

The Virgin Birth

by Dr. Norman Geisler

The virgin birth of Christ is the perennial target of naturalistic Bible critics, who tend to regard it as the result of pagan influence on Christian writers of the second century. These Christians developed the myth in an emulation of stories from Greek mythology. One reason for the vehemence of these pronouncements is that, if true, the virgin birth establishes beyond question the life of Jesus as a supernatural intervention of God. If antisupernaturalists concede at this point, they have no case left.

Evidence for the Virgin Birth: Credibility of Miracle

At the root of the rejection of the virgin birth of Christ is the rejection of miracles. A virgin birth is a miracle. If a theistic God exists, and there is evidence that he does, then miracles are automatically possible. For if there is a God who can act, then there can be acts of God. Indeed, there is every reason to believe that miracles have occurred from the instant of the founding of the universe. Hence, the record of Jesus' virgin birth cannot be ruled as mythological in advance of looking at the evidence.

Anticipation of the Virgin Birth

Genesis 3:15

Long before the New Testament recorded the virgin birth, the Old Testament anticipated it. In fact, the earliest messianic prediction in the Bible implies the virgin birth. Speaking to the Tempter (Serpent), "God said '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'" (Gen. 3:15).

That the coming Redeemer was to be the "off-spring" or "seed" of the woman is important in a patriarchal culture. Why of a woman? Normally, descendants were traced through their father (cf. Gen. 5, 11). Even the official genealogy of the Messiah in Matthew 1 is traced through Jesus' legal father Joseph. In the unique term, *seed of the woman*, there is implied that the messiah would come by a woman but not a natural father.

Jeremiah 22 (cf. 2 Samuel 7)

Another possible intimation of the virgin birth in the Old Testament is found in the curse placed on Jeconiah which said: "Record this man as if childless, a man who

will not prosper in his lifetime, for none of his offspring will prosper, none will sit on the throne of David or rule any more in Judah” (Jer. 22:30). The problem with this prediction is that Jesus was the descendant of the throne of David through Jeconiah (cf. Matt. 1:12).

However, since Joseph was only Jesus’ *legal* father (by virtue of being engaged to Mary when she became pregnant), Jesus did not inherit the curse on Jeconiah’s *actual* descendants. And since Jesus was the actual son of David through Mary according to Luke’s matriarchal genealogy (Luke 3), he fulfilled the conditions of coming “from the loins of David” (2 Sam. 7:12-16) without losing legal rights to the throne of David by falling under the curse on Jeconiah. Thus, the virgin birth is implied in the consistent understanding of these Old Testament passages.

Isaiah 7:14

Both the New Testament (Matt. 1:23) and many Christian apologists use Isaiah 7:14 as a predictive prophecy to prove the Bible makes specific supernatural predictions centuries in advance. However, critics, following the interpretation of many Bible scholars, say verse 16 refers to the birth of Isaiah’s own child shortly before the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C. If so, this is not a prophecy about the virgin birth of Jesus and, it has no apologetic value.

Of the three interpretations of Isaiah 7:14, only one is incompatible with a supernatural predictive understanding in reference to Christ’s birth. That is that this prophecy referred only to Isaiah’s day and was fulfilled in the natural birth of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (Isa. 8:3). Of the other two possibilities, the prophecy could have had a double fulfillment—a preliminary one in Isaiah’s child and the final one in Christ’s birth. Or this prophecy refers only to the supernatural birth of Christ (Matt. 1:23).

Single Reference to a Natural Birth

Liberal scholars and some conservatives view Isaiah 7:14 as having reference only to the natural conception and birth of the son of the prophetess. They argue that the Hebrew *alma*, sometimes translated “virgin” (KJV, ASV, NIV), refers to a young woman, whether married or unmarried, and should be translated “young maiden” (RSV). If the prophet had intended someone who was a virgin, he would have used *bethulah* (cf. Gen. 24:16; Lev. 21:3; Judg. 21:12). Further, the context reveals that the prophecy had a near-view fulfillment. Verse 16 declares that “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” (Isa. 7:16). This was literally fulfilled in the invasion of the Assyrian Tiglath Pileser.

Even in the broader context, only the birth of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz fit the prophecy. Isaiah 8:3 reads: “Then I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and gave birth to a son. And the Lord said to me, ‘Name him Maher-Shalal-Hash -Baz’” (Isa. 8:3). The “sign” was promised to Ahaz (7:10) and would have made no sense if its fulfillment was after his time (7:14).

Therefore, the argument concludes that no prediction of Christ’s virgin birth should be found here. The use by Matthew was either faulty or purely typological,

with no predictive or apologetic value. Matthew uses the phrase “that it might be fulfilled” typologically in other cases (for example, 2:15, 23). Matthew *applied* to Christ texts that were not messianic in their contexts.

