

## Lesson 60: Chapter 8: Paragraph 2: The Virgin Birth

Augustus Caesar, the adopted son of Julius Caesar in order to take over the rule of Rome brought Rome into its 'golden era' he established the Pax Romana and the Roman Empire flourished under his rule. Augustus used Myth to underscore his rule and allowed stories of a miraculous birth to arise about him. One source says, 'legend has it that his mother had a dalliance with some god or other. It seems that on the day he was born his mother had a dream that she was raised up to the sky and her intestines were spread all over the earth. His father also had a dream that the sun rose and set on his dear wife's womb. Well when the priests were consulted it was decreed that little Octavian must be the progeny of a god. But which god you may ask, well ancient sources are blurry on the subject, some say it was Jupiter himself, others suggest the god Mars.'<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that Augustus was a shrewd politician who milked his adoption by the deified Julius Caesar and who leaned into the myths around the so called founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus, he even built his house in a temple district in Rome to underline this impression of his being a god.

The claim is made that the Bible's teaching on the virgin birth of Christ is not unique or original, but rather it looks just like all the other miraculous birth stories that have been used to prop up a religious or political figure in the eyes of a superstitious mob. For example the birth of Hinduism's Krishna, 'According to the religious Hindu text, Vishnu Purana, Krishna was mentally transmitted from the mind of the god Vasudeva (an incarnation of Krishna himself) into the womb of the princess Devaki. This appears at first glance to be a striking parallel, but it cannot be classified a virgin birth because Devaki and Vasudeva had previously borne seven children together.'<sup>2</sup> Incidentally these stories began to circulate in the fourth century AD, this does not substantiate the idea that the virgin birth is borrowed from them but vice versa. Another example usually mentioned is the birth of Horus, I won't go into the details here except to say that the myth includes 2 gods having intercourse and conceiving, hardly a virgin birth. Another is Dionysius, 'Dionysus, for example, was the product of an affair between Zeus, the king of the gods, and a mortal woman named Semele. According to the Dionysus myth, Zeus' wife Hera learns of the affair and disguises herself as an old woman to befriend Semele. Her purpose was to cast a seed of doubt in this mortal woman's mind, that the father of her unborn baby was not really Zeus. Semele demands Zeus reveal himself, but mere mortals could not look upon undisguised gods without dying, and so she perished in flames. Zeus rescued the fetus and sowed him into his leg. Several months later, Dionysus was born.'<sup>3</sup>

We could multiply these examples but what we would find in every instance is that there was not a true virgin birth. Even any claim that a miraculous birth for a prominent figure predates the virgin birth does not stand because ultimately the birth of Christ is something that was prophesied from the beginning of the world, Gen. 3:15. Today we come to consider the miracle of the Virgin Birth. This has been a watershed miracle in the Liberal vs Fundamentalist debates in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but its importance is much greater than that, this is more than a point of orthodoxy, without the virgin birth there can be no salvation from sin.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://progressivechristianity.org/resource/the-greatest-birth-story-ever/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/was-the-virgin-birth-of-jesus-grounded-in-paganism>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

The 1689 gives us the following statement: 'being conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, the Holy Spirit coming down upon her: and the power of the Most High overshadowing her; and so was made of a woman of the tribe of Judah, of the seed of Abraham and David according to the Scriptures.' The 1689 does not follow the WCF's shorter statement which has the words 'of her substance,' but rather gives the longer statement of the first London Baptist Confession from 1644 which is a string of biblical statements, taken from Gal. 4:4; Rev. 5:5; Heb. 2:16; Rom. 1:3; 2 Tim. 2:8. Some have thought that this was to align the Reformed Baptists with the Anabaptist teaching of Christ's humanity not coming from Adam but coming from heaven with Him, the doctrine of the heavenly flesh of Christ. All the Reformed including the Reformed Baptists rejected this as a terrible error that undermines the humanity of Christ in that He has not share in our Adamic humanity.

Today as we come to this matter we come to the first of 2 studies, today we will be looking at the virgin birth, and next week we want to spend some time looking at the other Marian dogmas closely associated with it.

We will look at Luke 1:26-38.

There are two virgin birth accounts in the NT, found in Matthew and Luke. Some have fretted over the fact it is only recorded twice and see it as grounds for denying it as a miracle but this is just a case of anti-supernatural bias rather than compelling evidence for its exclusion. Feminists have tried to debunk the virgin birth because the gospels are written by men, but Luke's account is of great interest because he tells us that he researched the matter and interviewing the eye witnesses that were there, 1:1-4. And it is clear from the details about Jesus childhood that he had interviewed Mary who shared her personal thoughts with him, 2:35, 51.

