

The Virgin Birth Of Christ

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Texts: Isaiah 7:10-14; 9:6-7; Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38; John 1:14.

Introduction:

- I. The apostle John says that “*the Word [Jesus] became flesh and dwelt among us*” (John 1:14).
 - A. HOW the Word “*became flesh*” is the subject of this presentation.
 - B. If Matthew was correct when he quoted the prophecy found in Isaiah 7:14 and applied it to the birth of Jesus, he meant for us to understand that the birth of Jesus was a unique event in the history of the world.
 - C. The birth of Jesus was likely quite normal.
 1. There is no indication in God’s Word that Mary’s delivery of her firstborn child was in any way unusual or abnormal.
 2. Several externals were, of course, unusual!
 - a. The presence of angels and shepherds.
 - b. Location of the place of delivery – a “*manger.*”
 - c. The arrival of the shepherds that night and the wise men from the east sometime later are not typical of most deliveries.
 - d. But those things occurred after Jesus was delivered – they were not actually a part of the delivery.
 3. The real miracle was when the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary and she became pregnant.
 4. Then, the baby grew and developed within the womb of Mary for the proper amount of time and was born into the world.
 5. When we refer to the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, we are encompassing the entire process, from supernatural conception in the womb of a virgin all the way to the Christ child’s safe delivery nine months later, of Jesus Christ’s journey from heaven to earth.
 - D. If you liken the Christian faith to a building, then it is reasonable to understand that this structure of our faith is built upon several foundational pillars that are essential to the structure’s integrity.
 1. If one of the foundational pillars fails, the entire structure collapses.
 2. These foundational pillars are key teachings such as what we have come to call the trinity, the deity of Christ, the bodily resurrection of Christ, etc.
 3. Central among these foundational truths is the doctrine of the virgin birth.
 4. If you do not believe that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was born of the virgin, you cannot really be a Christian, regardless of what you might claim.
- II. In this presentation:
 - A. What is meant by “virgin birth”?
 - B. A look at the evidence.
 - C. A brief overview of various methods of interpreting Isaiah’s prophecy.

Body:

I. What is meant by “virgin birth”?

A. A “virgin” (cf. Matt. 1:23; Luke 1:34; 1 Cor. 7:28,34,36,37,38; 2 Cor. 11:2) is a:

1. Greek = παρθένος (Parthenos).
 - a. The Greek goddess Athena was generally understood to be a virgin.
 - b. The building in Athens, Greece that housed her statue was called the *Parthenon*.
2. When Matthew quoted Isaiah 7:14 he used *Parthenos*, likely quoting from the LXX.
 - a. *Parthenos* is found fifteen times in the New Testament.
 - b. It never denotes a “young married woman,” but refers to a sexually pure person.
 - c. “Marriageable woman; a woman who has never had sexual intercourse with a man.” (Thayer, accessed via E-SWORD)
 - d. “In our lit. one who has never engaged in sexual intercourse, virgin, chaste person; female of marriageable age w. focus on virginity.” (A&G, 777)
3. Luke (1:27) also used the word *Parthenos* to describe Jesus’ birth.
4. The Hebrew word in Isaiah’s prophecy which Matthew quotes is ‘*almâh*, and it occurs 7 times in the Old Testament (Gen. 24:43; Ex. 2:8; Psa. 68:25; Prov. 30:19; Song of Sol. 1:3; 6:8; Isa. 7:14).
5. “At the outset we may confidently assert that the word ‘*almah* is never employed of a married woman.” (Young, 287)
6. “It may be readily admitted that ‘*almah* does not actually indicate virginity, as does *bethulah*; it means rather a young woman of marriageable age.” (Machen, 288)
7. “The word used by Isaiah is ‘*almah*, which refers to an unblemished young woman who has reached marriageable age. It is a word that can be used of a virgin, and the LXX so translates it. Of course, Ahaz (likely even Isaiah) was unaware of the meaning of this part of the prophecy; but the Holy Spirit had this thought in mind, as was later shown by Matthew. How wonderful it is to have an inspired man to tell us the higher meanings of a prophecy like this one! The prediction was that the coming Messiah would enter the world by means of a virgin birth.” (Shackelford, 115)

B. The virgin birth, then, is a reference to the **supernatural** conception of Jesus, apart from the normal physical human process of procreation.

