

THE VIRGINAL CONCEPTION OF JESUS

The Gospel of Matthew was the most important gospel in the early history of Christianity. In early canon lists it was placed first, was the most widely read, and more often quoted by early Christian writers than the others. Of Matthew himself we know little beyond what is found in the NT. The tradition of attaching his name to the anonymous First Gospel dates from the 2nd century and is unanimously supported in early Christian history. Matthew was a Jewish tax gatherer, probably collecting tolls for Herod Antipas on the commercial traffic using the Damascus-Acre Road and possibly assessing taxes on the fishing industries of Galilee. He was one of the Twelve.

The Book of Matthew forms an important link to the OT in that it is usually understood to have been written to a Jewish-Christian community, possibly Antioch, Syria. It demonstrates a concerted effort to show that Jesus was the fulfillment of the OT anticipation of Messiah. Matthew contains over sixty explicit or substantial quotations of the OT and many more allusions, more than twice as many as any other gospel. Matthew's birth narratives are different than those of Luke, but they complement them well and fill out the story.

THE VIRGINAL CONCEPTION OF JESUS (Mt. 1:18-25)

In the genealogy proper, Matthew did not tell his readers who fathered Jesus, but now he addresses this question specifically. The expression "virginal conception" is more descriptive of the present passage than the traditional term "virgin birth," since the passage does not as yet describe a birth, only a conception.¹

According to Matthew, between the betrothal and the home-taking, Mary was found to be pregnant. How the discovery was made or how far along Mary was in the pregnancy is not explained, but Matthew is quite clear that the news deeply disturbed Joseph. Matthew is also careful to inform the reader that the pregnancy was a miraculous conception "through the Holy Spirit," something that Joseph did not know. He was left to figure the problem out for himself, and he could only conclude the worst. He knew the child was not his, and seemingly the only other options were seduction and rape.

Joseph wrestled with the most acute dilemma. Mary, his betrothed, was pregnant, and he knew not how. Was it her fault or was it someone else's? Being a "righteous" man, which is to say a

JOSEPH'S OPTIONS

The two Greek infinitives δειγματίσαι (= to publicly expose) and λάθρα ἀπολῦσαι (= secretly divorce) are significant in that they suggest Joseph considered both seduction and rape as possible causes of Mary's pregnancy. According to the Torah, if the encounter had occurred in a town, the woman was then assumed to have been seduced, since she had not been heard screaming for help. Both parties were to be executed. If it happened in the country, she was given the benefit of the doubt, since she could have been forced. In this case only the male was executed (Dt. 22:23-27). If there was only suspicion of seduction but no proof, the woman was required to submit to a judicial ordeal, an appeal to divine judgment to absolve or condemn her through the drinking of filthy water and the imposition of a curse (Nu. 5:11-31).

Rabbinical sources suggest that by this time the judicial ordeal could be declined and a divorce could be privately arranged before two witnesses.

¹ The term "virginal conception" has another advantage in that it avoids confusion with the Roman Catholic tradition which understands the virginity of Mary in a threefold way, i.e., as a virgin in conception, as a virgin in birthing (usually specified as a birth without pain and/or without rupturing the hymen), and as a perpetual virgin thereafter.

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Torah-observant Jew, he finally chose to decline the judicial ordeal and to shield Mary through a merciful alternative. He resolved to divorce Mary privately rather than publicly expose her.

It was only after he had chosen this course of action that God intervened to change Joseph's mind. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, urging him to complete the home-taking rather than proceed with a private divorce. When the angel addressed Joseph, he called him the "son of David," a point that Matthew has already demonstrated in the genealogy. Joseph was counseled not to be afraid of completing the home-taking, the second stage of Jewish marriage. Of course, to complete the marriage meant that he would be called upon to bear Mary's stigma as well. It meant that while he was willing to protect her from the overt charges of seduction or rape, he could never remove any popular suspicion that seduction or rape had actually occurred nor could he exempt himself from being suspected of intercourse prior to the home-taking. That suspicions of illegitimacy were indeed fostered in the Jewish community is hinted at later (Mk. 6:2-3; Jn. 8:41) and explicitly stated in non-biblical traditions.²

THE ANCIENT CREEDS

All the early expressions of Christian faith contain clear references to Jesus being born of a virgin. The Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and even the "Rule of Faith," which preceded both, contain the phrase or its equivalent "born by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary."

The divine action which resulted in Mary's pregnancy is explained by the phrase, "...what is conceived in her is through the Holy Spirit." Virtually all scholars agree that this passage intends to teach the virginal conception of Jesus.³ The phrase is uniformly included in the historic creeds of the church, and the virginal conception of Jesus points toward his uniqueness as both human and divine. There is mystery here, of course, and if one wishes to know the exact biological processes of the virginal conception, he/she can only be partially satisfied.

