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# The Virgin Conception

### A battleground

We should perhaps begin with a simple definition of the ‘problem’. Most people speak in terms of the virgin birth, as though there was something unusual in the Lord’s physical manner of birth. This has never been a question —Jesus was born in an entirely normal manner. It was the conception that led to the birth that was supernatural and so we should correctly refer not to the ‘virgin birth’ but to the ‘virgin conception’ and this is the term normally used in this book. To be precise, therefore, the Lord Jesus was conceived by the operation of the Holy Spirit without the co-operation of a human father. It is this simple truth to which most in the church lay hold.

In the UK in the mid 1980s a bishop was consecrated in the Church of England’s see of Durham who became for a short while a *cause celebre*, especially amongst segments of the press and media keen to undermine the authority of Scripture and exploit division within the church. He referred in a number of articles to what he considered to be the symbolic and mythological nature of the ‘story of the virgin birth’, opposing the views of those who were offended by his apparent denial of the straightforward biblical account —his own view being that many of the stories in the Bible are not literally true, but just inspired symbols of the activity of

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God. He considered parts of the Bible to be of the literary genre called ‘myth’ which seeks to set truth in historical form *without claiming that it is historical*. This particular bishop is mentioned here only because he was a well-publicised apologist for the idea that the ‘virgin birth’ was allegorical, not literal.

The first question to be considered, therefore, is whether the Gospel writers Matthew and Luke were deliberately writing myth when they recounted the virgin conception, and intended their readers to see it as such. Let us remind ourselves what they wrote:

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.

*Matt 1:18*

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one will be called the son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.”

*Luke 1:34-35*

Since the setting of both Matthew and Luke (and, for that matter, Mark and John as well) is quite clearly in a certain geographic place at a certain point in history, and since the Gospels in many places provide quite clear geo-political information, do we have any reason to assume that the authors weaved between two separate literary threads, one historic and the other ‘myth’ in order to present a synthesis that was to be accepted as ‘truth’ by their readers?

Critics who wish to pursue this line point towards the Jewish literary genre of *Midrash*, the method of biblical investigation in which oral tradition interprets and elaborates on scriptural text.

Midrash searched in particular for the spiritual truth contained in a biblical passage, rather than its literal interpretation. Critics have suggested that Matthew, especially, may have used this form of writing. There is no real evidence to support this view, however. Whilst Midrash *was* used in the first century AD, it did not reach its zenith of popularity until the second century. Midrash writers were embroidering the Old Testament with fiction, whereas Matthew was writing an account of the life of a contemporary man. There is no evidence that Matthew's readers understood him to be writing Midrash either at the time of writing or in the life of the early Christian church. On the contrary, the abundance of geo-political detail in the Gospels leads naturally to the conclusion that the writers were writing serious prose, not poetry.

Whilst much ink has been spilled on the battleground of the virgin conception, as opponents of the traditional view try to force in their favour the issue of 'myth' versus history, it must be said that the proponents of the myth theory muster no great weight of evidence to support their position. Indeed these critics might win more plaudits if they simply stated unequivocally that they cannot believe the biblical accounts because they do not believe in miracles —this would perhaps be a more honest approach to the question. Some who are (or claim to be) adherents of the Christian faith, maintain that the doctrine of the virgin conception is unimportant and that one can deny it and still be a mainstream Christian. In support of this they say that the virgin conception is only referred to in two New Testament Scriptures —Matt 1:18 and Luke 1:34-5, and only once in the Old Testament (Isaiah 7:14) and that therefore what the Bible deals with so scantily cannot be of great importance.

It is true that the virgin conception does not gain as much prominence in the New Testament as does Jesus' teaching, death and resurrection. But the account of the circumstances of Jesus' birth are not integral to the message of the New Testament in the way that His teaching, death and resurrection are. In the two Gospels where the virgin conception is mentioned, it is plainly taught, and the literal interpretation of the account has been

the universal understanding of the Christian church over two millennia. Are we to believe that God left His church floundering in erroneous understanding for all that time? It is also entirely congruous that the one who was simultaneously God and man should enter and leave His world in a supernatural way. It would seem bizarre, to say the least, that a holy God should look down over His creation with all the options no doubt at His disposal to manage the physical entry of His son into the world, and decide upon an illegitimate birth to be that method!

