

The Hidden Meaning of the Virgin Birth

(Matthew 1:18-25)

Jerry Truex; December 18, 2016

A. Introduction

Today, we look at the story of Jesus' virginal conception—otherwise known as the virgin birth. It is an advent story, because it talks about the advent or coming of God in the person of Jesus.

For many Christians, the virgin birth story has become a test case for "orthodoxy."

- If you believe in miracles, you believe in God and the virgin birth.
- If you believe in the Bible, you believe in the virgin birth.
- If you believe Jesus is divine, you believe in the virgin birth.

This story is worth looking at closely. If you recall, the first chapter of Matthew presents the genealogy of Jesus (1:1-17) and then "the virginal conception" story (1:18-25).

The *genealogy* (1:1-17) tells us that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of David, and the son of Abraham, in sum, the *telos* or goal of Israel's history.

Matthew 1:1 An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham...

³ and Zerah by Tamar...

⁵ and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab...

⁶ and Jesse the father of King David. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah...

¹⁶ and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

¹⁷ So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations

Note that the beginning and end of the genealogy identifies Jesus as the Messiah and links him to the father of the Jewish people, Abraham, to the great king (anointed, messiah) David, and to four women who were perceived to have checked sexual relationships.

The *virginal conception story* (1:18-25) further clarifies the meaning of the genealogy with more exalted descriptions of Jesus. The virginal conception story has three parts: Problem, Solutions, and Results.

B. The Virginal Conception (Matt 1:18-25)

1. Problem: Joseph's Dilemma (18-19)

a. Introduction (18a)

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah ¹⁸ Τοῦ δὲ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἡ γένεσις οὕτως ἦν.
took place in this way.

The word translation "birth" in verse 18 is *genesis* (ἡ γένεσις). It is the same word translated "genealogy" in verse 1. Matthew is presenting the *genesis* (origin or birth) of Jesus the Messiah.

b. Mary's pregnancy (18b)

¹⁸ ... When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together [lit. "came together"], she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ ... μνηστευθείσης τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ Μαρίας τῷ Ἰωσήφ, πρὶν ἢ συνελθεῖν αὐτοὺς εὐρέθη ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχουσα ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου.

Verse 18 tells us that Mary was pregnant—literally, "was found in the belly having" (εὐρέθη ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχουσα)—AFTER she was engaged to Joseph, but BEFORE they "lived together" or literally "came together" (συνελθεῖν).

pregnant AFTER betrothal,
but BEFORE they had sex ("came together")

Betrothal—pledged in marriage or engagement—in ancient Judaism took place at age twelve for women and eighteen or older for men.¹ The engagement lasted about one year after which time the woman moved from her father's authority to her husband's.² Betrothal was the legal equivalent of marriage and required a certificate of divorce to sever the relationship.

Now, Mary, who was between the ages of 12 and 14, was living at home when she was discovered to be pregnant.

¹ *b. Yeb.* 62 (*Yebamot* means "sister-in-law"); W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Vol. I, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988) 199; Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

² *m. Ketub.* 5.2; *m. Ned.* 10:5; *b. Ketub* 57b.

c. Joseph's response (19)

¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

¹⁹ Ἰωσήφ δὲ ὁ ἀνὴρ αὐτῆς, δίκαιος ὢν καὶ μὴ θέλων αὐτὴν δειγματίσαι, ἐβουλήθη λάθρα ἀπολῦσαι αὐτήν.

In verse 19, Joseph is called a "righteous man" (δίκαιος ὢν), which means he kept the Torah.³

So Mary's pregnancy placed Joseph in a dilemma: He had to divorce Mary because of her pregnancy, yet he didn't want to publicly disgrace her—"public disgrace" (δειγματίζω) refers to a public trial.⁴

So instead of putting Mary through a public trial, he decided to "dismiss" or "divorce" (ἀπολῦσαι) her privately or secretly (λάθρα) with two or three witnesses signing the divorce document (Deut. 24:1; *m. Git* 2.5; 9.4-5).

2. Angelic Message (20-21)

²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

²⁰ ταῦτα δὲ αὐτοῦ ἐνθυμηθέντος ἰδοὺ ἄγγελος κυρίου κατ' ὄναρ ἐφάνη αὐτῷ λέγων· Ἰωσήφ υἱὸς Δαβὶδ, μὴ φοβηθῆς παραλαβεῖν Μαρίαν τὴν γυναῖκά σου· τὸ γὰρ ἐν αὐτῇ γεννηθὲν ἐκ πνεύματος ἑστίν ἁγίου. ²¹ τέξεται δὲ υἱόν, καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦν· αὐτὸς γὰρ σώσει τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν.

²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

The Angel appears in a dream to help Joseph live within the divine will.

Look at the pattern. Joseph was determined to obey God and determined to act mercifully. His intent [Heb. *kavanagh*] was right, but his solution wrong. It appears that God honors the right intention of a person and intervenes with divine guidance.