1. Jesus was uniquely conceived in the womb of Mary (a virgin) by the power of the Holy Spirit.
2. The virgin birth is how the Son of God became incarnate – fully human.

C. The Bible clearly and consistently affirms that Jesus was born of a woman who was a virgin, yet this teaching is disclaimed not only by those in the world, but also by a seemingly increasing number of Biblical “scholars.”

D. Where did the idea that Jesus was **not** literally born of a virgin originate?

1. The earliest known reference suggesting that the virgin birth was a story made up by Jesus’ disciples was by the anti-Christian Jew, Trypho (hardly an unbiased source) in the mid-second century A.D. (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue*, 67)

2. In the mid-nineteenth century, the influence of German rationalism made its presence felt throughout the world, and even Biblical scholars who were generally considered “conservative” began to yield to the pressure to find some other more “rational” explanation for the Biblical accounts of the virgin birth.
3. One of those explanations was the suggestion that perhaps Matthew only “appropriated” Isaiah’s text to the circumstances of Jesus’ birth, when, in reality, there was a primary application to a “young woman” of the prophet’s own day.
4. More “liberal” explanations discarded any miraculous elements from the birth story.
 - a. “I do not think that we are intended to take the Virgin Birth literally.” (Barclay, *Matthew*, 328-329)
 - b. “I think we are clearly intended to take the story of the Virgin Birth as parabolic, symbolic, pictorial, metaphorical method of carrying the unique relationship with God back to the very birth of Jesus.” (Barclay, *Mark*, 118-119)
 - c. “I consider him to be the normally born child of Mary and Joseph.” (Crossan, 45)
5. Edgar Goodspeed, in his N.T. translation (1923) of Matthew 1:23 – “The **maiden** will be pregnant and will have a son, and they will name him Immanuel” (emphasis mine, GCK).
6. The *Revised Standard Version*, first published in 1952, translated ‘*almah* in Isaiah 7:14 as “young woman.”

E. We now want to examine the evidence that Jesus was literally and truly, as recorded in both Matthew’s and Luke’s gospels, born of a virgin.

II. Looking at the Evidence.

- A. “In this brief phrase Matthew records what is popularly called the virgin birth, and on this phrase hangs the entire paragraph, yea, all else that the New Testament reports concerning the Word made flesh . . . [Jesus] entered our race as Matthew here declares, or he did not. If he did not, if Jesus was an ordinary bastard, or Joseph’s natural son by an act of forbidden cohabitation, then they who will may [*sic*] call him their Savior – their lascivious fancy cannot raise him from the mire into which they have cast him.” (Lenski, 42)
- B. In Isaiah 7:14, the prophet spoke concerning the birth of the Messiah.
 1. “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”
 2. Assuming that this was intended, at least in part, to be Messianic, this verse records three distinct prophecies about the circumstances surrounding the birth, all spoken by the prophet some 700 years before the birth of Jesus.
 - a. The condition of his mother – the virgin or young maiden (definite article is included in both Hebrew and Greek texts of this verse, and in Matthew’s quotation of it).
 - b. The sex of the child – a “son.”
 - c. A name (or title) by which the child will be known – “Immanuel.”
 3. Isaiah noted also that this birth was intended by God to be a “sign.”
 - a. Definition – “Sign, signal, a distinguishing mark.” (BDB, accessed via E-Sword)
 - b. “A pledge; a token; an evidence of the fulfillment of what is predicted. The word does not, of necessity, denote a miracle, though it is often so applied.” (Barnes Notes on the O.T., accessed via E-Sword)
 - c. This was going to be something special, out-of-the-ordinary.

d. A virgin birth would be something that would attract attention!

C. Matthew records the fulfillment of this prophecy in 1:18-25.

1. *“Before they came together she [Mary] was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit”* (1:18).
2. To clarify what this meant, Matthew adds that Joseph *“knew her not”* (1:25, i.e., had no sexual relations with her) prior to the birth of Jesus.
3. Matthew makes it clear that Mary was a virgin at least until sometime after Jesus was born.