There is a difficulty with the claim that *alma* refers to someone who is married. Not once does the Old Testament use *alma* to refer to a married person. *Bethulah*, on the other hand, is used for a married women (see Joel 1:8). Among texts using *alma* to refer to a virgin are Genesis 24:43, Exodus 2:8, Psalm 68:25, Proverbs 30:19, and Song of Solomon 1:3; 6:8.

Some critics use 1 Chronicles 15:20 and Psalm 46 as examples of *alma* (or *alamoth*) referring to a married person. In Psalm 46 it is simply part of the title of the Psalm, “A Song for *Alamoth*.” Nothing in the title or psalm text helps us understand what *Alamoth* means, let alone whether it refers to a married person. It may be a musical notation, as one for the young women’s choir to sing, or it could refer to some kind of musical accompaniment. The reference in 1 Chronicles 15:20 is similar. Music is being sung “with strings according to *Alamoth*.” Whatever this may mean, it does not prove that *alma* means a married woman.

It can be argued that some features of the passage could not possibly refer only to the immediate circumstances: the supernatural nature of the “sign”; the reference to the one born as *Immanuel*, “God with us,” and the reference to the whole house of David” (vs. 13). The birth of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz in the next chapter cannot fulfill 7:14, since the one born was to be named “Immanuel.”

While the “sign” was for Ahaz, it also was for the whole “house of David” (vs. 13). A distant sign can be for someone who lives long before the event, provided the benefits of the sign extend to the one for whom it is given. Since the “sign” was the birth of Messiah, the hope of salvation for Ahaz and everyone else, the sign was certainly for him.

But what of 7:16? The only meaningful way to understand this verse is that it refers to a child born in Isaiah’s day. It should be kept in mind that 7:16’s reference to the Assyrian invasion is itself a supernatural predictive prophecy. The issue is not, then, whether 7:14 is predictive and was fulfilled. The question is whether it was fulfilled in three years or 700. There is a possibility that Isaiah 7:16 can be understood in terms of the virgin-birth-only view. Commentator William Hendriksen suggests this possible interpretation: “Behold, the virgin conceives and gives birth to a son.... Before this child, *who before my prophetic eye has already arrived*, shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good—i.e., *within a very short time*—the land whose two kings you abhor shall be deserted.”¹¹ Or, if one wants to be more literal, the Assyrians did invade *before* the child Jesus grew up—long before.

It is generally acknowledged that not all usages of the phrase “that it might be fulfilled” entail a truly predictive prophecy, Isaiah 7:14 need not be one of them. Matthew cites Micah 5:2, a clear prediction that the Christ would be born in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:5; see also Matt 3:3; 21:5; 22:43).

Double Reference

Even if the immediate context reveals that the prophecy had a near-view fulfillment in mind, this does not mean that there is not also a fuller fulfillment in a far-view reference to Christ. According to this view, many Old Testament prophecies have both a partial fulfillment in their day and a complete fulfillment in the distant future. Because of their desperate situation, God promised to give to Ahaz a sign that would assure the people that God would ultimately deliver them from bondage. This was a sign of the physical deliverance of Israel from the bondage of their enemies. It ultimately was a sign of the spiritual deliverance of spiritual Israel from bondage to Satan. The first aspect of the sign was fulfilled in the birth of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, the second aspect in the birth of Jesus to the true virgin, Mary. Such double fulfillments are clear in other prophecies. Zechariah 12:10 can be applied both to Christ's first (John 19:37) and second comings (Rev. 1:7). Part of Isaiah 61 was fulfilled in Jesus (Isa. 61:1-2a; cf. Luke 4:18-19). Part remains for the second coming (Isa. 61:2b-11).

According to the double-reference view, *alma* refers to a young maiden who has never had sexual intercourse. The wife of Isaiah, who bore the son in fulfillment of the first aspect of the prophecy was a virgin until she conceived by Isaiah. However, Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a complete fulfillment—a virgin when she conceived Jesus (Matthew 1:24-25).

Other arguments for this position also fit the supernatural-birth-only view. Both of these views reject the idea that the significance of Isaiah 7:14 is exhausted in the natural birth of the prophetess's son.

Single Reference to a Supernatural Birth

Some scholars defend the position that Isaiah 7:14 refers only to the supernatural virgin birth of Christ. Contrary to the first option, *alma* is only translated "virgin" in the Old Testament and has no other options. The prophetess, therefore, does not qualify. The Greek Old Testament (*Septuagint*) translated *alma* by the unambiguous word *parthenos* which can only mean "virgin." These translators, working before the advent, evidently believed that this was a prediction of the virgin birth of the Messiah. The inspired New Testament sanctioned this work by quoting from the *Septuagint* in Matthew 1:23. Further, to translate *alma* as a young girl who is not yet married, but would soon marry Isaiah means that it would be no longer a *virgin* who is conceiving, but a married woman. Isaiah 7:14 regards both the conception and birth as by a virgin.

