

# The Virgin Birth

Christmas is coming. For many people it is a time of fantasy and fairy stories. Along with Father Christmas and the red-nosed reindeer they will add the story of the birth of Jesus. But is the virgin birth just a fairy story? This is our subject. The aim of this article is to help you understand what really happened and to help you to answer questions that others may ask of you.

I am going to answer three questions about the virgin birth:

- 1 How do we know that it is true?
- 2 Is it possible?
- 3 What does it mean for us?

Let's begin with our first question

## **1 How do we know that it is true?**

Our evidence comes from three sources: a Jewish tax collector, a Greek doctor and an Israeli prophet.

The Jewish tax collector was Matthew. He wrote a gospel in Hebrew soon after 40 AD and it was translated into Greek a few years later. This was well within the lifetime of members of the family of Jesus. James the brother of Jesus was stoned to death in Jerusalem in 62 AD. Fragments of the Greek version of Matthew's gospel found in Egypt have been dated to the early sixties. There is a fascinating book by Carsten Thiede called *The Jesus Papyrus* telling how these fragments were dated. The original gospel must have been already written some years earlier in Israel. Given the short time between the events described and the writing of the gospel, it cannot be a collection of legends like we have in the apocryphal gospels of the second century. Legends take time to develop.

Matthew got his information from James and his brothers. They got it from their father Joseph. Joseph probably died when James was about twenty years of age.

We can read Joseph's story in Matthew 1v18-25.

Joseph had a dream in which an angel told him that Mary's pregnancy was an act of God through the Holy Spirit. Joseph then married Mary but had no sexual relationship with her until after Jesus was born. Later they had four other sons and two or more daughters.

Luke was a Greek doctor. He came to Israel while Paul was in prison in Caesarea between 58 and 60 AD. While waiting for the outcome of Paul's trial he used his time interviewing people in Israel about Jesus. Being a doctor he was used to talking with women and Luke's gospel includes the eyewitness accounts of a number of women who had been followers of Jesus. Luke may

even have been able to speak to Mary herself, though she would have been around 80 at the time, or perhaps he spoke with one of her daughters.

We find Mary's story is in Luke 1v26-38. When she was a young engaged woman, an angel appeared to her and told she would have a son. Mary asked how this could happen. She knew that women don't get pregnant without sex. Though she and Joseph were engaged they had been faithful to God's law and had not had sex before marriage. They challenge us in our modern society when so many are not prepared to save sex for marriage. The angel told her that her pregnancy would be due to the Holy Spirit and the power of God.

After the angel's announcement, Mary rushed off to visit her relative Elizabeth who lived near Jerusalem. Elizabeth, soon to be the mother of John the Baptist, had also had a miracle, though it was not the same as Mary. After many years of not being able to have children, Elizabeth was now six months pregnant with the son of her husband Zechariah. This was a great encouragement to Mary. She needed this encouragement because three months later when she returned to Nazareth after the birth of John she had to tell Joseph that she was pregnant. You can imagine his feelings. His beloved fiancée goes away for three months and then comes back pregnant and tells it was an act of God. What would you think?

However, as Matthew tells us 1v20-25, Joseph was finally persuaded by God in a dream to believe Mary. He married her and put up with the shame of all the comments of people in Nazareth. "Poor Joseph, he could not control himself and now they have had to rush into marriage". It was embarrassing for both of them.

Seven hundred years earlier the prophet Isaiah 7v14 had told that a virgin would have a son, who would be called Emmanuel, God is with us. At the time of Isaiah this was fulfilled when he married a prophetess and they had a son but Matthew sees a deeper fulfillment in this prophecy. For him it pointed to the real virgin birth of Jesus.

So these are our three witnesses, two within 60 years of the event and one 700 years before it.

Now we come to our second question:

## **2 Is it possible?**

In other words: Could God have designed genetic code similar to that in a normal male sperm and inserted it into one of Mary's eggs to fertilize it? Obviously the answer is "Yes" because God made the whole universe and can do whatever he chooses. The real question for many people is not so much "could God do it" but "Why would he do it? They believe in a God who started the whole universe but they get uncomfortable that he should actually intervene in human history. It is true that most of the time we do not see God doing miracles otherwise they would not be miracles. Even miracles in the

Bible are spread out over many years. So why should this one child be produced by the direct action of God instead of by normal sex?