After the birth, Joseph was instructed to name the child "Jesus," the same instruction that Mary had received earlier (Lk. 1:31) and that normally would have taken place at the circumcision, eight days after the birth. That Joseph was involved in the naming of the child was important for legal reasons, since according to the Mishnah (*Baba Bathra* 8:6) this constituted Joseph as the legal father of Jesus, despite the unusual circumstances of the birth.

The name "Jesus" was common enough in Jewry, since it was the Greek equivalent to the OT name "Joshua," though by the 2nd century it had disappeared as a proper name when the Jews began to

² In the pseudepigraphic *Gospel of Nicodemus*, also called the *Acts of Pilate* (AD 4th or 5th century or earlier), the accusers of Jesus at his trial are depicted as charging that he was "born of fornication" (Chap. 2). In the pseudepigraphic *Coptic Gospel of Thomas* (about AD 140), there is an enigmatic saying which may refer to Jesus as the son of a harlot (*Logion* 105). Celsus, a pagan philosopher who wrote in about AD 178, says that Jewish opinion held Jesus to be the son of Mary and Panthera, a Roman soldier who corrupted her, and the story of the virgin birth was "not believed" (*Origen Against Celsus*, 1.28, 32, 39, 69). Rabbinic literature follows this same line, referring to Jesus as Yeshua ben Pantera (= Jesus son of Pantera) as well as by other derogatory epithets of illegitimacy.

³ Non-evangelical scholars may be reluctant to believe what Matthew clearly asserts, of course. J. A. T. Robinson, the left-wing Bishop of Woolwich, sums up the doubt about historical reliability when he states, "We are not bound to think of the Virgin Birth as a physical event, in order to believe that Jesus' whole life is 'of God,' cf. J. Robinson, *But That I Can't Believe* (New York: New American Library, 1967), p. 44. Such skepticism, however, arises largely from the philosophical and scientific convictions that the world has advanced to such an extent through science and technology that it is no longer possible for anyone seriously to hold to the New Testament view [i.e., supernatural] of the world. Classical Christians, on the other hand, have always retained their firm belief in the birth of Jesus through a miracle.

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consciously avoid it. The name itself, though fairly common, was of great significance to Matthew because of its theological meaning. The equivalents *Iesous* (Greek), *Yeshua* (Aramaic), and *Yehoshua* (Hebrew) may be traced etymologically to the combination of the short form of the name Yahweh (= *Yah*) with the Hebrew *hiphil* verb *hoshi'a* (= to save), and means “Yahweh saves” or “Yahweh is salvation.”

In the virginal conception of Jesus, Matthew saw a connection with a prophecy given by Isaiah in the 8th century BC (1:22-23). This, Matthew’s first fulfillment passage,⁴ goes back to the time of Judah’s political crisis during the reign of Ahaz, ca. 734 BC. Assyria was emerging as a superpower, threatening the small countries on the Mediterranean seaboard. Ephraim (the Israelite northern kingdom) had formed an alliance with Aram (Syria) in order to withstand Assyrian aggression. This Syro-Ephraimite league wanted Judah, the Israelite southern kingdom, to join the coalition, but Ahaz, the king of Judah, hesitated. His reluctance incited the leaders of the Syro-Ephraimite league, Rezin of Damascus and Pekah ben-Remaliah of Ephraim, to invade Judah, an attack that included the threat of deposing Ahaz and replacing him with their own man, ben-Tabeel, a man who was not even of the Davidic family (2 Kg. 16:5; Is. 7:1-2, 5-6). While Jerusalem was under siege, Isaiah was directed by God to meet Ahaz and assure him that the Syro-Ephraimite threat was an empty one and that Ahaz must put his trust in God (Is. 7:3-4, 7-9). Isaiah instructed Ahaz to ask for a sign to confirm this divine promise of security (Is. 7:10-11).

Ahaz, however, refused under the guise of pseudo-humility; he would not “put Yahweh to the test” (Is. 7:12). In actuality, Ahaz was not a serious worshiper of Yahweh (cf. 2 Kg. 16:1-4), and his refusal was only evidence of his lack of faith. Yahweh was angered by this impudence and gave a sign anyway, a historical sign that a maiden⁵ would give birth to a son and would

THE CONCEPT OF FULFILLED PROPHECY

The concept of fulfillment (πληρώω = to fulfill, make full, bring to completion) is somewhat broader than might be supposed at first glance. There are at least four distinct ways in which NT writers in general, and Matthew in particular, understood OT passages to have been “made full” or “fulfilled.”