So, the virgin conception is directly mentioned only twice in the New Testament. Why, we might ask, do Mark and John not refer to the fact and why is it not mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament—most importantly in the writings of Paul? We should first remember that in English law silence may be construed as consent! An argument from silence, however, is unreliable. As John Stott comments in his splendid short book *The Authentic Jesus*, neither Mark nor John tell us anything about the childhood of Jesus, but we do not conclude from this that He never had one!<sup>1</sup> The fact that these writers do not refer to the virgin conception is actually quite irrelevant for the simple reason that neither Gospel writer chose to include anything about the Lord Jesus' birth and childhood; both, instead, begin their account with John the Baptist. It is significant, conversely, that the two Gospel writers who *did* choose to write an account of Jesus' birth were both quite clear that he was born of a virgin.

John Stott, in *The Authentic Jesus*, highlights three important factors to be taken into account in weighing the evidence for the virgin conception:

1. *The authenticity of the atmosphere*

The early chapters of Matthew and Luke present to us the last days of the Old Testament. Here we meet Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, Simeon and Anna—devout Old Testament believers, waiting with patience for the kingdom of God. The context is one of Old Testament piety, and the written style, language and structure is thoroughly Hebraic. Far from being

later inventions, these accounts give the strong impression that they were written very early in the Christian era. The narrative unfolds with simplicity and discretion. Certainly there were pagan myths of “gods” having sexual relations with human women, but in place of such crude and fantastic legends the Gospel writers are reticent, treating the sacred intimacies of the conception of Jesus with the utmost delicacy.<sup>2</sup>

### *2. The origin of the account of the virgin birth*

Matthew and Luke share the same essentials: both attribute Mary’s pregnancy to the action of Holy Spirit and both refer to the perplexities and problems which were caused by her virginity. The two accounts are independent, there being no serious evidence of collusion, yet complementary in content. Luke writes of the annunciation to Mary and of her concern at how she could be a mother when she was not yet married. Matthew, by contrast, writes of Joseph’s bewilderment on being told of Mary’s pregnancy, his difficult decision to quietly divorce Mary, and of the dream in which God instructs Joseph to take Mary home as his wife. It might be said, then, that Matthew tells Joseph’s story whilst Luke tells Mary’s.

### *3. The rumours of Jesus’ illegitimacy*

That the Lord Jesus was not the biological son of Joseph and Mary seems to be the prime indisputable fact about his birth. Had it been so, if in wedlock, then Jesus would have been born distinctly of the line of David both from His mother and His father, and this would have saved any controversy. If out of wedlock, the Gospel writers could easily have said, had they been false witnesses, that the marriage pre-dated the conception and no one would have been any the wiser, thus obtaining the benefits of an in-wedlock birth. Why should they have invented an otherwise remarkable story and so made themselves ‘hostage to fortune’? They obviously believed the facts they were given and so the only choice before us, as readers of their accounts, is between the virgin birth and an illegitimate birth.

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We have already alluded to the seemingly incongruous idea that God should choose a birth out of wedlock (i.e. a circumstance of birth that runs counter to His will, to the teaching of the Old Testament and an action on the part of the parents that would therefore have been sinful) to be the manner in which to bring His sinless Son into the world. John Stott clinically reviews the evidence that deliberate slurs were being made about Jesus' birth during His own lifetime. For example, when Jesus declared that certain disbelieving Jews did not have Abraham as their father but rather the devil, they responded, 'we are not illegitimate children' —which appears to be an innuendo that He was (John 8:41). On another occasion, this time in Nazareth – His own home town – when the people were offended by His teaching, they asked contemptuously, 'Isn't this Mary's son?' (Mark 6:3). As Stott says, in a patriarchal society this was a deliberate insult; the insinuation could not have been missed. On a third occasion, whilst interrogating the man born blind, whom Jesus had healed, his interrogators shouted at him: 'We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from' (John 9:29).

