

The Virgin Birth of Jesus

A little girl came home from Sunday school triumphantly waving a paper over her head. “Mommy!” she said. “My teacher says I drew the most unusual Christmas picture she has ever seen.

The mother studied the picture for a moment and concluded it was indeed a very unique picture of the nativity scene. She said to her daughter, “This is wonderfully drawn, but why have you made all of them ride in an airplane?”

The little girl said, “Well that’s ‘cause they took their flight into Egypt.”

She had a hint of disappointment that the picture’s meaning was not immediately obvious to her mother.

“Oh, of course . . . but who is that mean looking man at the front of the airplane?”

“That’s Pontius, the Pilot!” the girl said, now visibly impatient.

“I see. And here you have Mary and Joseph and the baby,” the mother volunteered. Studying the picture silently for a moment, she summoned the courage to ask, “But who’s the overweight guy sitting behind Mary?”

Her daughter said, “That’s Round John Virgin, of course” (Stephen Davey from “*The Father’s Gift*” Sermon).

How do you view Christmas this year? Do you have a skewed perspective? I have been to so many Christmas socials I am beginning to see myself as Round John Virgin.

Three of the four Gospel writers saw the first Christmas quite differently from our sweet Sunday school artist. John writes the most theologically when he declares that the eternal Word (John 1:1) “was made flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (1:14).

The other two Gospel writers, Matthew and Luke, tell us how the eternal Word became man, through the Virgin Birth (Robert Raymond. *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 548).

John makes the great doctrinal statement and Matthew and Luke put it a narrative for us.

First, there is the announcement of the supernatural birth of Jesus’ forerunner in Luke 1:5-25.

Then, there is the announcement of the supernatural birth of Jesus to Mary in Luke 1:26-56.

The popular talk-show host Larry King was once asked whom he would choose, if he had the choice to interview one person across history. Larry King replied that he would like to interview Jesus Christ and that he would ask Him just one question: "Are You indeed virgin born?" "The answer to that question," said King, "would explain history for me" (*Why Jesus* by Ravi Zacharias).

Luke answers King's question about the virgin birth of Christ in his record of the supernatural births of John and Jesus in Luke one.

First, The Supernatural Birth of Jesus' Forerunner in Luke 1:5-25.

The atmosphere in Luke one is thick with the supernatural: Parents unable by natural means to have children but then giving birth because of supernatural conceptions, angels materializing, the Holy Spirit working, and OT Scripture being fulfilled.

In Luke 1, there is an intended comparison between the births of John the Baptist (Jesus' forerunner) and Jesus. Along with these common parallels there will be some striking contrasts that exalt Christ as the greater of the two. In both cases

1. Comparison: The parents of John and Jesus who have a humanly impossible circumstance are introduced. Contrast: While John's birth is supernatural, it is not unique. Abraham and Sara also gave birth in their old age. Jesus' supernatural birth is the only ever virgin birth.
2. Comparison: An angel announces the supernatural births of John and Jesus. Contrast: While John's birth fulfills the forerunner prophecies, Jesus' birth fulfills the great virgin birth prophecy of Isaiah 7:14.
3. Comparison: There is the giving of a supernatural sign to both parents. Contrast: The sign given to John's parents is Zachariah's dumbness. The sign given to Mary was Elizabeth's supernatural birth which prepares us for Jesus' supernatural virgin birth.
4. Comparison: The supernatural births of John and Jesus. Contrast: While, John was filled by the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb, Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in his mother's womb.

Luke is illustrating that John was the forerunner who came before Jesus but Jesus is the exalted Son of God. In John 1:15, John's message is summarized, "he that comes after me is preferred before me for he was before me." John admitted that Jesus was His superior because Jesus is God. John preceded Jesus in time. Jesus preceded John in eternity.

A. The parents who experienced a supernatural birth are introduced (1:5-7).

Zacharias is a priest ministering in Judea, in the chosen tribe to give the Messiah, in Jerusalem, the religious capital of the world, and in Herod's magnificent temple. Like Abraham and Sara of

the OT, Zacharias and Elisabeth, were too old to have children. This was an humanly impossible case and heartbreak for this godly elderly couple. They constantly prayed about this (1:13).