D. Luke records the virgin birth, the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, in Lk. 1:26-28.

1. Luke calls Mary a *“virgin”* (*Parthenos*) twice.
 - a. *“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary”* (1:26-27, emphasis mine, GCK).
2. Luke does not quote Isaiah 7:14 directly, but he does appear to reference this text when he quoted Gabriel’s announcement to Mary.
 - a. *“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus”* (1:31).
3. The son to be born was to be given *“the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end”* (1:32-33).
4. This seems to be a clear reference to the *“child”* prophesied in Isaiah 9:6-7.
5. Mary responds to Gabriel’s announcement by asking, *“How will this be, since I am a virgin?”* (1:34).
 - a. The word *Parthenos* does not appear in this text.
 - b. *“...since I am a virgin and have no intimacy with any man?”* (AMP)
 - c. *“...seeing I know not a man?”* (ASV)
 - d. *“...since I do not know a man?”* (NKJV)
6. Elsewhere in the Bible, phrases such as *“know no man”* are clearly used of virgins.
 - a. *“The young woman [Rebekah] was very beautiful, a virgin; no man had had relations with her”* (Genesis 24:16).
7. Like Matthew, Luke also makes it clear that Mary was a virgin until sometime after Jesus was born.

E. Only Matthew and Luke specifically mention the virgin birth in the New Testament.

1. Matthew was a Jew – he quoted Jewish scripture (Isaiah 7:14) and asserted that the birth of Jesus was the fulfillment of that O.T. prophecy.
2. Luke was a *“physician,”* and would have been well-able to distinguish between accounts of a *“virgin”* birth and a normal physical birth.

F. The *“apostolic fathers.”*

1. These men (also called *“church fathers”*), who wrote mostly in the second century A.C.E., agreed that Jesus was born of a virgin, and that this birth was the fulfillment of the prophecy found in Isaiah 7:14.
2. One example:

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- a. Irenaeus (A.D. 120-202) wrote: “Wherefore also the Lord Himself gave us a sign, in the depth below, and in the height above, which man did not ask for, because he never expected that a virgin could conceive, or that it was possible that one remaining a virgin could bring forth a son, and that what was thus born should be ‘God with us.’” (*Against Heresies*, 19.3)
 3. In an article on the *Stand to Reason* website (source: <https://www.str.org/w/nine-early-church-fathers-who-taught-jesus-is-god>), Tim Barnett sites Irenaeus and others of these “Fathers” who wrote about and affirmed Jesus’ virgin birth, including:
 - a. Ignatius (117 A.C.E.)
 - b. Aristides (140 A.C.E.)
 - c. Justin Martyr (150 A.C.E.)
 - d. Tertullian (200 A.C.E.)
- G. The responses (both immediate and later) of Mary herself offer some compelling “secondary” testimony about what she believed had happened.
1. Before the birth of Jesus.
 - a. Before she and Joseph were married, the Bible says they were “*betrothed*.” (Mt. 1:18; Lk. 1:27; 2:5)
 - 1) “*Engaged*.” (NRSV; CSB)
 - b. Numerous sources describe the Jewish custom of “betrothal.”
 - 1) A pre-marriage period of engagement.
 - 2) Could last for up to one year.
 - 3) During this engagement period, the couple could legitimately be called “married,” even though the marriage had not been consummated.
 - 4) The consummation was the culmination of the marriage ceremony.
 - 5) The Law of Moses called for a woman found to be “not a virgin” during this period of engagement to be stoned to death (cf. Deut. 22:13-21).
 - c. It was during this “betrothal” period that we find Mary traveling to the house of her cousin, Elizabeth.
 - 1) “*In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth*” (Luke 1:39-40).
 - d. A significant, and perhaps sometimes overlooked, fact about this account is that Zechariah was a priest.
 - e. The fact that Mary had no qualms about entering his house suggests that she did not consider herself to be “guilty” of any sinful behavior.
 2. At the time of Jesus’ birth.
 - a. “*And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior’*” (Luke 1:46-47).
 - b. “*But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart*” (Luke 2:19).
 - c. This is not the reaction of one who knew that an illegitimate birth had taken place, or that she was a guilty woman!
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3. At the death of Jesus.
 - a. Matthew records in some detail the physical and verbal abuse that Jesus suffered leading up to his death on the cross.
 - b. He also tells us that his mother was present during much of this abuse, including witnessing his death on the cross.
 - c. Is it not likely that if Joseph – or any other human male – had really been the father of Jesus, that Mary would not have come forward with that information to save her son if that had been in her power?
 - d. I believe that Mary’s silence on this occasion is powerful testimony that she knew who he was, how he had been conceived, and the reason for his suffering.

