

## § 005

## THE ANNUNCIATION TO THE VIRGIN MARY OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS

<sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" <sup>29</sup> But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

<sup>34</sup> And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

<sup>35</sup> 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. <sup>36</sup> And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God." <sup>38</sup> And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.<sup>1</sup>

Luke 1:26-38

## Introduction

1. Having just described the announcement of John the Baptist's birth, Luke proceeded with a description of the announcement of Jesus' birth.
  - This account is tied to the first not only by the parallelism between the two accounts but also by the mention of the sixth month (1:26) and of two of the main characters from the previous account: the angel Gabriel (1:26ff.) and Elizabeth (1:36–37).
  - An even more important tie between the accounts is that the whole significance of John the Baptist's ministry, as pointed out in 1:17, is found in his preparation for the One coming after him who was more powerful than he (3:16).
  - The parallels between the two accounts are found both in content and form.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: English standard version*. 2001 (Lk 1:26-38). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the following: the setting, 1:5–7 and 26–27; the angelic greeting, confusion, and reassurance, 1:11–13a and 28–30; the angelic message, 1:13b–17 and 31–33b; the problem, 1:18 and 34; reassurance through a

2. This passage assumes and builds upon the previous one.
  - The mighty work God has done in John the Baptist's conception would be surpassed by an even greater miracle in the virginal conception of Jesus, God's Son.
  - The mighty work God foretold he would do through John the Baptist's ministry would be surpassed by an even greater work through his Son's ministry.
  - Whereas John would be "great in the sight of the Lord" (1:15), Jesus would be great without qualification (1:32) and would be called the Son of God (1:35).<sup>3</sup>
  
3. The story of the announcement of the birth of Jesus is told in a manner very similar to that of the preceding narrative, but the interest centers on the \_\_\_\_\_<sup>4</sup> of the child.
  - Mary, a girl betrothed to a descendant of David, is informed of God's choice of her to bear a child named Jesus who will be called the Son of the Most High and will reign over Israel as the Davidic Messiah.
  - His birth will be due to the influence of the Holy Spirit upon Mary, so that her child will indeed be God's Son.
  - The fact that Mary's cousin Elizabeth has already conceived a child by supernatural means will act as confirmation to Mary of the angelic message.<sup>5</sup>

### Commentary

1. The *sixth month* will refer to the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy.
  - Luke tells us first of the city to which Gabriel was sent and then of the maiden in that city to whom he came.
  - Nazareth is called *a city*, perhaps because Greek has no word for a 'town' and the alternative is 'village'.
  - We should not think of a bustling metropolis.
2. *Mary was betrothed*, a state much more binding among the Jews of that day than is an engagement with us.

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sign, 1:19–20 and 35–37; and the miraculous conception, 1:21–24 and 38. For further discussion see Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 292–98; C.H. Talbert, *Reading Luke* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 18–21.

<sup>3</sup> Stein, R.H. (2001, ©1992). *Vol. 24: Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (80). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>4</sup> **mother**

<sup>5</sup> Marshall, I.H. (1978). *The Gospel of Luke : A commentary on the Greek text*. Includes indexes. The New international Greek testament commentary (62). Exeter [Eng.: Paternoster Press.

- It was a solemn undertaking to marry, so that divorce was necessary to break it.<sup>6</sup>
3. Her \_\_\_\_\_<sup>7</sup> is repeatedly stressed (twice here and in v 34) to underline the magnitude of the miracle (and cf. the similar function of vv 36, 37).
- In the present text the betrothal to Joseph serves to provide (legal) Davidic ancestry for the child.
  - In Jewish tradition a girl was normally betrothed in the thirteenth year and for legal but not domestic purposes was from that point on considered to be married.
  - Around a year later the girl was taken to the bridegroom's home for normal married life to begin.
  - Sexual relations prior to this "taking home" would be considered a violation of marriage customs.<sup>8</sup>
4. "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" *Charitiusthai* (χαριτιῦσθαι) is a quite rare Hellenistic verb (only elsewhere in the New Testament at Eph 1:6 in the active).
- Etymologically it should mean "to be furnished with grace," and
    - it is used both in relation to intrinsic qualities for which a person is to be commended (like the English "well-favored") and
    - also in relation to the receipt of special graces or \_\_\_\_\_<sup>9</sup> by a benefactor ("privileged").
  - The latter is undoubtedly to be preferred here and points already to the privileged role for which Mary has been marked out by God.<sup>10</sup>
5. It is not quite clear what caused Mary to be *greatly troubled*.
- We might understand fear at the sight of an angel (as with Zechariah), but her distress is linked with the *sort of greeting*.
  - Evidently in her modesty she did not understand why a heavenly visitor should greet her in such exalted terms.