1:26-27, 'In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary.' Luke gives us the details in a certain order, first she is a virgin; second she is betrothed to Joseph of the tribe of Judah; and third her name is given—Mary, which means excellence. Unlike all the other mythical miracle birth stories Mary was truly a virgin. There was no consummation with a deity; nor was she a married women like many of the mythical stories, she was an unmarried virgin. This is confirmed from her own mouth in 1:34, 'And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" The answer is given in v35 that this is by a miracle wrought through the power of God not through natural means. The question has often been raised, does it matter that Jesus was born of a virgin? One theologian has pointed out though that the virgin birth is the perfect method for bringing Christ into the world. A birthless incarnation would put a question mark over His true humanity; and a natural conception would put a question mark over His sinlessness and divinity. By being born of Mary, He is human and can be our representative in saving us from sin; and in being conceived miraculously He is able to be sinless and to be the Divine Son assuming a human nature, not overtaking an already present human person.

Lets underline these points: Jesus was not the product of in vitro fertilization where an already existing fertilized egg/alien human nature not sourced from Mary but from heaven was inserted into Mary's womb. Luke 1:31 makes very clear by the words of Gabriel that Mary will conceive by her womb, 'And behold,

you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.’ And again when Elizabeth by the Holy Spirit says the same thing, v42, <sup>42</sup>and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” Gal. 4:4 underlines this with some very specific language, ‘But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law.’ The language is literally ‘become of a woman.’ In fact the scripture goes so far as to say that Mary is not merely the bearer of Jesus but the Mother of Jesus, Elizabeth under inspiration of the Spirit calls Mary ‘the mother of my Lord,’ 1:43. This connection with Mary is what makes Him fully human. Through Mary He is the Son of David; the Lion of the Tribe of Judah; the seed of Abraham and the Seed of the woman, Eve. The promise of Gen. 3:15; of Gen. 12:1-3; of Gen. 49:10 of 2 Sam 7:12-13 are all fulfilled because He is born to Mary. Any so called mythical miraculous birth we see is predated by God’s promise given at the beginning of the world as soon as sin entered it. Any so called miraculous birth is a satanic counterfeit seeking to obfuscate the way in which God intended to save the human race. To allow any of these so called miracle births to diminish, to detract from, to cast in doubt the absolute wonder of the virgin birth is unacceptable. Here we see the faithfulness of God as He keeps His oldest promises, here we have the method of God’s salvation revealed that through a man born of woman we would be saved. The devil hates for God to get the glory for this and so it is shrouded in controversy and doubt.

Being fully human by having Mary as a mother He is of Adam’s race and so He is able to be a second Adam as Thomas has already explained for us. He cannot save what He does not assume. He cannot represent what He is not.

Now to our modern minds the idea of a woman being able to conceive a child without natural means seems impossible, and it is. This confused Mary as well and when she questioned how it could be possible because she was a virgin, the angel in Luke 1:35 explains how, ‘And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” She was not some gullible girl who just went along with these things but knew how babies were made. What is impossible with man is possible with God, 1:37. The second half of v35 explains why the virgin birth by the power of the Spirit is so important, ‘And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.’ His holiness and divine identity are upheld by this miracle. Connected to Adam through Mary but kept from sin by the power of God conceiving Christ ensures that Christ’s humanity like Adam’s prefall humanity is very good. Our salvation rests upon the sinlessness of Christ. He was sinless in nature by virtue of His virgin birth; sinless in life as He positively obeyed every commandment of God and resisted all sin; and He was an unblemished offering and offerer as He fulfilled His death for us upon the cross. The virgin birth plays a vital part in the One who knew no sin becoming sin for us to rescue us from sin. Without a virgin birth we do not have a second and last sinless Adam just another sinner in need of saving.

We said earlier that Jesus could not have been born by natural conception otherwise God becoming a man would be God possessing an already existing person’s nature and ejecting a previously existing person. This raises a debate that happened in the 5<sup>th</sup> century around the title ‘Theotokos’ Godbearer. Is it right to call Mary ‘the mother of God’. The text tells us that the fruit of her womb is the Son of God, and Elizabeth calls her ‘the mother of my Lord.’ There was a