B. The announcement of a supernatural angel (1:8-17).

Gabriel announced that their supernaturally born son will be great because he will be the forerunner of the Messiah.

This was an answer to their many prayers (1:13) and a fulfillment of OT forerunner prophecies (Mal 4:5; Isa 40). Elizabeth's child would be filled with the Holy Spirit from her womb.

C. The giving of a supernatural sign (1:18-23).

Because Zacharias did not believe the angel and asked "Whereby shall I know this?" his inability to speak would be the sign. In 2 Corinthians 4:13, Paul could testify, "I believe, and therefore have I spoken." It is as if God said to Zacharias, "If you don't trust me or believe my Word, you don't have anything to say to the people." So for nine months, he was mute.

D. The supernatural pregnancy (1:24-25).

There is no excuse for not believing what God promises. What impossible circumstance do you face? Even though Zacharias and Elizabeth were old enough to be great grandparents, God still expected them to believe He could give them a child.

1. Like Zacharias, God has answered our prayers.
2. Like Zacharias, God has kept His promises.
3. Like Zacharias, God the Holy Spirit is in us to help us do His will.

Christmas for some is a most painful time of year. We have one friend in Missouri by the bedside of her dying son this Christmas season. Another friend's sister was recently murdered. Another friend is disabled and his wife is out of work. And yet, as these face their Christmas spoilers they have answered prayers to encourage them, God's promises and the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Even though Rob Bell believes in the virgin birth of Christ in *Velvet Elvis*, he plays down the virgin birth:

"What if tomorrow someone digs up definitive proof that Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry, and archeologists 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 the 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 were seriously questioned? Could a person keep on 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? Or does the whole thing fall apart?...If the whole faith falls apart when we reexamine and rethink one spring, then it wasn't that strong in the first place, was it?"

Luke's account of the virgin birth of Jesus answers some of Bell's questions.

First, The Supernatural Birth of Jesus' Forerunner in Luke 1:5-25 (See Part 1 and 2).

Then, The Supernatural Birth of Jesus in Luke 1:26-56.

The following comparisons from John's birth are repeated by Luke. But there are also some very significant contrasts that exalt Christ above John.

A. The parents who experienced a supernatural birth are introduced (1:26-27).

There are many stark contrasts that display God's grace in the comparison of the births of John and Jesus. Luke in his gospel portrays Christ as seeking and saving the lost. These contrasts highlight this message.

The angel this time is sent to Galilee of the Gentiles, not Judea, to Nazareth, not Jerusalem, to a poor, uneducated Jewish girl, not a religious priest in Herod's temple. To receive God's grace you don't have to live on the right side of the tracks or be affluent or educated.

By way of contrast to John's parents, Mary and Joseph are very young. She is betrothed which took place shortly after puberty. The young teenage parents are not officially married, yet. This was the Jewish way of cutting down on unwanted teenage pregnancies. Let them marry as teenagers. The teens of Jesus' day were already very mature making this a better situation than today. Joseph and Mary are in the second of the third phase in Jewish weddings:

The first phase: The parents picked the future mates for their children and entered into a contract which was signed by the two sets of parents of the future couple.

The second phase: This is the one year waiting period to test their purity. This phase is much more binding than our engagement period. This betrothal could only be broken by divorce or death. This was where Joseph and Mary were in their relationship. That is why when Joseph discovers that Mary is with child he is devastated. He knew he was not the father. Joseph decides to put her away, quietly divorce her in Matthew 1:18-25.

The third phase: The ceremony and the consummation of the marriage in the one flesh relationship. Mary is still a virgin at this point in the story.

B. The announcement of a supernatural angel (1:28-35).

Whereas John will be great because he was the forerunner of Jesus, the angel tells Mary that her son will be great because He will be the Son of God.