This brings us to our third question:

### **3 What is the significance of it?**

The first significance we find in the words of the angel to Mary:

#### **Jesus was called the “Son of God”**

“The Holy Spirit shall come upon you and the power of the Highest shall overshadow you: therefore also that holy one which shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God” Lk 1v35.

Jesus was not to be the son of Joseph but the Son of God. We know from other places that, as a spiritual being, Jesus has eternally been the Son of God. But God wanted Jesus his Son also as a human being.

There was one other person who was also called a son of God, Adam. Luke tells us about him also. He gives a family tree for Jesus but he is careful to add the words “He was the son, *so it was thought*, of Joseph” Luke 3v23.

The family tree goes all the way back to Adam. He is called a son of God because he had no human father, God created him, 38. This brings us to the second significance of the virgin birth.

#### **Jesus did not need to die**

In Bible times, sons would inherit from their fathers. If Jesus were a son of Adam he would inherit from Adam. What was the inheritance Adam left to his sons? It was death. Adam sinned and was denied access to the tree of life and died. This was the inheritance he passed on to all those who were his legal children. Paul explains this in Roman’s 5v12-19.

Briefly, Paul’s point is that the children of Adam inherit death from Adam as well as deserving it by their own sinful actions. Through the virgin birth, Jesus had God as his father and thus did not inherit death from Adam. In addition, through his sinless life Jesus did not deserve death because of his actions. Therefore as the one person who did not need to die, he could freely choose to die for you and me. He died the death that we inherit because we are children of Adam and also deserve because of our own sins.

As we start to understand the significance of the virgin birth, it helps us understand another difficult passage in the New Testament. In Matt. 22v41-46, Jesus asked a question of the people who were asking him questions. They all agreed that the Messiah was the son of David. They also agreed that no parent would call his own son his lord because it is children who must always give respect to their parents. So Jesus asked how it could be possible that David called the Messiah his Lord when the Messiah was his son? No one had any answer because they did not know about the virgin birth. With what we now know we can understand what Jesus was telling. It is true that

biologically, through Mary, Jesus was descended from David, as from Adam. But legally, because God was his Father, he was not subject to David but was above him. Thus David rightly called him Lord.

### **Jesus gives life to all who are born again**

There is a third significance of the virgin birth for us. Whereas the children of Adam inherit death, the ones who become children of God through faith in Jesus inherit from their “ancestor” Jesus. What does Jesus have to give us? It is life! Jesus told that just as the Father has life in himself, so Jesus has life in himself, John 5v26. He offers us that life.

Of course, since we are physically children of Adam, our bodies die even if we are Christians, but there is more to us than the body. When we become Christians we receive a new Spirit from God, and this changes us on the inside. One day the new person we have become will receive a new body that will never die.

It is like a computer that gets new software downloaded into it. The new software takes over many of the functions of the computer. One day that software is uploaded to new hardware and the old hardware is scrapped. The important thing is that we learn to cooperate with the Holy Spirit so that when the upload happens there is something to transfer. The more we use the gifts God has given us the more we will be able to serve him in the future.

As Paul writes in 1 Cor. 15v45-49, Jesus was the last Adam, the second Man. This could only have happened through the virgin birth otherwise he would have been simply a son of Adam instead of another Adam. As the last Adam and the second Man he became the beginning of a new race of people who inherit life and not death.

The virgin birth is thus no fairy story made up for Christmas but is one of the foundation teachings on which our salvation is based. It shows us that Jesus is qualified to be the sacrifice offered for our sins. It also shows us that in him we can receive a new life that will continue for eternity.

If you have trusted Jesus to be your savior, you can rejoice in the truth of the virgin birth. If you have not yet trusted in Jesus, I invite you to do it now because he is able to save you from your sins and to give you new life, as John tells us in John 1v12,13.

Graham Turner  
December 2008