Rumours about the circumstances of Jesus' birth carried on long after the death of all the apostles. In the Jewish Talmud these rumours became explicit. The Christian scholar Origen in the third century had to respond to a jibe by the critic Celsus that Joseph had turned Mary out of his home because she had committed adultery with a soldier named Panthera. Stott asks how these hints and slanders could have arisen unless it was common knowledge that Mary was pregnant at the time when Joseph married her. However distasteful this gossip is, there can be no doubt it is corroborative evidence of the virgin conception.<sup>3</sup>

### **The importance of the virgin conception**

We have already seen that some argue that what the Bible treats so scantily, we need not be too concerned about. Most Christians would reply that the doctrine of the virgin conception is indeed of fundamental importance because only in this way can we begin

to understand how God the second person in the Trinity, could become man and take human nature into *eternal union* with His divine nature. If the virgin conception is false we have much less ground on which to base another central reality of Christ, that of His sinlessness and of course the legitimacy of His birth, as we have seen, then comes into question. The virgin conception is important, then, because it helps to explain the rather greater miracle of the Incarnation.

The correct placing of the verses which tell of the virgin conception in the original texts (Matthew 1:18 and Luke 1:34-35) has never been seriously doubted. Practically every ancient manuscript includes them, except a mutilated copy of a manuscript of the Ebionites (a Jewish/Christian sect that denied Christ's deity and which deleted many other things that also referred to His deity), and one Syriac reading of Matt 1:18 which is certainly wrong, but which critics sometimes claim may have predated other manuscripts: it says that Joseph begat Jesus – but then goes on to narrate the virgin birth – something the critics are less willing to own up to!

The Gospel writer Luke was, as we know, a physician and therefore an educated man, who accompanied the apostle Paul on his missionary journeys. These journeys encompassed many of the locations where the Gospel events took place. Whilst Paul was in prison in Caesarea, undergoing some protracted investigations by the Roman procurators Felix and Festus (see Acts 24 and 25) Luke may well have had time to travel within Judaea, Samaria and Galilee to interview surviving witnesses —as he wrote, “I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning” (Luke 1:3).

These witnesses may have included Mary herself. Allowing that Mary was no more than eighteen years old in 6 to 5 BC when Jesus was probably born, and knowing as we do that Luke accompanied Paul on his second missionary journey, AD 49-52, then Mary would have been in her late sixties at the time when Luke had an opportunity to meet her. Obviously this is supposition, but irrespective of this there would, without doubt, have been plenty

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of eyewitnesses still alive at the time. It is simply not possible that the apostle Paul, of whom Luke was a close companion over a number of years (see Col 4:14; 2 Tim 4:11; Philemon 24), was unaware of the virgin conception, yet nowhere in his writings does he seek to deny it. If anything he confirms it, as he writes to the Galatians (Gal 4:4), “when the time had fully come, God sent His son, *born of a woman*, born under law....” It is difficult to see why Paul would otherwise have made this statement unless it was to affirm that the Lord’s conception was undertaken in a supernatural manner.

The doctrine of the virgin conception is important because it is clearly implied throughout the New Testament. In this respect it is similar to the doctrine of the Trinity which is also everywhere implied in the Bible but nowhere expressly stated. (The passage in 1 John 5:7 is not found in any reliable Greek manuscript and is rightly omitted from modern versions —though the questionable rendering is provided as an interesting footnote in the New International Version of the Bible). Paul, for example, believes in the real human birth of the Lord Jesus and in His deity. So in Romans 1:3-4 he says that Christ, “as to his human nature was a descendant of David,” yet, “through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead”. In Galatians 4:4 we read that, “God sent his son, born of a woman, born under law.” In 2 Timothy 2:8 Paul reiterates his doctrinal position: “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel .....” The writer of Hebrews affirms the same thing: “since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity” (2:14).

The virgin conception is also implied in the Gospel and epistles of John. Although no direct reference to the virgin conception is made as we have seen, it is also true that John omits to mention the temptations and the transfiguration —two other important facets of Jesus’ life and ministry. John does not repeat facts already well known, nor details supplied by the other three evangelists who wrote before him. He implies his readers already know about baptism and even his doctrine of the Logos—the Word. John adds



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detail only to those aspects that illustrate his thesis that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). John nevertheless places emphasis on the fact of Christ’s genuine humanity and His absolute deity—both implying one common foundation, that of His virgin birth. The following verses from John’s writings illustrate the point:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

*John 1:14*

The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.