Just as John's birth was a fulfillment of OT prophecy, so was Jesus ([Isa 7:14](#)). The prophecy in Isaiah provides no supernatural sign if it is a prophecy of only a young woman giving birth. This happens every day. The sign pointing to Immanuel (God with us) is the prophecy of a supernatural birth of a virgin who has never known a man sexually. This is the way Gabriel interprets Isaiah 7:14 in Matthew 1:23. I think I will stick with Gabriel's hermeneutics rather than Bell's questioning approach.

Whereas John was filled with the Holy Spirit in his mother's womb, Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in His mother's womb. Gabriel told Mary that the Holy Spirit would "overshadow" her. This word was used to describe the presence of God in the holy of holies in the OT Jewish tabernacle (Exodus 40:35). Mary's womb became the holy of holies for the Son of God (Warren W. Wiersbe).

Robert J. Miller, associate professor of religion at Juniata College, raises an old argument that the virgin birth of Jesus was stolen from mythology, such as Zeus impregnating women who gave birth to important persons. Miller said, "The notion that Jesus had no human father because he was the Son of God . . . was originally a pagan notion. Gentiles in a pagan culture expect a man whose life embodied divinity to have a divine father and a mother. The virgin birth thus corresponds to what Gentile Christians expected in a biography" (*Born Divine*. Santa Rosa, Calif.: Polestar, 1995, 246).

There are two major problems with this view:

1. Zeus, the mythological god of the Greeks, lusted after many women, even raped women, and in the myths caused them to give birth. God the Father was fulfilling OT Scripture and is perfectly holy.

J. Gresham Machen wrote the definitive argument for the Virgin Birth in 1930 which has never been answered. Here is Machen's response to this denial of the Virgin Birth, "Zeus may have union with Danae . . . a satisfaction of his lust for the human maid . . . Could anything be more utterly remote from the representation in Matthew and Luke than these stories of the amours of Zeus" (*The Virgin Birth of Christ*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1965, 338). Christianity did not steal this immoral version of God and incorporate it into the birth of Jesus' narrative.

2. Zeus was a mythological god; he was not real. He was like a comic superhero. Batman or Spiderman don't impregnate real women.

C. The giving of a supernatural sign (1:36-38).

Mary's sign, though she did not request one like Zacharias, was the supernatural pregnancy of Elizabeth followed by a much assuring promise: "For with God nothing shall be impossible."

D. Mary's response is in contrast to Zachariah's and should be our response.

1) We should surrender to the will of God no matter what the price (1:38).

The Talmud, which is a 2nd Century compilation of Jewish law and ethics includes the record that Mary was the mistress of a Roman soldier named Panthera and that Jesus was illegitimate. This story had spread and by the time of Christ's ministry, the Pharisees said to Him, "We be not born of fornication, we have one Father, even God" (John 8:41). If the Virgin Birth is not true then this view is a viable option.

If the Virgin Birth of Christ is not true then Mary was a tramp who ran around on her future husband and contrived this incredible story of a virgin birth instead of the example of virtue that Luke describes to be.

2) Belief (1:45) in her God who does the impossible.

Do we have to fully understand God in order to believe in Him or what He says in His Word? I do not comprehend the Trinity that there is one God who is three person nor Jesus the God/man who is one person with two natures. Neither do I completely understand the Virgin Birth, but Mary believed her son was both the son of man and the Son of God by means of the Virgin Birth. I don't even completely understand the New Birth, much less the Virgin Birth. But Jesus said to Nicodemus, "You must be born again" and Nicodemus questioned, "How?" What is interesting is Jesus' response in John 3. Jesus did not explain how. Jesus did simply said, "Whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:15).

3) Praise for Him (1:46-56)

Elizabeth praises God that Mary the mother of my Lord (Jesus in Mary's womb) should come and visit her (1:43). Mary praises her Lord who is also her savior (1:46-47).

I love the Christmas song, Mary, did you know. The first line captures Mary's praise:

Mary, did you know that your Baby Boy
Would one day walk on water?
Mary, did you know that your Baby Boy
Would save our sons and daughters?
Did you know that your Baby Boy
Has come to make you new;
This Child that you delivered
Will soon deliver you.