, I'm sure it was 'the power of the Highest' overshadowing her. Heh, heh, heh!" A cynic would expect a young, betrothed woman, caught in such a compromising situation, to make up a fantastic story to get herself off the hook. Yet Mary and her betrothed husband Joseph, certainly not flighty, immature children, were so convicted of their experiences with the angelic messengers that they stood by it—and the subsequent life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ corroborates their explanation entirely.

Still another complication is the plethora of supernatural births of messiah-figures in pagan literature. Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, Greece, Rome, Carthage, and many other ancient nations possessed stories of "sons of gods" mysteriously born into the world to save and rule their peoples. Although these stories do not describe true virgin births—they are predominantly products of intercourse between a god and a human maiden—they are close enough to warrant many raised eyebrows. The accounts in Matthew and Luke, however, are uniquely grounded in reality, sobriety, and majesty, setting them apart from the usually crass and sexual accounts of the heathen demi-gods' conceptions and births.

A final disadvantage to the virgin birth is its lack of verifiability. In essence, we have to take God's, Mary's, and Joseph's words for it, and skeptical people thus feel justified in writing it off as hearsay, fantasy, or contrivance. Because the first-century church made little mention of it, even many theologians dismiss the virgin birth as a later Christian interpolation to validate Jesus' Messiahship and to spice up His origins. In other words, it is a nice story but made up out of whole cloth. Yet, this conclusion neither takes account of the validity of prophecy nor of the many other signs of Jesus' authenticity as the Christ. It simply discounts the miraculous nature of Jesus altogether, while the internal evidence of Scripture conversely emphasizes it.

The Gospel Accounts

Matthew's account is plain and straightforward, as if he were laying out the facts in a court case, and in a way, he is building a case for the reader—particularly the Jewish reader—to accept Jesus as the Messiah. He takes great pains to present the facts that will show that Jesus fulfilled the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 to the letter. What is more, this is an event in which Jesus Himself is passive, having no active part in the fulfillment of the prophecy. This, of course, increases the improbability of its achievement by human manipulation.

Matthew mentions Mary's virginity several times. In Matthew 1:18, he writes, "After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, *before they came together*, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit." In verse 20, the angel verifies this fact by repeating that her conception occurred via supernatural means: "for that which is *conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit*." Verse 23 quotes Isaiah 7:14, "Behold, *a virgin shall be with child*, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel." Finally, in verse 25, Matthew reports that Joseph "*did not know her* [a euphemism for sexual intercourse] till she had brought forth her firstborn Son." In just eight verses, the apostle makes four either explicit or implicit references to Mary's virginity, not only at the time of conception, but also throughout her pregnancy and for some time beyond.

In Matthew, this passage does not stand alone; it is only one of several scenes, along with His genealogy, in the first two chapters that together provide overwhelming proof that Jesus fulfilled many of the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament before He was old enough to have a hand in orchestrating their fulfillments. The virgin birth, however, comes first as the most astounding of them all.

For his part, Luke treats his material with precision, dignity, and grandeur. He immediately gives concrete details of time and place, setting the miraculous in the real world (Luke 1:16-27). The speech of both the angel and Mary is measured and dignified, though he is careful to include the young woman's "troubled" reaction to the angel's greeting, her consternation that she could become pregnant while still a virgin, and her humble, Hannah-like acceptance of God's charge (verses 29, 34, 38). Luke does not overpaint the picture with gaudy details, reporting the simple yet astonishing announcement with respectful restraint, which adds to its solid reality.

Though the virgin birth is central to Luke's passage, its emphasis is not on the uniqueness of this situation but on the divinity, nobility, and capability of the One it will produce. This is God's way of putting matters in their proper perspective. The virgin birth is merely a miraculous means to an end—the advent of the Son of God in human form to perform the works that will bring salvation to humanity and eventually the Kingdom of God to this earth. Such a marvelous Person requires an astounding entrance to mark Him for His far-greater future accomplishments. The emphasis, then, is not on Mary and her condition but upon her divine Son and His purpose.

Finally, it should be noted that the angel admits that the virgin birth, along with Elizabeth's pregnancy in old age, are things men consider "impossible." His answer is to make us realize that in this matter we are not dealing with the things of men: "For with God nothing will be impossible" (verse 37). It is this assurance of God's ability to turn reality on its head—from a human perspective—that elicits Mary's declaration of faithful submission to God's will: "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word" (verse 38).

The Prophecy

Some commentators feel that the prophecy of the virgin birth appears within a longer prophecy that runs from Isaiah 7 through Isaiah 12. A theme that holds this seemingly disjointed prophecy together is a string of messianic prophecies, of which the virgin birth is merely the first (see Isaiah 7:14; 8:16; 9:2, 6-7; 11:1-5, 10). This is important in debunking a popular argument that the virgin-birth prophecy was only for the particular situation in Ahaz's day. The other nearby messianic prophecies weaken this contention considerably.

Like many Old Testament prophecies, the sign of the virgin birth has both a typical and an antitypical—or a near and a later—fulfillment. Ahaz (c. 731-715 BC) was afraid that the recent alliance between Israel and Syria would tip the balance of power and spell Judah's doom. God, however, assures Ahaz through Isaiah that no such thing would happen—in fact, within 65 years, Israel itself would be completely gone from the land (Isaiah 7:8)! The virgin birth, thought by some to be by a maiden within Ahaz's house, was a sign from God that He would surely bring this to pass. Further, before the child could dis-tinguish good from evil, both kings of Israel and Syria would be dead (verse 16; see II Kings 15:30; 16:9)!

Unfortunately, neither Isaiah nor the authors of the books of Kings and Chronicles document the fulfillment of this prophecy in Ahaz's time. We are left to assume that it indeed happened, or it would be a worthless sign to Ahaz. The virgin and her son Immanuel remain unknown in history.

The only other significant debate regarding this prophecy is the Hebrew word *'alm?*, translated "virgin." The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* comments:

Since *bet?l?* is used many times in the OT as a specific word for "virgin," it seems reasonable to consider that the feminine form of this word [*'alm?*] is not a technical word for a virgin but represents a young woman, one of whose characteristics is virginity. This is borne out by the fact that the LXX translates it as *parthenos* in two of its seven occurrences, and that its use in Isa 7:14 was quoted to Joseph by the angel as a prediction of the virgin birth. . . . There is no instance where it can be proved that *'alm?* designates a young woman who is not a virgin.

The Greek term for "virgin," *parthenos*, which Matthew uses in Matthew 1:23, has exactly the same meaning and nuances. Spiros Zodhiates writes in *The Complete Word Study New Testament*, "Generally it refers to a maiden or damsel of marriageable age," yet "particularly in the sense of one who has not known a man." The plain sense of both usages is that a literal virgin is meant. Otherwise, the sign becomes "no big deal"—thousands of young women have sons every day! But how often does a virgin bear a son?

Unlike the Catholic Church, the church of God, though believing in the virgin birth, does not make it a major doctrine. It is important as a proof of Jesus' Messiahship, and it adds detail to the transcendental nature of the Son of God. In the end, however, like Luke, we must place our focus on Him and the wonderful works He performed as a human being like us, as well as all the many things He does for us still as our High Priest before the Father.

Yes, a virgin did conceive and bear a Son—and what a Son!