*1 John 1:2*

This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God.

*1 John 4:2-3*

This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.

*1 John 5:6*

The creeds of the early Christian church refer plainly to Christ as ‘conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary’ which shows that the doctrine was an integral belief of the early Roman church and part of its baptismal confession of faith. The fact that the creed was used as part of the baptism rite suggests that it had already become an essential part of accepted doctrine. A creed is simply crystallised belief and crystallisation takes time.

As Justin Martyr and Ignatius quote the creed in their writings,

and the latter died no later than AD 117, we may reasonably conjecture that the creed was in use by AD 100. Note also that the apostles' creed contains only the barest necessities, so we may assume that the virgin conception was from early times reckoned to be among the essentials of the Christian faith. Finally, since the Roman church was at this time the centre of Christianity, we may reckon that belief in the virgin conception was held by the entire church at that time.

### **The scriptures concerning the Virgin Mary**

Let us look again at the three main Scriptures concerning the virgin conception. The words in parentheses are added by the author to assist explanation:

#### **Matt 1:18-25    Joseph's dream and decision**

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin [ Greek *parthenos* Ed ] will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel —which means "God with us."

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

**Luke 1:26-37    Annunciation of birth of Jesus Christ,  
Mary, Elizabeth, Mary's song**

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendent of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the son of the Most High. The Lord will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end."

How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one will be called the son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

**Isaiah 7:10-17**

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, "Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or the highest heights." But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test."

Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The Virgin [*Ed.* Hebrew *almah*] will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. The Lord will bring on you and your people and on the

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house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah —he will bring the king of Assyria.

The historical situation presented in the book of Isaiah concerns the fortunes of Israel, then divided into two opposed kingdoms of Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Isaiah, as God's prophet, has been told by God to meet King Ahaz of Judah just outside the city of Jerusalem at the spring he was planning to divert and seal up against an attack by his enemies, the axis formed by the coalition of Israel and Syria. To repel this invasion, king Ahaz of Judah contemplated calling Assyria to his aid, something which God opposed. It was as if to defend himself against two fierce little puppies that a man should summon a wolf —something he obviously would not be able to control, and which would have dire long term consequences for Judah.

God accordingly told Ahaz through the prophet Isaiah not to ally himself with Assyria but that instead He, God, would save Judah. He promised that, to strengthen Ahaz's weak faith, He would grant any sign Ahaz asked for. Ahaz refused because he was determined not to trust God. Isaiah then said that God Himself would give Ahaz a sign. A virgin (Hebrew *almah*) would bear a son and before he was old enough to know the difference between right and wrong (presumably three years) the Israel/Syria coalition would be overthrown by Assyria.

We read in Isaiah chapter 8 how a child, not necessarily the same one, was to be called Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (Hebrew *quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil*) and how he was born to a prophetess (Isa 8:1-3). Twice the name Immanuel is used in chapter 8 (in verses 8 and 10) in the context of the thwarting of Ahaz's rebellious plans. Thus there was a double-fulfilment of this prophecy – as so often is the case with such messianic prophecies – one in the near term, answering the disbelief and rebellion of king Ahaz and one eight hundred years later when the name Immanuel would be understood in all its glory. As always, the scholar Alfred Edersheim has a perceptive comment on the real meaning of these prophecies. Referring to Joseph's dream and