Prediction/Verification: *Here, a future event is announced in advance, and it is fulfilled when that event takes place (cf. Mt. 2:5-6; Mic. 5:2).*

Enigmatic Passages Clarified: *Here, an ambiguity at the time of writing is resolved, where Matthew clarifies things by asserting that Yahweh was speaking to the Messiah himself when he said, “The Lord said to my Lord...” (Ps. 110:1; Mt. 22:41-46).*

Corporate Solidarity: *It was a common Hebrew conception that an individual could represent the many and vice versa. This fluidity between the one and the many became an important way of connecting Jesus (the one) with the true Israel (the many). Passages which in one sense seem to refer to the nation (Ho. 11:1) can in another sense refer to the individual representing of the nation (Mt. 2:15) so that in his life Jesus fulfilled a representative role for the many as the embodiment of the true Israel.*

Recapitulation: *In some cases, there was a correspondence between an event in the OT and an event in the life of Jesus, a sort of “history repeats itself.” When Jeremiah used the poetic figure of Rachel as the ghostly mother weeping over her children in the Assyrian exile, Matthew saw a recapitulation of this same grief in Herod’s slaughter of the innocents (Mt. 2:17-18).*

⁴ More than a dozen times Matthew will use fulfillment language: “This took place that it might be fulfilled...” (1:22; 2:5, 15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14, 35; 21:4; 26:56; 27:9).

⁵ A tremendous amount of ink has been spilled over the Hebrew word *’alma* translated either “virgin” (ASV, RSVmg,

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name him Immanuel (Is. 7:13-14). Isaiah did not immediately identify this maiden, but while there is some debate, it seems most likely that the maiden was either the wife or soon to be wife of Isaiah.⁶

THE IMMANUEL NAME

The name of the child, Immanuel, means “God with us,” a reflection of the divine promise to protect Ahaz if he would put his faith in Yahweh (Is. 7:4, 7-9). God’s presence would be evident in that before Immanuel had reached adolescence, the lands of the Syro-Ephraimite coalition would be devastated (Is. 7:16). Still, God’s presence would be there not only to protect Judah, but also to judge her, and while the nation would be protected from Ephraim and Aram, she would soon be invaded by Assyria as a further sign of God’s presence (Is. 7:16-25). Thus, the Immanuel sign to Ahaz was double-edged: it was a sign of protection, on the one hand, but a sign of judgment on the other. This double-edged character of the sign is reflected in the two names given to the sign-child. Not only was he to be called Immanuel (= God with us), he was also to be called Maher-shalal-hash-baz (= the spoil hastens, the plunder comes quickly) (Is. 8:1-2).

The predicted sign came to pass when Isaiah’s second son was born, and at the time of the birth, the word of Yahweh came to Isaiah confirming to him that this son was indeed the promised sign (Is. 8:3-4). The divine promise of protection from Ephraim and Aram would be kept. Yet the promise of a judgment by Assyria would also be kept (Is. 8:5-8). The land of the young Immanuel would suffer an invasion so serious that Jerusalem, the capital, would be surrounded by Assyrian armies, like someone standing in water up to the neck. That Isaiah’s son was the sign-child is further emphasized by a direct statement (Is. 8:18).

Seven centuries later, Matthew, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, saw a prophetic connection between Isaiah’s prediction to Ahaz of the sign-child and the birth of Jesus. The birth of Jesus “made full” the word of Yahweh given

to Isaiah about the Immanuel child. Matthew seems to be using the term “fulfill” in the sense of recapitulation. Since Jesus was miraculously born “of the Holy Spirit,” he was Immanuel in the most complete sense of the word, not merely God’s invisible presence among his people (to protect and judge them), but God visibly among them (to save them from sin)!

Joseph’s dream was decisive! He immediately completed the home-taking, just as he had been instructed by the angel. However, as Matthew is careful to point out, Joseph did not have conjugal relations with Mary until after the birth.⁷ When the promised child had been born, he named him Jesus. Since Matthew’s account of the nativity is largely from the perspective of Joseph (unlike Luke’s, which is largely from the perspective of Mary), he does not describe the circumstances of the birth itself. Rather, he will continue those parts of the narrative which keep Joseph central.

NIV, NIB, ESV, NAB, NASB, NLT) or “young woman” (RSV, NRSV, JPS, NET, NJB, ASVmg, NEB, NASBmg). The word usually refers to a girl of marriageable age. However, the word itself is not as precise in meaning as one might hope or as precise as some English translations might seem to suggest. Youngblood is probably the most forthright in saying, “The most that can be said of ‘*alma*’ is that in all of its OT occurrences it seems to be used of an unmarried woman, a ‘damsel’ which, in situations such as the one before us, carries with it a strong presumption in favor of virginity,” R. Youngblood, “Immanuel,” *ISBE* (1982) 2.807.

⁶ Other suggestions are that the maiden was the wife of Ahaz, or some other maiden who was known to both Ahaz and Isaiah. While some conservatives, on the basis of Mt. 1:23, see the prediction as referring exclusively to Mary, the mother of Jesus, the context of the Isaiah passage militates against such an interpretation, for it would make the sign completely irrelevant to Ahaz.

⁷ The expression *heos* (= until) suggests that Joseph and Mary engaged in normal conjugal relations after the birth of Jesus.