

THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF JESUS

Matthew wrote, *“All this happened so that what the Lord had said through the prophet might be fulfilled: Look! The virgin will become pregnant and have a son, and they will name Him ‘Immanuel’”, which means, ‘God With Us.’ When Joseph awoke, he did what the Lord’s angel had commanded. He took his wife home with him, but did not have relations with her until she gave birth to her son.”* (Mt 1:22-25) Matthew quoted Isaiah 7:14, written over 700 years before Christ, as fulfilled. The Christian Church has always taught that Jesus was born of a virgin, but nowadays some denominations and individual liberal “theologians” either reject the virgin birth or permit people to deny it.

They say that only several of the writers of the Bible mention it. Some plainly claim that in Isaiah 7:14 the Hebrew word *“Almah”* merely means “a young woman” The *Revised Standard Version* simply translated *“Almah”* as *“a young woman”* in Isaiah 7:14. That makes it hard for a lay person to see the connection with Matthew 1:22-23. Etymologically the word *“Almah”* means a girl who is old enough to have children. However, sound interpretation does not derive meaning simply from etymology, but from the context in which words occur. The root of the word is *“Elem.”* Saul called David that in 1 Sam 17:56 when he came back from fighting Goliath. He was about 20 years old, and unmarried. After David married Michal, he wasn’t called an *“Elem.”* Jonathan used that word for the “boy” who chased his arrows (1 Sm 20:22). *“Elem”* is never used for a married man. The feminine word *“Almah”* occurs 9 times in the Old Testament. Its meaning depends on the context where the words are used. In all of these passages the word means a “virgin” or “maiden” in the strict sense: Gen 24:43; Ex 2:8; Prov 30:19; 1 Chron 15:20; Song of Solomon 1:3; 6:8; Is 7:14; Ps 46:1; 68:26. In Ps 46: 1 the meaning is uncertain. *“Virgins”* there may refer to a musical instrument. Some liberal theologians have suggested that, if Isaiah really meant “virgin”, he would have used the Hebrew word *“bethulah.”* This word is used about 50 times, mostly in the sense of *“virgin”*, and *“bethulim”* is used ten times in the sense of *“virginity.”* However, in Joel 1:8 *“bethulah”* is used for a woman who has had a husband. *“Almah”* alone seems to insure the thought that the Lord, through Isaiah, designated an unmarried woman.

In the context of Isaiah chapter 7 we don’t have to maintain that there was another virgin birth at the time of King Ahaz. If the intended sense of the prophecy is the birth of Jesus, that is all that concerns us. The Greek translation of the OT, called the *“Septuagint”* used the word *“parthenos”* in Isaiah 7:14. That means “virgin” in the strict sense, and that is the word that Matthew retained when he quoted it as fulfilled. Quite simply, Jesus had no human father, even though legally Joseph was Jesus’ father.

Luke made a direct connection between the conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit and the deity of Mary’s baby. He also connected the holiness (or sinlessness) of Jesus from birth that resulted from His conception by the Holy Spirit: Gabriel told Mary, *“The Holy Spirit will come over you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. And for that reason the Holy Being to be born of you will be called the Son of God”* (Lk 1:35). Liberal theologians have made two great errors besides rejecting the full authority of the Scriptures. First, they don’t believe in direct prophecy. Anything that the Bible claims to be a prophecy can only be something after the event, or something that had not been intended as a prophecy interpreted differently. People should be aware that such people deny Jesus’ virgin birth. Secondly, they don’t believe that miracles happen. If the Scriptures claim a miracle, either it is a myth constructed to teach something, or we have to explain the event differently. Against liberal unbelieving “theologians” we have to assert that the birth of Jesus from a virgin was foretold 700 years in advance, and that it was a miracle. Gabriel made a special point of telling Mary, *“There is nothing that God will not be able to do.”* His words were an allusion to what the Lord told Sarah, who laughed at the idea that she could have a son in her old age: *“Is anything too hard for the Lord?”* (Gn 18:14). God, who created human beings, is not bound by his own rules for where the precise number of chromosomes for a male baby normally come from.

Plainly, beneath the denial of the virgin birth is something even more serious. Liberals want to say that Jesus was “divine”, but not in true sense that He existed as God from all eternity. They mean that He was born either as the natural son of Joseph and Mary, or, as the pagan Celsus and others said, he was an illegitimate son of Mary and a Roman soldier!

Pagans spoke of the virgin birth of demigods and heroes. However, it won’t do to claim that Matthew and Luke took over the idea of the virgin birth from religious sources in the pagan Greek and Roman world. In the early church both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians who had come out of paganism had turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God. They would never have turned back to the degrading features of pagan worship. To Greeks and Romans their gods were just like human beings, but with human virtues and vices

magnified. At the heart of the Greek and Roman ideas was the degrading notion that the gods lusted carnally for mortal women.

Some modern liberals say that they believe that Jesus is divine, but that they would not insist on the virgin birth as a binding doctrine within their denomination. It is not good enough to say that Jesus is “divine” if no more is meant than that He was an “inspired” and very admirable man. Christians must affirm with Peter, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*” (Mt 16:16), and with the angel, “*To you is born this day, in the city of David, a Saviour, who is Christ, the Lord*” (Lk 2: 11).

Such a liberal attitude also calls into question the authority of the Bible. The attitude that the Bible is a good book as the source of faith, but that it is not a textbook on matters of history, geography, or science (including biology) is dangerous. Rather, because God’s Word is truth, where it reports matters of history, geography, or science (including biology) let God be true! Besides, in history and archaeology, for example, the Bible has often triumphed over former doubts.

Some suggest that, because Paul did not mention Jesus’ virgin birth, there is some doubt about what Matthew and Luke reported. This was not the attitude of Jesus to Scripture. For Him one word of Scripture was final. The only question is: Virgin birth, true or false? If anyone answers, “false”, then the authority of the Bible has gone for him. He must have the greatest difficulty acknowledging God the Father as the Master of his heart when he rejects God’s Word through Matthew and Luke. If, after the Christian Church has for 1900 years held Jesus’ virgin birth, it now has to be given up, what is at stake is not just one element of the Christian faith, but all of it. For such people, the Bible presents a mythical, fairy-tale kind of language, which is removed from external facts. They are prepared to accept the moral and spiritual values of the Bible, and the example of Jesus, but no more. Indeed, if such people were consistent, they could not even depend on what the Scriptures report about the example of Jesus. Then the “authority” of the Bible is independent of what Jesus did and had done to Him nearly twenty centuries ago. The result is a recipe for a Christianity without Christ! And the consequence of that is that human beings have to save themselves, if they can!

Our faith is not a natural faith, in the sense that we can accept only what agrees with our natural reason. Though we insist on the actuality of the facts that the Scriptures report, our faith is supernatural. It rests on the mighty, miraculous acts of God, including Jesus’ virgin birth and His resurrection from the dead. Our faith is supernatural in another sense. Simply accepting the fact of the virgin birth makes no one a Christian. Accepting facts is one thing; and they are important. However, the Holy Spirit works saving faith in the heart of a person. The Holy Spirit applies to him or her the meaning of those facts, the realisation that they have happened for him or for her, to bring him or her God’s rescue from sin, death, the devil, and eternal damnation. Of course, the virgin birth is necessary! Whatever Jesus did on earth and whatever happened to Him involved Him as the incarnate Son of the living God. That is the reason why He is powerful to save.