decision (in Matthew, above) he writes: “Viewing events, not as isolated, but as links welded in the golden chain of the history of the kingdom of God, ‘all this’ not only the birth of Jesus from a Virgin, not even His symbolic name with its import, but also the unrestful questioning of Joseph, ‘happened’ in fulfilment of what had been prefigured (Isa 7:14). The promise of a virgin-born son as a sign of the firmness of God’s covenant of old with David and his house; the now unfolded meaning of the former symbolic name of *Immanuel*; even the unbelief of Ahaz, with its counterpart in the questioning of Joseph —‘all this’ could now be read in the light of the breaking day. Never had the house of David sunk morally lower than when, in the words of Ahaz, it seemed to renounce the very foundation of its claim to continuance; never had the fortunes of the house of David fallen lower, than when a Herod sat on its throne, and its lineal representative was a humble village carpenter, from whose heart doubts of the Virgin-Mother had to be Divinely chased.....But as nevertheless, the stability of the Davidic house was ensured by the future advent of *Immanuel* —and with such certainty that, before such a child could even discern between the choice of good and evil, the land would be freed of its dangers; so now all that had been prefigured was to become literally true, and Israel would be saved from its real danger by the advent of Jesus, Immanuel. And so it had all been intended.”<sup>74</sup>

Critics, in attacking the biblical account of the virgin conception, often argue that the Greek word *parthenos* in the New Testament translated ‘virgin’ actually means ‘young girl’. This is disingenuous. Both the word and the context make it quite obvious that in Luke 1:34, in her exchange with the angel, Mary was referring to the fact that she had had no physical relationship with a man.

Furthermore, the word *parthenos* always and unequivocally means virgin. It is interesting, in this regard, that the Hebrew word translated virgin in the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 is *almah*. The word *almah* usually, though not invariably, signifies a virgin. It was translated in the Greek Septuagint by the uncompromising word *parthenos*, which has only one meaning. The Septuagint

was the Hellenist Jews' standard translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek until the first century AD. As Christians used the word *parthenos* to defend the virgin conception of the Lord Jesus and made the Septuagint generally the Christian Bible, and as the Hebrew text was in any case undergoing revision in the first century, the Jews ceased to use the Septuagint and prepared a succession of other Greek translations, in which *almah* was translated not by *parthenos* but by *neanis* —a young woman, presumably (but not inevitably) unmarried.<sup>5</sup>

### **The significance of the Annunciation**

The words of the conversation between Mary and the angel Gabriel that are recorded in Luke are heavy with scriptural and spiritual significance. The economy of the conversation – there are a little over one hundred and sixty words between them in an English translation – but the extraordinary spiritual scope that these few words convey, bear testimony to the inspired nature of the conversation itself, and the record that we have of it. This, in turn, adds weight to the normal Christian view that the account of the virgin conception we have is both accurate and truthful. Let us look again at the verbal exchange: the angel's disclosure to Mary of God's purpose was in two stages. The first emphasised her child's continuity with the past, because *she* would bear Him. The second laid emphasis on His discontinuity, His uniqueness, because the Holy Spirit would overshadow Mary.

In the first stage (verses 30-34), the angel told Mary that she would conceive and bear a son. The child, to be named 'Jesus', would be 'great', and would be called 'the son of the Most High'. This was a reference to His messianic ministry as Saviour. The angel said that Jesus would occupy the throne of His father David (verse 32) and would reign over the house of Jacob forever. In this way we can deduce that Jesus would inherit from His mother His humanity *and* title to the royal throne. Certainly this appears to be the implication, and the apostle Paul was later to underline this view when he wrote, "as to his human nature he was a descendant of David" (Rom 1:3). We already know that Joseph was also a

descendant of David (Matt 1:20) and by accepting Jesus as his son Joseph gave Him all the legal rights of legitimate sonship (see below the legal basis on which this was achieved).

In the second stage (verse 35) the angel continued by explaining that the Holy Spirit would come upon Mary and that the *power* of the Most High – and in this we understand His *creative* power – would overshadow her. The deduction from this is that the ‘holy one’ (a reference to the Lord’s sinlessness) will be called the ‘son of God’ and in this we perceive a deeper meaning than simply His messianic title. John Stott in *The Authentic Jesus* points out that what was announced to Mary was that her son’s humanity and messiahship would be derived from her. She would conceive and bear Jesus, whilst his deity and sinlessness would be derived from the Holy Spirit who would powerfully overshadow her. Jesus’ continuity with humanity would be traced from his natural birth via Mary, but his newness or discontinuity was via his supernatural conception by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus would be descended from Adam by his birth, but was also the second Adam – the head of a new humanity – by his conception by the Holy Spirit. As a result of the virgin conception the Lord Jesus was at one and the same time Mary’s son and God’s Son, human and divine. He was the Messiah descended from David and the sinless Saviour of sinners. As John Stott concludes, God is both sovereign and free in the choices He makes. He could perhaps have achieved all this in some other way, but the New Testament evidence remains clear that he chose to bring his Son into the world through a normal birth via a virgin conception. It is not difficult to understand its reasonableness and the appropriateness of this course.<sup>6</sup>