In addition to scripture, *dreams* are primary ways in which God reveals and guides people. Six times in Matthew God's will is revealed in dreams.⁵

³ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Vol. I, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988) 203.

⁴ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Vol. I, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988) 204.

⁵ Matt 1:20; 2:12, 13, 19, 22; 27:19.

Matthew is “not just concerned about objective events, but also about (what we must regard as) subjective experiences.”⁶

The Angel of the Lord has three words for Joseph.

a. Commands Joseph not to fear (20b)

²⁰ ... [an angel of the Lord said] "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife ...

²⁰ ... Ἰωσήφ υἱὸς Δαυίδ, μὴ φοβηθῆς παραλαβεῖν Μαρίαν τὴν γυναῖκά σου·

First, the Angel commands Joseph not to be afraid. The appearance of the Angel is a theophany. A theophany is a vision-like appearance of God. In this case, the theophany comes in a dream state.

The Angel instructs Joseph is not to be afraid. Why would Joseph be afraid “to take Mary as his wife” (παραλαβεῖν Μαρίαν τὴν γυναῖκα σου)?

Joseph lived in an honor-shame culture. In that culture, honor, more than wealth, was the greatest value. In that culture, at that time, failure to divorce Mary would be shameful and dishonoring. Joseph (and Mary) would have to endure the shame and disgrace of raising an illegitimate child. But, the Angel makes it clear; if Joseph does the Lord’s will, he has nothing to fear.

b. Explains what has happened (20c)

²⁰ ... for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

²⁰ ... τὸ Γὰρ ἐν αὐτῇ γεννηθὲν ἐκ πνεύματός ἐστιν ἁγίου.

Second, the Angel explains what has happened. Now Joseph knows what the reader has known since verse 18. Mary has conceived by the Holy Spirit. Literally, the text says, “for the [child] in her having been conceived is from the Holy Spirit.”

c. Utters a prophecy concerning Mary’s son (21)

²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

²¹ τέξεται δὲ υἱόν, καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦν· αὐτὸς γὰρ σώσει τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν.

⁶ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Vol. I, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988) 205.

Third, the Angel utters a prophecy—she will bear, you will name him, he will save—all future tense. In Jewish culture, male babies were named on the eighth day (circumcision) by either parent.

However, for Matthew, it is important the Joseph carries out that responsibility, because it will signify that Joseph has accepted the child as his own. To take Mary as his wife and to name Jesus means that Joseph accepted Jesus is his legal son⁷ and, in this way, Jesus becomes the legal Davidic Messiah.

The Greek name “Jesus” (Ἰησοῦς) stands for the Hebrew “Yeshua” (יְשׁוּעָה), which is related to the Hebrew verb “to save” and the Hebrew noun “salvation”.

The child’s name will be “Jesus” because he will save his people from sin. It was expected that the Messiah would save his people—Jews and Gentiles—in a national-political sense from Roman occupation, so it is more profound to hear that salvation would be from sins; “Jesus will deliver the people from a bondage even more critical than political oppression (cf. Ps. 130:8; Matt. 26:28).”⁸

3. Results

a. Fulfillment of Prophecy (22-23)

<p>²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³ “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”</p>	<p>²² τοῦτο δὲ ὅλον γέγονεν ἵνα πληρωθῇ τὸ ῥηθὲν ὑπὸ κυρίου διὰ τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος· ²³ ἰδοὺ ἡ παρθένος ἐν γαστρὶ ἔξει καὶ τέξεται υἱόν, καὶ καλέσουσιν τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἐμμανουήλ, ὃ ἐστὶν μεθερμηνευόμενον μεθ’ ἡμῶν ὁ θεός.</p>
--	--

Finally, in verses 22-23, we come to the prophecy in Isaiah that Matthew used to build his story of Jesus’ virginal conception.

Matthew quotes from the LXX Isaiah 7:14, which refers to a “virgin” (παρθένος; *parthenos*) who will conceive a child. In contrast, the Hebrew version of Isaiah 7:14 uses the word “young woman” (עַלְמָה; *almah*).

Isaiah 7:14. Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. (NRSV)

⁷ Isa. 43:1: “I have called you by name, you are mine” (NRSV).

⁸ Richard B. Gardner, *Matthew*, BCBC (Scottsdale: Herald, 1991) 40.