III. Interpreting Isaiah’s Prophecy.

A. What follows requires some explanation.

1. My assignment was to discuss the virgin birth, especially as recorded by Matthew, who quotes Isaiah’s prophecy and applies it to the circumstances surrounding the conception of Jesus.
2. What follows, then, is nothing more on my part than an attempt at a brief overview of various interpretations of Isaiah’s prophecy.
3. For a much more scholarly, in-depth, detailed discussion of the question of the different views of the prophecy’s interpretation, please see the paper by Jeff Smelser entitled *A Virgin Shall Conceive* in the S.I.T.S. archive, 2005, study of Isaiah.

B. Although Matthew connects Isaiah’s prophecy of a child’s birth with the virgin birth of Jesus, perhaps few O.T. prophecies have generated more controversy, especially in the past 100 years.

C. There are generally three categories of judgment on how to interpret Isaiah 7:14.

1. The view that the text is non-Messianic and refers only to an event in Isaiah’s day.
2. The view that the prophecy has a dual fulfillment, predicting an event in Isaiah’s day, but also looking ahead to the birth of the Messiah.
3. The view that the text is exclusively Messianic.

D. The non-Messianic position.

1. Chad Frantz (I believe he is a Baptist preacher) wrote a paper entitled *The Doctrine of the Virgin Birth – A Cardinal Doctrine?* (accessed via the Academia website: https://www.academia.edu/28996106/The_Doctrine_of_the_Virgin_Birth_A_Cardinal_Doctrine), in which he catalogs 10 specific objections he has encountered to the Biblical teaching that Jesus was literally born of a virgin.
 - a. The virgin birth is not emphasized in the Scriptures, referenced only briefly by Matthew and Luke, and then never mentioned again.
 - b. The virgin birth plays an insignificant role in early church conflicts and received support from heretics.
 - c. Isaiah 7:14 does not prophecy a virgin birth.
 - d. The virgin birth is a falsification of historical facts done to exalt Jesus and answer questions about his birth.
 - e. There are other scriptural options such as the dual father viewpoint.

- f. The virgin birth is not compatible with science.
 - g. The virgin birth opposes the incarnation of the preexistent Son of God.
 - h. The virgin birth is false due to the historical evidence that Jesus was born by a human father.
 - i. The virgin birth is a docetic doctrine.
 - j. Due to the genre of Matthew/Luke, the virgin birth view is legendary storytelling.
2. Proponents of this position sometimes argue that Matthew “appropriated” the Isaiah passage and gave it a meaning not originally intended.
 3. Those who take this view include modernists who deny anything “miraculous”; rationalists who deny the divine inspiration of the scriptures; but also, some who claim to believe in the virgin birth, but hold the non-Messianic view on other grounds.
 4. An extremely simplistic outline of this position.
 - a. First, the sign was meant to relieve Judah’s fears of the threat of invasion by Syria and Israel – the birth of a child centuries later would have no value for those who lived in Isaiah’s time.
 - b. Second, the context (Isa. 7:15-16) indicates that Judah’s danger would pass before the child was old enough to discern good and evil.
 - c. Third, the word Isaiah used to describe the child’s mother – *‘almah* – a word which does not necessarily mean *virgin*, but rather a young woman, or perhaps more specifically a woman of marriageable age.
 5. Thus, according to this interpretation, Isaiah was not predicting the birth of the Messiah, but a contemporary child (i.e., Mahershalahashbaz [Isa. 8:48]; or perhaps Hezekiah, or maybe an 8th century B.C.E. child actually named Emmanuel) who would be born in the normal way, and whose birth would reassure Judah that God was with them.
- E. The dual-fulfillment position.
1. This view asserts that while Isaiah was indeed referring to the Messiah, his prophecy also had an immediate, local fulfillment in the birth of a child in Isaiah’s time.
 2. Proof for this position would typically follow many of the same arguments used by those who promote the non-Messiah position (see C.4. in the outline above).
 3. Some of our brethren take this position.
 4. “I believe Isaiah was speaking about a well known virgin. She is in the process of being married. She will (very soon) bear a child in the normal way. The baby will be named Immanuel and will be a visible token that God is with the nation in the middle of these crises. I believe this child was/is a type of Jesus Christ. I believe he was intended to reflect the coming child who was literally born of a virgin and was literally *God With Us*.” (McGuiggan, 56)
 5. “The Holy Spirit’s use of the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 makes it clear that the Lord used language that would have messianic application. In the context, however, the prophecy of Isaiah also had an immediate application to the days of Ahaz. This application was fulfilled soon after its revelation (Isa. 7:15-16; 8:3-4).” (Pope, 48)
- F. The position that the prophecy has a single fulfillment in the birth of the Messiah.
1. This theory affirms that Isaiah’s prophecy is an exclusive reference to the miraculous birth of the Messiah.