<sup>6</sup> Morris, L. (1988). *Vol. 3: Luke: An introduction and commentary*. Originally published: Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press; Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1988, in series: The Tyndale New Testament commentaries. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (88). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>7</sup> **virginity**

cf. *confer*, compare

<sup>8</sup> Nolland, J. (2002). *Vol. 35A: Word Biblical Commentary: Luke 1:1-9:20*. Word Biblical Commentary (49). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

<sup>9</sup> **privilege**

<sup>10</sup> Nolland, J. (2002). *Vol. 35A: Word Biblical Commentary: Luke 1:1-9:20*. Word Biblical Commentary (50). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

6. Gabriel reassures her, as he had done with Zechariah (13).
- He tells Mary not to be afraid, for she has *found favor with God*.
  - It is, of course, a complete misunderstanding to translate ‘Hail Mary, full of grace’, and understand the words to mean that Mary would be a source of grace to other people. Gabriel is saying simply that God’s \_\_\_\_\_<sup>11</sup> rests on her.
  - He goes on to explain that she will *conceive* and *bear a son* (cf. Isa. 7:14).
  - As with John earlier, the angel names the child: *you shall call his name Jesus* (= Heb. Joshua = ‘The Lord is salvation’).<sup>12</sup>
7. Gabriel proceeds to say that Jesus will be *great*, a word he had applied to John (15), but now uses with a fuller meaning, for Jesus *will be called the Son of the Most High*.
- This sets him apart from all others and makes him Son of God in a special sense. Gabriel goes on to speak of him as the recipient of *the throne of his father David*.
  - The Messiah was expected to be of David’s line (cf. 2 Sam. 7:12ff.; Ps. 89:29) and it is clearly this that is in mind.
  - It is further brought out in the reference to *his kingdom* as never-ending.<sup>13</sup>
8. *How will this be, since I am a virgin? Literally since I know no man.*
- Although technically Joseph was Mary’s husband, no sexual consummation had as yet taken place (cf. Matt 1:25).
  - The word *know* is used to describe the sexual act.<sup>14</sup>
  - Furthermore, since it would be natural to assume that a young woman would in the marital relationship bear children, the angelic message is interpreted by Mary as meaning that she, as she was then, i.e., as a virgin, was to bear a son; and she asked, *How?*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> **favor**

<sup>12</sup> Morris, L. (1988). *Vol. 3: Luke: An introduction and commentary*. Originally published: Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1988, in series: The Tyndale New Testament commentaries. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (88). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>13</sup> In current Messianic speculations the Messianic kingdom was often seen as of limited duration. It was God’s final kingdom that would have no end and it is this kingdom to which Jesus is now related. It is not a temporal kingdom, an earthly realm, but God’s kingly rule. In due time Jesus would make this clear. (Morris, L. (1988). *Vol. 3: Luke: An introduction and commentary*).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Gen 4:1, 17, 25; 19:8; Judg 11:39; 21:12; 1 Sam 1:19; Matt 1:25. Attempts to interpret the Lukan account as portraying a normal birth by a virgin who will give birth in a normal way, i.e., by later sexual intercourse with her husband, are impossible since the angelic message had not mentioned Joseph or the normal marital relationship.

<sup>15</sup> Mary was puzzled, though why is not immediately obvious. She was soon to be married, so there seems no insuperable difficulty in the thought of her bearing a son. Some exegetes hold that the question implies that Mary had made a vow to remain a virgin perpetually. But (a) this reads something into the

9. That this was to be a virgin birth<sup>16</sup> is also confirmed by the fact that, since Jesus is greater than John the Baptist, his birth must also be \_\_\_\_\_.<sup>17</sup>
- If John's birth was miraculous but Jesus' birth was the result of a normal sexual relationship, then the whole parallel between 1:5–25 and 1:26–38 breaks down at this point.
  - Jesus' birth had to be greater than that of John the Baptist, and this requires us to understand his birth as a virgin birth.
  - Luke told his readers this to prepare them for 1:35.<sup>18</sup>
10. Mary's question should not be understood as reflecting the same kind of doubt Zechariah possessed (Luke 1:18), since there is present no rebuke as in 1:19–23.<sup>19</sup>
11. *The child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.* Here we have a parallel to the twofold description in 1:32, where we have “great” and “Son of the Most High.”
- The Spirit's activity results in the Son of God's being called, i.e., being “holy.”
  - In light of 2:23 the term “holy” is best interpreted as designating not a particular ethical quality (as in Acts 3:14) so much as indicating that the Son of God was to be \_\_\_\_\_<sup>20</sup> or set aside for a unique, divine purpose.
  - Each firstborn male (Luke 2:23) was consecrated to God.