### **Compatibility of the virgin conception and the Messiah’s descent from David**

We consider once again that, had the Gospel writers wanted to falsely present Jesus as Messiah, they could quite simply have secured all the necessary Jewish and scriptural credentials for Him by referring to His ancestry via Joseph and Mary, and presenting

to the world a ‘normal’ birth. Prima facie the virgin conception appears to deny His descent from David —so why should the Gospel writers introduce such a difficulty? The answer is surely that they did so because they believed it was true and, in honouring Jesus who was Himself ‘the truth’ (John 14:6) they unashamedly present this truth, irrespective of the difficulties it introduces.

The virgin conception, as should now be abundantly clear, removes Joseph’s biological role in the procreative process which means that *in a physical sense*, Jesus was arguably not the ‘son of David’. How do the Gospel writers then think of Jesus as ‘son of David’? As noted in the previous chapter Bishop Paul Barnett has commented with precision on this very issue: how could the Gospel writers Matthew and Luke have thought of Jesus as the “son of David”, when Joseph was not Jesus’ biological father? A serious question, the answer to which must be that Joseph was the legal father, if not the biological father. Joseph transmits to Christ his ‘crown rights’ as Joseph represented, in himself, the regal-legal line. Being a direct descendant of David through Solomon he possessed the crown rights. “But for the misfortune of his race” writes H. Brash Bonsall, “he would have been known not as the carpenter of Nazareth but as King Joseph I and, by Jewish law, he could pass on these rights to his foster son, Jesus the Christ.”<sup>8</sup> We see then, that there is no legal incompatibility between the virgin conception and the Lord Jesus’ descent from King David.

### **Modern attacks on the Virgin Birth**

Attacks upon the ‘virgin birth’ are almost as old as Christianity. What we tend to see is a repetition of arguments that have been heard and answered in the past, but which, to each new generation, may appear to be genuine new arguments. It also needs to be said that because of widespread and significant ignorance of what the Bible *actually* says and how attacks upon the Bible have been answered in the past, these common forms of attack may appear to casual observers to be quite compelling. Sadly, many churchgoing Christians have not much troubled themselves to look in detail at this key area of the virgin conception and consider it to be



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the responsibility of theologians to sort out! This is a great pity, as it means that they are themselves often ill-prepared to meet challenges to their own faith. It may confidently be predicted that many of the arguments we are about to consider will be heard again in the future. So the virgin conception, along with the resurrection, the creation, and the authority of the Bible will always be battlegrounds for Christians. Each new generation will find itself fighting the same old battles!

Attempts to brush off the historicity of the biblical records need to be treated with some scepticism. As we look at the arguments of the sceptics we need to ask ourselves: exactly who are these ‘scholars’ —if indeed they claim to be such? What are their qualifications? Do they have a hidden agenda? If they claim text-tampering on the part of the church, precisely *what* records indicate there were later changes? What is the weight to be attached firstly to ‘evidence’ they are able to present and secondly to the existing and widely accepted manuscript evidence? Bear in mind, it is easy for ANYONE to ‘rubbish’ the biblical (or any historical) account—but exactly where are these people coming from? What is their own agenda?

The current attack on Mary coalesces around the following propositions:

1. The virgin birth was not prophesied.
2. The prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 is a false translation.
3. The name Immanuel appears only once in Matthew and is a quotation of a false translation of Isaiah.
4. Immanuel was born at the time of Isaiah and not later.
5. Immanuel was not perfect.
6. The word *almah* normally means ‘young woman’ and not ‘virgin’.
7. A number of other ancient stories involve ‘virgin births’.