2. This position leans heavily on defining *'almah* as always referring to a virgin.
3. Edward Young says that in the OT the word “is never employed of a married woman. It seems to be the only word in the [Hebrew] language which unequivocally signifies an unmarried woman.” (Young, 287-288)
4. Proponents of this position present what they perceive to be a problem:
 - a. The woman in the text is called an *'almah* – either virgin or young unmarried woman.
 - b. Thus, she would have to have conceived either because of illegitimate sex, or else supernaturally.
 - c. If Isaiah’s *'almah* conceived and bore a son prior to a legitimate marriage, how would this be a “*sign*” from God to Ahaz and Judah, and how would such a birth be a type of the birth of the Messiah?
 - d. “... since the presumption in common law was and is, that every *'almah* is a virgin and virtuous, until she is proven not to be, we have a right to assume that the *alma* of Isa. vii. 14, and all other *almas*, were virgins and virtuous, until and unless it shall be proven that they were not. (Robert Dick Wilson, quoted by Gromacki, 147)
5. An argument is also made that, in the context of Isaiah’s prophecy, no child was born who fits the description of the child described in Isaiah 7-12.

G. My position.

1. I don’t believe there is much room for falling out with brethren over positions # 2 & 3 above.
2. For a long time, I took the position that the text in Isaiah 7:14 was an exclusive prophecy about the birth of the Messiah and had no immediate fulfillment.
3. Some time ago I switched to the “dual fulfillment” position.
4. I also believe that a translation of “*young woman*” in Isaiah 7:14 is not cause for much concern, and especially not for a charge of “liberalism.”
5. If we understand an *'almah* to be a young woman of marriageable age and give her the benefit of the doubt that she is sexually pure – a virgin – then there is, in my opinion, no reason to spend much time quibbling over a particular translation.
6. For an excellent in-depth study of the question of how that Hebrew word should be translated, see the November 4, 1982, edition of *Guardian of Truth Magazine*, the entire issue of which is devoted to this question. It includes an exchange between Dan King and Melvin Curry, along with a series of articles on the prophecy by Mike Willis.

Conclusion:

- I. “The New Testament presentation of Jesus is not an agglomeration, but an organism, and of that organism the virgin birth is an integral part. Remove the part, and the whole becomes harder and not easier to accept; the New Testament account of Jesus is most convincing when it is taken as a whole. Only one Jesus is presented in the Word of God; and that Jesus did not come into the world by ordinary generation, but was conceived in the womb of the virgin by the Holy Ghost.” (Machen, 397)
- II. Hopefully we learn from a study of the Bible’s teaching that there is abundant evidence for the virgin birth of Christ.
- III. Must one believe in the virgin birth?

- A. It is conceivable that someone might come to Christ without yet learning that the Bible teaches that Jesus was born of a virgin.
- B. The real question is this: Can a Christian, once aware of the Bible's teaching, reject the virgin birth?
- C. The answer must be **NO!**
- D. Skeptics and doubters may find belief in the virgin birth to be evidence of intellectual backwardness among Christians, but a denial of the virgin birth is a denial of Jesus as the Christ.
- E. The Savior who died for our sins was none other than the baby who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin.
- F. The virgin birth does not stand alone as a biblical doctrine, it is a vital part of the biblical revelation about the person and work of Jesus Christ.
- G. With it, the Gospel stands or falls!

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Selected Bibliography

*Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are from the *English Standard Version*. 2001. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

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