



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

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Lord's Day 14 - April 6, 2008

- 35 **Q.** *What does it mean that he “was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary”?*
 A. That the eternal Son of God, who is and remains true and eternal God, took to himself, through the working of the Holy Spirit, from the flesh and blood of the virgin Mary, a truly human nature so that he might become David’s true descendant, like his brothers in every way except for sin.
- 36 **Q.** *How does the holy conception and birth of Christ benefit you?*
 A. He is our mediator, and with his innocence and perfect holiness he removes from God’s sight my sin—mine since I was conceived.

The accounts of Jesus’ birth in Matthew (chapter 1) and Luke (chapters 1-2) are clear and unequivocal: Jesus’ birth was not ordinary. He was not an ordinary child and his conception did not come about in the ordinary way. His mother Mary was a virgin, having had no intercourse prior to conception and birth. As one author puts it, by the Holy Spirit, Mary’s womb became the cradle of the Son’s incarnation (Matt. 1:20; Luke 1:35).

It’s no secret then in recent history, the doctrine of the virgin birth (or more precisely, the virginal conception) has been ridiculed by many outside the church, and now a few voices inside the church, as a make-believe fairy tale. Two arguments are usually mentioned. First, the prophecy about a virgin birth in Isaiah 7:14, it is argued, actually speaks of a young woman and not a virgin. (To be fair, some scholars make this argument about Isaiah’s prophecy and still believe in the virgin birth). Many have pointed out that the Hebrew word in Isaiah is *almah* and not the technical term for virgin, *bethula*. It is true that *almah* has a wider semantic range than *bethula*, but there are no clear references in the Old Testament where *almah* does not mean virgin. The word *almah* occurs 9 times in the Old Testament and wherever the context makes its meaning clear, the word refers to a virgin. More importantly, the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures begun in the 3rd century B.C.) translated *almah* with the Greek word *parthenos* (the same word used in Matthew 1:23 where Isaiah 7:14 is quoted), and everyone agrees that *parthenos* means “virgin.” The Jewish translators of the Septuagint would not have used a clear Greek word for virgin if they understood Isaiah 7:14 to refer to nothing more than a young woman.

Second, many have objected to the virgin birth because they see it as a fairly typical bit of pagan mythologizing. Star Wars has a virgin birth, Mithraism had a virgin birth, Christianity has a virgin birth. Big deal. They are all just fables. This is a popular argument and it sounds quite plausible as first glance, but there are a number of problems with it. (1) The assumption that there was a proto-typical God-Man who had certain titles, did certain miracles, was born of a virgin, saved his people, and then got resurrected is not well-founded. In fact, no such prototypical “hero” existed before the rise of Christianity. (2) It would have been unthinkable for a Jewish sect (which is what Christianity was initially) to try to win new converts by adding pagan elements to their gospel story. I suppose a good Jew might make up a story to fit the Old Testament, but to mix in bits of paganism would have been anathema to most Jews. (3) The virgin birth parallels are not as strong as we might think. Consider some of the usual suspects. Alexander the Great: his most reliable ancient biographer (several centuries after his death) makes no mention of a virgin birth. Besides, the story that began to circulate (after the rise of Christianity it’s worth mentioning) is about a miraculous conception and not a virgin birth (Alexander’s parents were already married). Dionysus: like so many of the pagan “parallels”, he was born when a god (in this case Zeus) disguised himself as a human and impregnated a human princess. This is not a virgin birth and not like the Holy Spirit’s role we read in the gospels. Mithra: for starters, he was born of a rock, not a virgin. Moreover, the cult of Mithra in the Roman Empire dates to after the time of Christ so any depen-

dence is Mithraism on Christianity and not the other way around. Buddha: his mother dreamed that Buddha entered her in the form of a white elephant. But this story doesn't appear until five centuries after his death and she was already married. I could go on. The so-called parallels always occur well after the life in question, well into the Christian era, and are not really stories of virginal conceptions anyway.