LXX Isaiah 7:14. διὰ τοῦτο δώσει κύριος αὐτὸς ὑμῖν σημεῖον ἰδοὺ ἡ παρθένος ἐν γαστρὶ ἔξει καὶ τέξεται υἱόν καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἐμμανουὴλ

This is important because it shows that Jesus' origin was in accord with scripture and that vindicates the church as the continuation of Israel. "If Jesus, whom the church confesses, has fulfilled scriptures, then Christians are the true people of God."⁹

"More important than the process of conception is the fact that the one conceived will be Emmanuel, God with us (cf. Isa. 7:14; 8:8, 10)."¹⁰

Matthew's Gospel stresses that God is present with us. At the beginning of Gospel, Matthew 1:23 speaks of "God *with us*." At the end of the Gospel, Matthew 28:20, Jesus says, "I am *with you* always"

b. Joseph's Obedient Response (24-25)

<p>²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.</p>	<p>²⁴ ἐγερθεὶς δὲ ὁ Ἰωσήφ ἀπὸ τοῦ ὕπνου ἐποίησεν ὡς προσέταξεν αὐτῷ ὁ ἄγγελος κυρίου καὶ παρέλαβεν τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ, ²⁵ καὶ οὐκ ἐγίνωσκεν αὐτὴν ἕως οὗ ἔτεκεν υἱόν· καὶ ἐκάλεσεν τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦν.</p>
--	--

The story of the virginal conception of Jesus ends with a brief statement about Joseph's obedient response—he took Mary as his wife and Jesus as his son.

This story also rules out belief that Mary was a "perpetual virgin," which is taught by the Roman Catholic Church. Matthew tells us that Joseph did not have sexual relations with Mary "until" (ἕως) Jesus was born.

That Mary was not a perpetual virgin is supported by Luke 2:7, which says that Jesus was the "first-born son," and Matthew 12:46 and 13:55, which refer to the brothers and sisters of Jesus.

C. Reflections

This text has been one of the most divisive texts in the Bible. At times, the church has gotten sidetracked with questions that the text neither addresses nor asks:

⁹ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Vol. I, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988) 213.

¹⁰ Richard B. Gardner, *Matthew*, BCBC (Scottsdale: Herald, 1991) 40.

1. Was the virgin birth necessary to keep Jesus from acquiring our sinful nature?
2. Did Jesus receive his human identity from Mary and his divine identity from the Holy Spirit?
3. How is it possible for a human to receive only half the human genome and still be a person? How can Jesus be like us in every way when this story says his was not?
4. Was Jesus born of a virgin because virginity is better than marital life?
5. Is the virgin birth scientifically possible?
6. Can we verify the historicity of this account?
7. If this happened, why doesn't Paul, John, or Mark talk about it?

Questions like these lead me to believe we have missed the point. I would like to ask two other questions that move me in a different direction.

The first question is what kind of literature or genre is this story? Is it history? Fiction? Biological science? Theology? Or what?

The second question is what is the significance of the story? What was the significance of this story for Matthew? Why did Matthew include it in his Gospel?

1. Genre: *Midrashic Haddadah*

First, what is the genre of the virginal conception story? Many scholars recognize Matthew's virginal conception story as ancient Jewish *midrash*. Literally, *midrash* means "to investigate" or "to study," so *midrash* is a method of Jewish interpretation. It also refers to ancient works of interpretation of the Jewish Bible. There are at least 35 major works, including the *Mekilta* on Exodus, *Sirpa* on Leviticus, *Midrash Rabbah* (Gen Rab, Exod Rab, etc), and *Midrash Aggadah*.

Matthew's story of the virginal conception looks like a specific type of *midrash* called, *midrashic haddadah on Isaiah 7:14*.¹¹ *Midrashic haddadah* quotes a piece of scripture and then a story is presented that illustrates or applies that biblical text.

This is what Matthew does. Look at Isaiah 7:14.

Isaiah 7:14.¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. (NRSV)

With that verse in view, Matthew then creates or retells the story of Jesus' conception as the *telos* or fulfillment for which that prophecy was written.

¹¹ Donald Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, WBC, Vol. 33A (Dallas: Word, 1993) 15-17; Richard B. Gardner, *Matthew*, BCBC (Scottsdale: Herald, 1991) 36-37; Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

“The story is not told for the facts alone, but to illustrate their deeper meaning” or theological significance of Jesus.¹²

2. Significance: *Messianic Theology*

What is the significance of Matthew’s virginal conception story? From the standpoint of Isaiah 7:14, Matthew tells us that the conception of Jesus conforms to the divine plan for the Messiah laid out in scripture.

The story is—in my judgment—is not historically factual, but nevertheless profoundly true in another and more important sense. The story affirms that Jesus is the Messiah, the one through whom God’s promises to Israel and to the Nations will be fulfilled. Through Jesus, God’s ultimate purposes for humanity will happen.

The focus of the story is not only the physical, biological process, but the theological significance. What the story asks is not whether we can consider the virginal conception physically possible, but whether in this birth we can see God’s own, unique intervention for our salvation in Jesus, God *with us*.¹³

And, more than that, at another level of interpretation, a spiritual level, we see the mother of Jesus being put forth as an example for all of us in giving birth to god. We must ask ourselves how we can give birth to god in our lives. How can the virginal conception happen within us?

¹² Hagner, *Matthew 1 – 13*, 16.

¹³ Richard B. Gardner, *Matthew*, BCBC (Scottsdale: Herald, 1991) 43.