

Why Did Jesus' Mom Need to Be a Virgin?

Vintage Jesus, week 11

December 17, 2006

Pastor Mark Driscoll

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.

— Isaiah 7:14

Each Christmas the world celebrates the birth of Jesus to His young mother, Mary, and homes are adorned with nativity scenes. Nonetheless, the virgin birth of Jesus remains the second most controversial miracle in all of history, following the resurrection of Jesus from death. Therefore, we will examine both what Scripture does and does not teach about the virgin birth of Jesus.

Part 1 – What Scripture does teach about the virgin birth of Jesus

Genesis 3:15 *“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”*

Here God promises that Jesus would be born from a woman. This is unusual because the rest of Scripture speaks of children as being born from their father (e.g., Genesis 5; 11), but here no father is mentioned for Jesus. This infers that He would not have a biological earthly father. Paul speaks in this same manner in Galatians 4:4, “But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman . . .”

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.*

This verse is the most hotly debated Old Testament verse regarding the virgin birth of Jesus, for two reasons in particular. First of all, some contend that the prophecy was not speaking of future events but rather the birth of the son of Ahaz. That is half true. An examination of the entire context (Isaiah 7:10–14) reveals that the prophecy has a dual fulfillment; it speaks of the birth of a son to “Ahaz” as well as the birth of the Messiah to the “house of David.” Furthermore, by naming the son “Immanuel,” God is promising more than just a male son because Immanuel means “God is with us.” This points to the son being God. Moreover, a few pages later, in Isaiah 9:6–7, we read, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.”

Secondly, some contend that the prophecy in Isaiah does not refer to a virgin. This is because the Hebrew word that is used in Isaiah 7:4, “almah,” typically means young woman and not virgin, whereas the Hebrew word “betulah” typically means virgin. However, there are three reasons why the verse should be read as referring to a virgin. First, even if the word does mean young woman, that does not mean that she would not be a virgin. In that day, most young women were virgins, making the terms synonymous for many young

women. Second, the word “almah” is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to refer specifically to a young virgin woman. One clear example is Rebekah: “The girl was very beautiful, a virgin [betulah]; no man had ever lain with her” (Genesis 24:16). We then read in Genesis 24:43 that Rebekah was a “maiden” [almah]. Therefore, the two words are occasionally synonymous in Scripture. Third, in the New Testament, Isaiah 7:14 is clearly interpreted to be a prophetic promise about the birth of Jesus to the young virgin Mary (Matthew 1:18–25; Luke 1:26–38).

Part 2 – What Scripture does not teach about the virgin birth of Jesus

1. Scripture does not teach that Mary did not have a normal delivery.

Some Catholic theologians have taught that Jesus was not born in the normal fashion through Mary’s birth canal. Rather, they say He was born much like a miraculous c-section. However, nothing in Scripture says this, but instead contradicts it, saying in Micah 5:2–3, “‘But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.’ Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor gives birth and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.”

2. Scripture does not teach that Jesus’ virgin birth was a myth taken from other religions.

In mythology there are stories like Zeus begetting Hercules and Apollo begetting Ion and Pythagoras. As a result, some have speculated that Christians stole the virgin birth story from such myths. This speculation must be rejected on three grounds. First, some of the myths came after the prophesy of Isaiah 7:14 and therefore could not have been the origination of the story. Second, the myths speak of gods having sex with women, which is not what the virgin birth account entails (despite the peculiar Mormon belief that a physical God the Father came down and had actual intercourse with the human Mary, which did not negate her virginity because having sex with a god somehow does not count as sex). Third, the myths do not involve actual human beings like Mary and Jesus, but rather fictional characters.

3. Scripture does not teach that belief in the virgin birth proves the deity of Jesus.

Some, including Gregory the Great, have reasoned that the virgin birth is proof that Jesus was and is God. But ancient heretics, such as the Arians, their contemporary counterparts, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and some Muslims all believe in the virgin birth of Jesus while rejecting His full divinity.

4. Scripture does not teach that Jesus’ virgin birth was needed to keep Him from having a sin nature and therefore sinless.

A commonly held position by many Christian theologians such as Augustine, Ambrose, Aquinas, and Luther is that Jesus had to be born of a virgin because the sin nature is imparted through the male line. This required that Jesus could not have an earthly father. This may or may not be true, but is nowhere said in Scripture. Furthermore, it wrongly assumes that somehow women are not depraved like men are, which Scripture flatly denies (Romans 3:23). It also presumes that a woman does not contribute to her child’s sin nature, which is incorrect (Psalm 51:5). In an effort to theologically protect Jesus from having a sin

nature, even Augustine said that Mary was not a sinner in her life, while others said that she too was immaculately conceived and therefore without a sin nature and not a sinner. None of this is grounded in Scripture and flatly contradicts Mary's own words that she needed a savior (Luke 1:46–47) and Mary's own actions of bringing a sin offering to the temple (Luke 2:21–24 cf. Leviticus 12:6–8). Indeed, Jesus was without sin (2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15) and did not have a sin nature, not because Mary was without sin, but because He was conceived by a miracle of the Holy Spirit in a way that was similar to the miracles of God making Adam and God granting Sarah the ability to conceive Isaac.

5. Scripture does not teach that Mary remained a virgin for the rest of her life.

Arguments for the perpetual virginity of Mary arose as early as the second century, became more popular in the fourth century, and culminated with the Second Council, which convened in 553, declaring Mary “ever virgin.” Some early church fathers (e.g., Origen), Catholic and Protestant theologians, such as Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and Wesley, along with the Second Helvetic Confession and the Geneva Bible say that Mary was “ever virgin,” or “semper virgo.” Practically, this would mean that not only was Mary a virgin when she conceived Jesus but that following His birth she never had intimate relations with her own husband Joseph. This teaching is inaccurate for four reasons. First, God designed marriage to include physical union (Genesis 2:24) and says that depriving marital intimacy is a sin (1 Corinthians 7:3–5). Second, Matthew 1:25 says they did have relations following Jesus' birth: “But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.” Third, in saying that Jesus was her “firstborn,” Luke 2:7 infers that she had other children, which would require marital intimacy. Fourth, Scripture repeatedly states that Mary had other sons and daughters (Matthew 12:46–50; 13:55–57; Mark 3:20–21, 31–35; 6:3–4; Luke 8:19–21; John 2:12; 7:3, 5, 10; Acts 1:14; 1 Corinthians 9:5; Galatians 1:19). Therefore, Scripture states that Mary was a virgin until the birth of Jesus, as was also taught by the church fathers Tertullian and Irenaeus.

6. Scripture does not teach that Jesus' virgin birth is unimportant.

The only alternative to the virgin birth is that Mary was a sexually sinful woman who conceived Jesus illegitimately, which was the accusation in Jesus' day (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3; John 8:41). If the virgin birth of Jesus is untrue then the story of Jesus changes greatly; we would have a sexually promiscuous young woman lying about God's miraculous hand in the birth of her son, raising that son to declare He was God, and then joining His religion (Acts 1:14). But if Mary is nothing more than a sinful con artist then neither she nor her son Jesus are not to be trusted.

In conclusion, Scripture prophesied that Jesus would be Immanuel, “God with us,” born of the virgin Mary. The birth of Jesus is unique, miraculous, and unprecedented in all of human history. It shows that God kindly works through us by His power and grace. Regarding women, it shows that God honors motherhood and women of faith like Mary, who is not to be our object of faith, but rather our example of faith in Jesus.

Next week: What difference has Jesus made in history?