Even for those who believe in the virgin birth, it is sometimes questioned whether the doctrine is really that important. For example, one popular author has written, in what has become a very well-known passage:

What if tomorrow someone digs up definitive proof that Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry, and archaeologists find Larry's tomb and do DNA samples and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the virgin birth was really just a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in to appeal to the followers of Mithra and Dionysian religious cults that were hugely popular at the time of Jesus, whose gods had virgin births? But what if as you study the origin of the word virgin, you discover that the word virgin in the gospel of Matthew actually comes from the book of Isaiah, and then you find out that in the Hebrew language at that time, the word virgin could mean several things. And what if you discover that in the first century being born of a virgin also referred to a child whose mother became pregnant the first time she had intercourse? What if that spring was seriously questioned? Could a person keep jumping? Could a person still love God? Could you still be a Christian? Is the way of Jesus still the best possible way to live?

There are a lot of questions here, but the underlying one seems to be this: is the virgin birth really that essential to Christianity? My answer, not surprisingly, is a resounding yes! Let me give you four reasons why.

First, the virgin birth is essential to Christianity because it has been essential to Christianity. That may sound like weak reasoning, but only if we care nothing about the history and catholicity of the church. Granted, the church can get things wrong, sometimes even for a long time. But if Christians, of all stripes in all places, have professed belief in the virgin birth for two millennia, maybe we should be slow to discount it as inconsequential. Being a Christian in any historic sense of the word means believing core doctrines like those summarized in the Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed, both of which attest to the virgin birth and have been believed on throughout the world for centuries. In his definitive study of the virgin birth, J. Gresham Machen

concluded that "there can be no doubt that at the close of the second century the virgin birth of Christ was regarded as an absolutely essential part of the Christian belief by the Christian church in all parts of the known world." Perhaps, then, we should not be so hasty in dismissing the doctrine as mostly irrelevant to Christian faith and practice.

Second, the gospel writers clearly believed that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived. We don't know precisely how the Christ-child came to be in Mary's womb, except that the conception was "from the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 1:20). But we do know that Mary understood the miraculous nature of this conception, having asked the angel "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34). The gospels do not present the virgin birth as some prehistoric myth or pagan copy-cat, but as "an orderly account" of actual history from eyewitnesses (Luke 1:1-4). If the virgin birth is false, the historical reliability of the gospels is seriously undermined.

Third—and this is where we finally intersect with the Catechism—the virgin birth demonstrates that Jesus was truly human and truly divine. How can the virgin birth be an inconsequential spring for our jumping when it establishes the very identity of our Lord and Savior? The Catechism says that the eternal Son of God took to himself a human nature through the flesh and blood of the virgin Mary. Notice Answer 35 stresses that the Son of God *remained* true and eternal God. Jesus may have emptied himself in the sense that he humbled himself as a servant for our salvation, but he did not empty himself of his divinity. Rather, while retaining the fullness of his deity, he took to himself a human nature (Phil. 2:5-8). If Jesus had not been born of a human, we could not believe in his full humanity. But if his birth was like any other human birth—through the union of a human father and mother—we would question his full divinity. The virgin birth is necessary to secure both a real human nature and a completely divine nature.

Fourth, the virgin birth is essential because it means Jesus did not inherit the curse of depravity that clings to Adam's race. Jesus was made like us in every way except for sin (Heb. 4:15; 7:26-27). Every human father begets a son or daughter with his sin nature. We may not understand completely how this works, but this is the way of the world after the fall. Sinners beget sinners (Psalm 51:5). Always, without fail. So if Joseph was the real father of Jesus, or Mary had been sleeping around with someone else, Jesus is not spotless, not innocent, and not perfectly holy. And as result, we have no mediator, no imputation of Christ's righteousness (because he has no righteousness to impute to us), and no salvation.

So, yes, the virgin birth is kind of essential.