

## CAN WE REALLY BELIEVE IN –

### 1:THE VIRGIN BIRTH?



Actually strictly speaking there is no such thing as a “virgin birth.” What the Bible talks about is a virginal conception and it is this event which has become part of the very fundamentals of the Christian church.

In the words of the Creed (the earliest expressions of Christian belief): “I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, *who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary...*”

So what are we to make of this seemingly extraordinary claim that Jesus was born without the aid of a human father?

#### THE GOSPEL ACCOUNTS

The idea that Jesus was born of a virginal conception is found in two of the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus, the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke. It is indeed from these two narratives that we receive our entire information about the circumstances surrounding the conception and birth of Jesus.

Are the stories imaginative and picturesque ways of conveying spiritual truth but never meant to be taken literally, or are they something more? How did Luke for example view his material and how did he expect his audience to respond to what he had written?

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (Luke 1v1-5)

“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us” - but apparently not all of them accurate or helpful, or why attempt another version of events? Thus Luke wants his reader (Theophilus means “a lover of God,” so he may either be an actual person or represent any Christian), to know “the *certainty* of the things you have been taught.”

How does Luke ensure this certainty that he feels is so vital?

By making *careful investigation* and by talking to *eye-witnesses*, including those who were there *from the first* i.e. from Jesus’ birth. So that what we are finally left with is an *orderly* and *certain* record of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. That’s quite a claim!

In fact Luke was well placed to compile such an authoritative record, for as a travelling companion of Paul he had spent around two years in Palestine, with ample opportunity to talk to those whom he describes as being “eyewitnesses,” including Jesus’ family and indeed to Mary herself. (Acts 21v17; 24v27)

Furthermore unlike the classical Greek of his prologue (1v1-4) and of the rest of his Gospel, Luke’s first two chapters abound in Jewish terms and phrases, suggesting strongly that he is virtually quoting from these eye-witnesses to whom he spoke.

“Wherever modern scholarship has been able to check up on the accuracy of Luke’s work, the judgement has been unanimous: he is one of the finest and ablest historians in the ancient world” (Prof. Otto Piper).

Matthew gives less information than Luke but in the relatively few details that he does supply, he is absolutely unshakeable on the fact that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit not via Joseph, and that Mary became pregnant before she was married to him. Indeed her pregnancy was the very reason that Joseph decided to “divorce” her i.e. the baby clearly wasn’t his. In Jesus’ day a length of time would elapse between an engagement and the actual marriage. Yet during that intervening time, although the couple did not live together, they would already be called “husband” and “wife” (Mt.1v19), and were one of them to die, their partner would be called a “widow” or “widower.” So binding was this formal betrothal that it could only be broken by a divorce (Mt.1v19), and there would have to be compelling reasons – such as unfaithfulness – to take such an action.

## FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT

The idea of a virginal conception of course did not come out of nowhere. It is found in our Old Testament in a prophecy of Isaiah (Isa.7v14), given around 700 years before the birth of Jesus. "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."

In many versions of the Bible, the prophecy runs as follows:- "The *virgin* will be with child and will give birth to a son.." Strictly speaking that is not quite what Isaiah says. The Hebrew word he uses which is translated as "virgin," is *almah*, which means a young woman of marriageable age, rather than specifically a *virgin*. It most closely approximates to our word *maiden*.

However that virginity is taken as read is clear for three reasons. Firstly, because in the culture of the times if a girl was unmarried then she would have been a virgin. Secondly, because whenever *almah* is used elsewhere in the O.T. it describes a sexually mature but unmarried woman. Thirdly because when Jewish scholars translated Isaiah. 7v14 into Greek, they did not choose a general word to describe a young woman but rather they translated *almah* by the Greek word *parthenos*, which *means virgin and only means virgin* (The only other time *parthenos* is used for *almah* is Gen.24v13f in the story of Isaac and Rebekah. In v.16 she is specifically described as being an *almah*, i.e. a *virgin*).

Now Isa.7v14 also says this is not just any virgin but *the* virgin who will conceive, i.e. a specific and significant individual. In fact a young woman, called Mary...

One final point: although passages such as Isa.9v2ff were interpreted by Jewish scholars as referring to God's special servant the Messiah (or Christ), no such understanding appears to have been attached to Isa.7v14 and nor was there any expectation that the Messiah would be conceived by means of a virgin.

This means that neither Matthew nor Luke were basing their account on Jewish expectations of the Messiah but rather were forging a totally new narrative. And in doing so they would have been aware of the extra difficulties that they posed for themselves by claiming not only that Jesus was the Messiah but that He was God and that He had been conceived in this unique way.

The only reason for recording such a unique conception was because that was the way that it had happened.

## DOES IT MATTER?

That Jesus was conceived in the way described by the Gospel writers matters very greatly indeed.

Firstly because if this part of the life and ministry of Jesus is couched not in words of actual fact but in the language of religious symbol and poetry, what about the rest of the Gospels? When do they stop being fiction and start becoming fact and the sort of fact upon which we can base our lives and our eternal destiny?

Secondly, consider the claims that Luke makes about his Gospel and the care with which he gathered his information. Is he a liar, or sadly deceived, or is he telling the exact, literal truth? Isn't it somewhat intellectually dishonest for us to dismiss his account – which he would know wouldn't be easy to accept – simply because it challenges our own preconceptions?

Thirdly, the reason that Mary conceived a child whilst still a virgin takes us to the very heart of the nature and identity of Jesus. The first part of the angel's message to Mary in Luke 1v26-38 might speak only of the birth of a great man, a true descendant of King David and God's chosen Messiah. Even the term "Son of God" could refer simply to a king or to the Messiah and the promise of a kingdom that would never end, simply to a reiteration of the promise made to King David years before (Ps.2; 2 Sam.7v11-16).

But the *second* part of Gabriel's message reveals that this child will not simply be a great human being but will be God Himself,. "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" (Lk.1v35).

However godly and upright a man Joseph might be, and however godly and upright a woman Mary might be, the result of their sexual union could only be a human being, no more and no less. Only in this unique fusion of the Holy Spirit of God and of a woman (Mary), can God enter the world to be both fully man and also fully God. Suddenly "Son of God" takes on a whole new and deeper meaning and suddenly "Immanuel" (Mt.1v23) means *exactly* what it says! Isaiah 9v6-7 is literally fulfilled!

## Can we really believe in the Virgin Birth?

**Yes. How else could God in human form come into His world?**