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text (and into other passages also, for we read of brothers of Jesus), and (b) there seems no reason for her to get married if she planned to remain a virgin. The solution of the difficulty rather is that Mary understood Gabriel to mean that she would bear a child without the intervention of a man, perhaps even that conception would be immediate.

<sup>16</sup> Technically it is more correct to talk about the virginal conception than the virgin birth. Technically speaking, *virgin birth* refers to the Gnostic doctrine that Mary remained physically a virgin after Jesus' birth, i.e., that her physical organs (the hymen) remained intact. The dangerous corollary of this doctrine is a docetic Christology. A Christ “born” in this fashion would have passed through the birth canal and hymen as a spirit would rather than as a flesh-and-blood baby would.

<sup>17</sup> greater

<sup>18</sup> Attempts to interpret Mary's words in this verse as expressing a vow of perpetual virginity (several early church fathers) are incorrect. (Such explanations clash with Matt 1:25, which implies that after the birth of Jesus, Joseph and Mary had a normal husband-wife relationship.) Although Luke and Matthew both clearly affirmed that Jesus' conception was miraculous in that Mary was a virgin when she conceived, what is most important in the NT teaching of the virgin birth (or virginal conception) is not the manner in which God sent his Son but the fact that he sent him. To use later terminology we might say that what is of primary importance is not the virgin birth but the incarnation. In other words it is not the “how” but the “what” of Christmas that is most important.

<sup>19</sup> Stein, R.H. (2001, ©1992). *Vol. 24: Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (84). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>20</sup> dedicated

- This does not mean that the firstborn possessed a moral or ethical quality over his brothers at birth.
- Rather he was dedicated to God in a unique way because God had a special claim on the firstborn (cf. 2:23).
- In a similar way the Son of God through his conception by the Spirit was set apart by God for a divine task.
- In this sense “holy” is related to “anointed,” which also points out that God set apart (and equipped) his Son for a particular task (cf. how “anointed” and “holy servant” are closely related in Acts 4:27). For Jesus as “holy,” cf. Luke 4:34; Acts 3:14; 4:27, 30.

12. One should not read into this verse the thought that since Jesus was not conceived through sexual intercourse he was as a result “uncontaminated” by such a natural birth.

- Rather, Luke sought to teach that since Jesus’ birth was entirely due to the “overshadowing” of the Holy Spirit, Jesus would be uniquely set aside for God’s service, i.e., he would be “holy.”<sup>21</sup>

13. Evidently Mary had not heard of Elizabeth’s experience.

- Gabriel now informs her that it is *the sixth month* of her pregnancy.
- Mary will see that *with God nothing will be impossible* (cf. Gen. 18:14).

14. Mary’s response is one of quiet submission. *Servant (doulē)* means ‘slave-girl’; it expresses \_\_\_\_\_.<sup>22</sup>

- The slave-girl could not but do the will of her Master.
- This is reinforced with *let it be to me according to your word*.
- We are apt to take this as the most natural thing and accordingly we miss Mary’s quiet heroism.
- She was not yet married to Joseph. His reaction to her pregnancy might have been expected to be a strong one and Matthew tells us that he did in fact think of divorcing her (Matt. 1:19).
- Again, while the death penalty for adultery (Deut. 22:23f.) does not seem to have been carried out often, it was still there.
- Mary could not be sure that she would not have to suffer, perhaps even die. But she recognized the will of God and accepted it.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Stein, R.H. (2001, ©1992). *Vol. 24: Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (85). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>22</sup> **complete obedience**

<sup>23</sup>Morris, L. (1988). *Vol. 3: Luke: An introduction and commentary*. Originally published: Leicester, England : Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1988, in series: The Tyndale New

## Conclusion

### THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF CHRIST<sup>24</sup>

The virgin birth of Christ is the perennial target of naturalistic Bible critics, who tend to regard it as the result of pagan influence on Christian writers of the second century. These Christians developed the myth in an emulation of stories from Greek mythology. One reason for the vehemence of these pronouncements is that, if true, the virgin birth establishes beyond question the life of Jesus as a supernatural intervention of God. If antisupernaturalists concede at this point, they have no case left.