man by the name of Nestorius who rejected the title 'Theotokos' for Mary and preferred 'christotokos.' Protestants are often sympathetic to Nestorius's concern because of the Mariolatry in the Roman Catholic Church, but Nestorius was wrong. Nestorius wrongly taught that Jesus Christ was a human person inhabited by the divine Logos, and so instead of two natures united in one person, what we call a hypostatic union, he taught two natures in two persons who co-inhabited the same space. The divine Logos dwelt in the human Christ like a man living in a temple. Nestorius so divided the two natures so as to create two persons. For Nestorius these two persons were so divided that Mary could be called the bearer of the human Christ without attributing this to the person of the Divine Son. Nestorius had a good intention trying to protect the divine Son from being seen as a creature and denied Mary the ability to give birth to the divine person. The problem is that scripture speaks in such a way that only two natures united in one person can properly account for. For example, Paul talks about crucifying the Lord of glory, this is technically impossible. But by virtue of the natures united in the one person, and the attributes of the other nature properly attributed to the person and not the other nature, this way of speaking becomes possible. Statements like God having blood, Acts 20:28; the fullness of the Godhead dwelling bodily in Christ Col. 2:9; and crucifying the Lord of glory 1 Cor. 2:8, are possible because we see Christ's two natures united in one person and can properly attribute properties of one nature of the person without communicating them to the other nature. By the same token we can affirm that Mary was the mother of God insofar as the two natures are united in one person, but she cannot be the mother of the divine nature of the Son, which no one was affirming. Nestorius fell short denying the union of two natures in one person; and ended up creating a second person in Christ veering into error through good intentions.

The virgin birth was of course famously prophesied in Is. 7:14, 'Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.' Here is one of the great prophecies of the Bible about 700 years before Jesus is born. King Ahaz is facing uncertain times as he is facing invasion from a Syria and Northern tribe alliance into Judah who want to coopt Judah into their alliance to stop the growing power of Assyria. He has struck a deal with Assyria seeking her aid by giving the gold of the temple to get Assyria to help against these invaders. While inspecting the water reserves in preparation for a war Isaiah is sent to Ahaz. Isaiah tells Ahaz not to fear, and to ask for a sign, 7:11. Ahaz has already made his contingency plans and hides behind piety saying he will not test God. It is not testing God if God says ask for a sign. At this point God volunteers a sign. This is where our prophecy comes in. There are two schools of thought about how this prophecy is to be understood. Is this prophecy speaking of something near and something far off; or only of something far off. I take this prophecy like 2 Sam. 7:12-14 which speaks of a Son sitting on David's throne to have a near fulfillment in Solomon but a penultimate fulfillment in Christ. This prophecy has a near fulfillment for Ahaz as God is saying that as long as it takes a virgin to get married, fall pregnant and have a child, that is how soon I am going to deal with these threats; but the far off fulfillment is penultimately speaking of Jesus born of the virgin Mary. The near fulfillment would see God with His people fulfilling the conditions of the Mosaic Covenant and being a near and present help. But in the penultimate fulfillment Immanuel would take on greater significance as the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

What I want us to think about is the idea that the virgin birth is a sign. A sign we know like baptism is something that God gives to point to something else. For example baptism is a sign, it points to the historical death and resurrection of Christ; it points to our union and participation in these in Him; it points to our assured resurrection from the dead when He returns. How is the virgin birth a sign?

Firstly, it is a sign of God's faithfulness to His promises. God promised in Gen. 3:15 that He would send a child born of a woman who would crush Satan's head. The virgin birth is a sign that God is faithful, that the day of salvation has come, that the promised one through whom Satan and death will be overcome is here. God is a promisekeeper what promise do you need to know He will keep?

Secondly, it is a sign of God with us, a marker of Jesus' divine identity as the Son of God. Throughout the OT God promises to be present and a Saviour of His people, when the day of salvation arrives it comes in an unexpected way for where we might have expected a Davidic king of his royal bloodline, a mere man. Instead we have the God-man.

Thirdly, and this is a point relevant to every sinner. Sin entered the world and man was incapable of saving themselves from God's judgement or Satan. But God promises to provide what we cannot. We then have a long history of God using miraculous births where barren woman after barren woman, a sign of our own spiritual barrenness is gifted an offspring by God. Each offspring a type of Christ or part of the bloodline of Christ that will eventuate in the birth of Jesus Christ. Flesh gives birth to flesh; we are barren; we cannot save ourselves, our salvation must come to us from outside the human race. Yet we are promised one of the human race after the fall who will be our Savior, how can this be? Here we see the profound power and wisdom of God. And even now as a sinner what do you have to offer to God, nothing but sin. So God not only gave Christ freely, and brought Christ into the world by His power without any contribution on our part, for Mary was a virgin. And even now He offers salvation as freely as He gave Christ to die for us. The weakness and inability of our flesh is seen here, but is also the opportunity God has taken to demonstrate His intention and His power to save.

We think too little of the virgin birth. Here the oldest promises are fulfilled; here the greatest of miracles occurs; here the barren ability of flesh gives way as God does a miracle to bring about our salvation. The devil wants nothing more than to mock, that to belittle, than to draw our attention away from this glorious miracle. It is by the virgin birth that Jesus can be our Savior.