Proponents of the supernatural-birth-only view point out that the prediction obviously goes beyond Ahaz to the whole "house of David" (Isa. 7:13). That hardly would apply to a natural birth by the prophetess in Isaiah's day. Also, the emphasis is on some wonderful, unheard of "sign" (Isa. 7:11-14). Why should an ordinary birth be understood as an extraordinary sign?

The whole context of Isaiah 7-11 (cf. Micah 5:2f.) forms an unbreakable chain of messianic prophecy:

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. [7:14]

Its outspread wings will cover the breadth of your land, O Immanuel! [8:8b]

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. [9:6]

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD—and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash round his waist. [11:1-5]

Matthew 1:22 both interprets Isaiah 7:14 as prophetic with the phrase “that it might be fulfilled” and adds an intensifying phrase, “*now all this was done* that it might be fulfilled...” (emphasis added). The manner of the quotation emphasizes the supernatural quality of the birth and the deity of Christ. Most scholars on both sides of the issue acknowledge that the phrase “that it might be fulfilled” does not necessarily refer to a predicative prophecy. However, indications are that Matthew 1:23 is an example of one that is predictive.

Finally, the same verse cannot refer to the birth of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, for the same verse cannot mean two different (opposing) things. If both the *Septuagint* and the inspired New Testament affirm that this refers to an actual virgin, it must refer to Christ alone.

Translating the Name Immanuel

A final issue that arises in this debate regards whether the name *Immanuel* mandates that Isaiah was referring to God incarnate. It does not. *Immanuel* can mean “God *is* with us.” While the translation “God with us” seems to mean the name-bearer has deity, it is linguistically possible to translate “Immanuel” as “God is with us,” which does not denote deity for the name-bearer. The name of a child can refer to a situation meaningful to the giver of the name. Thus Sarah named her son *Isaac*, meaning “laughter.”

However, overall evidence indicates that the traditional translation is correct. When a point is made of a biblical name, it most often refers to the one who bears it: *Eve*, mother of the “living” (Gen. 3:20); *Noah* related to the Hebrew for “comfort” (Gen. 5:29); *Abram*, “father” and *Abraham* “father of many” (Gen. 17:5); *Sarai*, “princess,” and *Sarah* “princess of God” (Gen. 17:15); *Esau*, “hairy” (Gen. 25:25); *Jacob*, “He grasps the heel” or “deceiver,” and *Israel*, “He struggles with God” (Gen. 27:36; 32:28); *Naomi*, “pleasant,” and *Mara*, “bitter” (Ruth 1:20); *Nabal*, “fool” (1 Sam. 25:3, 25); *Jesus*, “*Yahweh* saves” (Matt. 1:21); *Peter*, “rock” (Matt. 16:18); and *Barnabas*, “son of encouragement” (Acts 4:36).

Both the immediate and broad contexts show that *Immanuel* refers to the character of the one bearing the name. The event is a supernatural sign. The whole “house of David,” is in view, especially within the “messianic chain” of Isaiah 7-11. The New Testament interprets it as referring to Christ. All these factors support the view that it is a reference to Christ.

The Reliability of the New Testament Record

The evidence that Jesus was conceived of a virgin is based in the reliability of the New Testament documents and the New Testament witnesses. Both of these have been established with strong evidence. In fact, as is shown elsewhere, the evidence for the authenticity of the New Testament is greater than for that of any book from the ancient world. It remains only to show that these records do testify to the virgin birth of Christ.

There can be no doubt that the New Testament clearly affirms that Christ was born of a virgin.

Matthew 1:18-23

Matthew 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. 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 will be with child and will give birth to a son and they will call him Immanuel”—*which means, “God with us.”
[1:18-23]

The emphasized sections point to four factors which demonstrate that Christ was virgin born: First, Mary conceived “*before they came together*,” thus revealing that it was not a natural conception. Second, Joseph’s initial reaction reveals that he had not had sexual intercourse with Mary since when he found that she was pregnant “*he had in mind to divorce her quietly*.” Third, the phrase “*what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit*” reveals the supernatural nature of the event. Finally, the citation from the *Septuagint* translation of Isaiah 7:14 about a *parthenos*, “virgin,” giving “birth” to a child indicates that Mary had not had sexual relations with anyone. She was not simply a virgin before the baby was conceived, but after it was conceived and even when it was born.