#### *Evidence for the Virgin Birth*

*Credibility of Miracle.* At the root of the rejection of the virgin birth of Christ is the rejection of miracles. A virgin birth is a miracle. If a theistic God exists, and there is evidence that he does, then miracles are automatically possible. For if there is a God who can act, then there can be acts of God. Indeed, there is every reason to believe that miracles have occurred from the instant of the founding of the universe. Hence, the record of Jesus' virgin birth cannot be ruled as mythological in advance of looking at the evidence.

*Anticipation of the Virgin Birth. Genesis 3:15.* Long before the New Testament recorded the virgin birth, the Old Testament anticipated it. In fact, the earliest messianic prediction in the Bible implies the virgin birth. Speaking to the Tempter (Serpent), "God said 'And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.'" (Gen. 3:15).

That the coming Redeemer was to be the "offspring" or "seed" of the woman is important in a patriarchal culture. Why of a woman? Normally, descendants were traced through their father (cf. Gen. 5, 11). Even the official genealogy of the Messiah in Matthew 1 is traced through Jesus' legal father Joseph. In the unique term, *seed of the woman*, there is implied that the messiah would come by a woman but not a natural father.

*Jeremiah 22 (cf. 2 Samuel 7).* Another possible intimation of the virgin birth in the Old Testament is found in the curse placed on Jeconiah which said: "Record this man as if childless, a man who will not prosper in his lifetime, for none of his offspring will prosper, none will sit on the throne of David or rule any more in Judah" (Jer. 22:30). The problem with this prediction is that Jesus was the descendant of the throne of David through Jeconiah (cf. Matt. 1:12).

However, since Joseph was only Jesus' *legal* father (by virtue of being engaged to Mary when she became pregnant), Jesus did not inherit the curse on Jeconiah's *actual*

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Testament commentaries. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (88). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>24</sup> Geisler, N.L. (1999). *Baker encyclopedia of Christian apologetics*. Baker reference library (759). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books.

descendants. And since Jesus was the actual son of David through Mary according to Luke's matriarchal genealogy (Luke 3), he fulfilled the conditions of coming "from the loins of David" (2 Sam. 7:12–16) without losing legal rights to the throne of David by falling under the curse on Jeconiah. Thus, the virgin birth is implied in the consistent understanding of these Old Testament passages.

*Isaiah 7:14.* Both the New Testament (Matt. 1:23) and many Christian apologists use Isaiah 7:14 as a predictive prophecy to prove the Bible makes specific supernatural predictions centuries in advance. However, critics, following the interpretation of many Bible scholars, say verse 16 refers to the birth of Isaiah's own child shortly before the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C. If so, this is not a prophecy about the virgin birth of Jesus and, it has no apologetic value.

Of the three interpretations of Isaiah 7:14, only one is incompatible with a supernatural predictive understanding in reference to Christ's birth. That is that this prophecy referred only to Isaiah's day and was fulfilled in the natural birth of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (Isa. 8:3). Of the other two possibilities, the prophecy could have had a double fulfillment—a preliminary one in Isaiah's child and the final one in Christ's birth. Or this prophecy refers only to the supernatural birth of Christ (Matt. 1:23).

*Single Reference to a Natural Birth.* Liberal scholars and some conservatives view Isaiah 7:14 as having reference only to the natural conception and birth of the son of the prophetess. They argue that the Hebrew *'almâ*, sometimes translated "virgin" (KJV, ASV, NIV), refers to a young woman, whether married or unmarried, and should be translated "young maiden" (RSV). If the prophet had intended someone who was a virgin, he would have used *bethulah* (cf. Gen. 24:16; Levit. 21:3; Judg. 21:12). Further, the context reveals that the prophecy had a near-view fulfillment. Verse 16 declares that "before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste" (Isa. 7:16). This was literally fulfilled in the invasion of the Assyrian Tiglath Pileser.