We will examine these propositions in turn:

**1. ‘The virgin birth was not prophesied’**

Critics seek to undermine the prophecy in Isaiah 7: 14 (“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” – NIV). We saw in an earlier study that there was in fact an historic context in which Isaiah gave this message from God to king Ahaz. But the first thing to observe about the passage is that it is at the beginning of a fairly lengthy series of chapters, not just verses, which are almost totally messianic in content. These take us through to Isaiah chapter 11 (although there are messianic prophecies throughout Isaiah; readers interested to see the full scope of these are referred to Appendix 9 of Alfred Edersheim’s *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*) but the particular verse in question was *not* seen by first century Jews as being messianic. This fact undermines any view that Matthew was trying to ‘fit’ Jesus’ life into a pattern of known messianic prophecies. It was only in retrospect that the Gospel writers saw the connection, referred to above, between the Lord Jesus and Isaiah’s verse concerning Immanuel.

Critics argue that the infant referred to in Isaiah 7 is the child born in Isaiah chapter 8. This is possible, but unlikely. Even if it was the same child, this does not undermine the fact that the prophecy had both a near-term and a long-term outworking. It should be noted that the child in chapter 8 was given an entirely different name, at God’s instruction, being Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz - a name with a meaning connected to the defeat of the Israel/Syria axis which was then poised against Judah. To most Christians, the linkage of the verse in Isaiah 7 to the beginning of a series of messianic prophecies, and the fact that Matthew recognised it as such, seems entirely reasonable.

**2. ‘The prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 is a false translation’**

This is connected with objection 6 below, so the two are dealt with together. We have already seen the normal meaning of *almah* is a virgin. The fact that later Jewish translations of the word in the key verse in Isaiah changed it from *almah* to *neanis* – a young woman – speaks volumes. The normal meaning of the word and

the context make the normative Christian interpretation beyond reasonable dispute.

**3. ‘The name Immanuel appears only once in Matthew and is a quotation of a false translation of Isaiah’**

Immanuel – *God with us* – is used only once in the New Testament and twice in the Old —both times in Isaiah. The fact that Jesus is *only* referred to as Immanuel in the context of the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy is by no means extraordinary. More than fifty titles are applied to the Lord Jesus in the pages of the New Testament, and most are used only once or twice. But Jesus’ deity – the fact that He *is* God with us – is referred to everywhere in the New Testament, both directly and by implication.

By the sovereign action of God, a virgin was able to conceive and give birth —no human father was involved. Why is this significant? The *name* Immanuel tells us: *God* with us —there is, realistically, no other way for this to be true other than by a virgin birth. *God with us* —born of a human mother. One hundred per cent human and one hundred per cent God.

**4. ‘Immanuel was born at the time of Isaiah and not later’**

This was dealt with in (1) above.

**5. ‘Immanuel was not perfect’**

The reasoning here is that in Isaiah 7:16 the prophet refers to the child Immanuel not knowing the difference between right and wrong. Since Jesus was born as a human being and had in every sense a normal childhood except that He did not sin, we may assume that, as a normal baby, infant and child, there were times when He did not fully know the difference between right and wrong. The Bible’s claim is only that He did not sin, not that He had supernatural understanding from his first day of life! Furthermore, allowing that the child referred to as Immanuel in King Ahaz’s day was not Jesus (and nobody thinks that he was!) we might conjecture that this child, as he grew up, also had to make choices between right and wrong and sometimes, as a result,

he sinned! Never lose sight of the fact that the first outworking of the prophecy, in the life of King Ahaz, was simply that before ‘Immanuel’ was fully able to discern the difference between right and wrong, Judah’s enemies would be defeated. And indeed they were.

**6. ‘The word *almah* normally means “young woman” and not “virgin”’** This was dealt with in (2) above.

**7. ‘A number of other ancient stories involve “virgin births”’**

They do. However these stories were fantastic, not to mention in some cases extremely crude. They were myth and no doubt understood as such. Those who quote such stories (especially on the internet) may make themselves sound very knowledgeable but a quick check against even non-specialist publications such as the Encyclopaedia Britannica, reveal serious misquotes and wrong dates attributed to these stories. The big difference we need to keep in mind is that these myths developed and evolved over (in some cases) many centuries. There is no equivalence with the Bible’s near contemporary eyewitness reports and an acknowledged and carefully guarded canon of scripture.