Luke 1:26-35

Mark begins immediately with Jesus’ ministry in accord with his stress on Christ as Servant (cf. 10:45). But we would expect a physician, Dr. Luke, to give attention to the circumstances of the birth. He begins with the announcement of Christ’s birth of a virgin:

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 descendant of David. The *virgin's* name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are *highly favored!* 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 favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus."... "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 to be born will be called the Son of God." [1:26-35]

The emphasized text again demonstrates that the conception of Christ was supernatural: Mary was a "virgin" (*parthenos*), "pledged to be married." Mary's reaction of being "greatly troubled" and being "afraid," as well as her astonished question, "How will this be?" reveals that she was a virgin. The angel gave some description of how the conception would happen through the Holy Spirit and "the power of the Most High."

Luke 2:1-19

When Luke records the birth he again stresses that Mary was only "pledged to be married," which in that culture meant she had not yet had sexual intercourse with Joseph. The supernatural appearance of the angel and the heavenly choir demonstrate that something extraordinary had happened. Mary's reaction was to contemplate in awe the mystery of it all. Obviously she knew something supernatural and holy had occurred (vs. 19).

John 2:2-11

John stresses the overall divinity of Christ, and doesn't dwell on particulars. Nevertheless, there are a couple of strong intimations in John's Gospel that Jesus was virgin born. When Jesus performed his first miracle at Cana of Galilee his mother was obviously aware of his supernatural origin and confident that he could do the supernatural. John wrote: "On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, '*They have no more wine.*' 'Dear woman, why do you involve me?' Jesus replied. '*My time has not yet come.*' His mother said to the servants, '*Do whatever he tells you.*'" Indeed, the emphasized text reveals that Mary seems not only to believe that Jesus could do a miracle but to be requesting one, even though she had never seen him do one since this was Jesus' "first miracle" (vs. 11). Her understanding of his supernatural ability came from her past relationship with Jesus, including his birth.

John 8:41

Even the insult of Jesus' enemies shows that the circumstances of his birth had stirred general gossip, as might be expected if the story spread. Jesus said to them, "'You are doing the things your own father [Satan] does.' 'We are not illegitimate children,' they protested. 'The only Father we have is God himself.'" The Jews may have simply been responding defensively to Jesus' attack on their misplaced confidence in the fatherhood of Abraham. If so, it is an odd rejoinder. But it makes

perfect sense if they were turning the argument back on Jesus' own legitimacy. Even Joseph had needed an angelic visitation to be convinced of Mary's purity (Matt. 1:20). He and Mary likely faced a continuing shadow on their reputations. But Jesus faced the matter boldly in responding to his sniggering accusers, "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?" (John 8:46).

Galatians 4:4

The Epistles are filled with references to Jesus' sinlessness. In the context of teaching about the innate sinfulness that adheres to each descendant of Adam (for example, Romans 5), these teachings themselves indicate that God had done something different in Jesus (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 1 John 3:3). Paul's reference to Jesus as "born of a woman" is relatively explicit. He wrote, "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law" (Gal. 4:4). This refers to Genesis 3:15. In a Jewish patriarchal culture one is begotten of a male (the father). To bring attention to being "born of a woman" is to show that something unusual is occurring—in Jesus' case a virgin birth.

The Charge of Mythology

It is difficult to deny that the New Testament teaches the virgin birth of Christ. The easier attack is to say that it is a myth patterned after Greek and Roman gods and was not really a historical event. However, in brief:

- ◆ Evidence is unassailable that the New Testament was written by contemporaries and eyewitnesses (cf. Luke 1:1-4). Second-century dating theories have now been thoroughly discredited by archaeological and manuscript evidence, allowing no time for legend.
- ◆ Virgin birth records do not show any of the standard literary marks of the myth genre.
- ◆ Persons, places, and events of Christ's birth precise and historically substantiated. Luke in particular goes to great pains to note historical detail (Luke 3:1-2).
- ◆ No Greek myth even remotely corresponds to the literal incarnation of a monotheistic God in human form (cf. John 1:1-3, 14) by way of a literal virgin birth (Matt. 1:18-25). The Greeks were polytheists, not monotheists.
- ◆ Stories of Greek gods become human via miraculous events like a virgin birth postdated the time of Christ. Hence, if there is any influence it is from Christianity on mythology, not the reverse.

Conclusion

Historical evidence that Jesus was supernaturally conceived of a virgin is more than substantial. Indeed, there are more eyewitness contemporary records of the virgin birth than for most events from the ancient world. The records show no signs of myth development. Indeed, they are surrounded by historical references to real people, places, and times. Thus, there is no reason to believe Jesus was not literally, biologically born of a virgin just as the Bible claims he was. Only an unjustified antisupernatural bias is ground for any conclusion to the contrary.

A particular battleground text is Isaiah 7:14, which is cited by Matthew. Critics argue that it has no predictive value. At worst the text refers to events in Isaiah's time only, which were applied typologically to Christ but have no predictive value. There is reason to believe the text refers, in part or whole, to a prediction of the virgin birth. In any case, there are other clear predictive texts in the Old Testament.

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Notes

- ¹ William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), p. 139.