## **Conclusion**

That non-Christians should have difficulty with the virgin conception is not, at first sight, surprising. It is hoped that in this chapter, as elsewhere in this book, the reliability of the Gospel witnesses and the appropriateness of the action of God in bringing His Son into the world in this way, has been demonstrated. The disbelief of those – and in fact it is only a very few – who claim to be adherents of the Christian faith is rather more surprising, in particular because it calls into question just what sort of a ‘god’ they actually believe in. Critics of the biblical account of the virgin conception need to answer some serious questions:

\* Why should the gospel writers invent a fable, knowing it would invite adverse comment, even ridicule?

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- \* Why did a doctor such as Luke, an educated man, risk his reputation by reporting the story—and reporting it as fact?
- \* Why was the account of Jesus' birth not omitted by the early church from its creeds? By this time it was indeed drawing unfavourable comment.
- \* Why has the church always treated Mary with the utmost reverence, if she was no more than a loose woman?

It was a blessed duty and honour for Mary to bear the Christ child. We have already seen in Chapter 7, that the virgin conception has always been a battleground for Christians and their critics, and a truth of great importance to defend. We may recognise in some Bible-detractors unbelief borne first and foremost from a lack of personal knowledge and experience of God. But we should not forget that all attacks on truth *ultimately* have one source: "He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). We should perhaps spend a few moments reflecting on what Jesus Himself said about the devil and 'the devil's children'. This is found in John 8:42-47 (*italics added*):

Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? *Because you are unable to hear what I say.* You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? He who belongs to God hears what God says. *The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.*"

This stark and simple statement by the Lord Jesus helps us to understand from where all untruth originates and why those

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who are not *born again*, to use Jesus' own term, cannot fully understand spiritual truth (see also 1 Cor 2:14; 2 Cor 4: 4; Rom 8:5-8). Reading this we might panic and ask, as the disciples did, "who then can be saved?" (Matt 19:25). Jesus' answer to them is an encouragement to all people, everywhere. Look it up and see for yourself! We need to keep in mind that for truth such as the virgin conception to be fully understood, as opposed to partly understood, the Father must 'draw' us to enable us to come to Him. (John 6:44f.)

We have referred several times in this chapter to John Stott's excellent short book *The Authentic Jesus*, which includes a chapter on the virgin conception. In relation to the so-called 'liberal' wing of the church, which tends to disbelieve the biblical account of Christ's birth, Stott's concluding remarks are telling. He comments that as Christians we need the humility of Mary who so completely accepted God's purpose for her life in that simple response, 'May it be to me as you have said.' There is a common tendency today to reject the virgin conception because it does not mesh neatly with our modern prejudices. Many reject miracles in general and the virgin conception in particular, because they believe the universe to be a closed system and fail to see the anomaly of dictating to our Creator God what he is permitted to do in His own creation. It would certainly be more modest to imitate Mary's faithful response of submissiveness to God's revelation.

Mary had great courage: she was so willing for God to fulfil his purposes that she was prepared to risk the social stigma of being an unmarried mother, thought an adulteress and being seen as having borne an illegitimate child. She surrendered her reputation to God's will. Perhaps the major cause of theological liberalism is that some scholars care rather more for their own reputation than for God's revelation. It is frankly hard to be ridiculed for being credulous enough to believe in miracles and some theologians are undoubtedly tempted to sacrifice the biblical account of Christ's birth on the altar of their own respectability. Theologian John Stott acknowledges how strong this temptation can be, but concludes that ultimately it is more important that we allow God to be God

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and to do things His way, even if by so doing we share with Mary the risk of losing our own reputation.<sup>9</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Stott *The Authentic Jesus* (Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1985), p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 62.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.* *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, p. 110.

<sup>5</sup> This again shows how early the fact of the virgin conception had become an issue between Christians and Jews.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.* *The Authentic Jesus*, p. 65.

<sup>7</sup> See Paul Barnett *Bethlehem to Patmos* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> H. Brash Bonsall *The Person of Christ* Volume 1: The Doctrine (CLC, 1967), p. 44.

<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.* *The Authentic Jesus*, pp. 66f.