Even in the broader context, only the birth of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz fit the prophecy. Isaiah 8:3 reads: "Then I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and gave birth to a son. And the LORD said to me, 'Name him Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz' " (Isa. 8:3). The "sign" was promised to Ahaz (7:10) and would have made no sense if its fulfillment was after his time (7:14).

Therefore, the argument concludes that no prediction of Christ's virgin birth should be found here. The use by Matthew was either faulty or purely typological, with no predictive or apologetic value. Matthew uses the phrase "that it might be fulfilled"

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KJV King James Version

NIV New International Version

RSV Revised Standard Version



typologically in other cases (for example, 2:15, 23). Matthew *applied* to Christ texts that were not messianic in their contexts.

There is a difficulty with the claim that *'almâ* refers to someone who is married. Not once does the Old Testament use *'almâ* to refer to a married person. *Bethulah*, on the other hand, is used for a married women (see Joel 1:8). Among texts using *'almâ* to refer to a virgin are Genesis 24:43, Exodus 2:8, Psalms 68:25, Proverbs 30:19, and Song of Solomon 1:3; 6:8.

Some critics use and 1 Chronicles 15:20 and Psalm 46 as examples of *'almâ* (or *alamoth*) referring to a married person. In Psalm 46 it is simply part of the title of the Psalm, “A Song for *Alamoth*.” Nothing in the title or psalm text helps us understand what *Alamoth* means, let alone whether it refers to a married person. It may be a musical notation, as one for the young women’s choir to sing, or it could refer to some kind of musical accompaniment. The reference in 1 Chronicles 15:20 is similar. Music is being sung “with strings according to *Alamoth*.” Whatever this may mean, it does not prove that *'almâ* means a married woman.

It can be argued that some features of the passage could not possibly refer only to the immediate circumstances: the supernatural nature of the “sign”; the reference to the one born as *Immanuel*, “God with us,” and the reference to the whole “house of David” (vs. 13). The birth of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz in the next chapter cannot fulfill 7:14, since the one born was to be named “Immanuel.”

While the “sign” was for Ahaz, it also was for the whole “house of David” (vs. 13). A distant sign can be for someone who lives long before the event, provided the benefits of the sign extend to the one for whom it is given. Since the “sign” was the birth of Messiah, the hope of salvation for Ahaz and everyone else, the sign was certainly for him.

But what of 7:16? The only meaningful way to understand this verse is that it refers to a child born in Isaiah’s day. It should be kept in mind that 7:16’s reference to the Assyrian invasion is itself a supernatural predictive prophecy. The issue is not, then, whether 7:14 is predictive and was fulfilled. The question is whether it was fulfilled in three years or 700. There is a possibility that Isaiah 7:16 can be understood in terms of the virgin-birth-only view. Commentator William Hendriksen suggests this possible interpretation: “Behold, the virgin conceives and gives birth to a son. . . . Before this child, *who before my prophetic eye has already arrived*, shall know to refuse the evil and chose the good—i.e., *within a very short time*—the land whose two kings you abhor shall be deserted” (Hendriksen, 139). Or, if one wants to be more literal, the Assyrians did invade *before* the child Jesus grew up—long before.

It is generally acknowledged that not all usages of the phrase “that it might be fulfilled” entail a truly predictive prophecy, Isaiah 7:14 need not be one of them. Matthew cites Micah 5:2, a clear prediction that the Christ would be born in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:5; see also Matt 3:3; 21:5; 22:43).

*Double Reference.* Even if the immediate context reveals that the prophecy had a near-view fulfillment in mind, this does not mean that there is not also a fuller fulfillment in a far-view reference to Christ. According to this view, many Old Testament prophecies have both a partial fulfillment in their day and a complete fulfillment in the distant future. Because of their desperate situation, God promised to give to Ahaz a sign that would assure the people that God would ultimately deliver them from bondage. This was a sign of the physical deliverance of Israel from the bondage of their enemies. It ultimately was a sign of the spiritual deliverance of spiritual Israel from bondage to Satan. The first aspect of the sign was fulfilled in the birth of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, the second aspect in the birth of Jesus to the true virgin, Mary. Such double fulfillments are clear in other prophecies. Zechariah 12:10 can be applied both to Christ's first (John 19:37) and second comings (Rev. 1:7). Part of Isaiah 61 was fulfilled in Jesus (Isa. 61:1–2a; cf. Luke 4:18–19). Part remains for the second coming (Isa. 61:2b–11).

According to the double-reference view, *'almâ* refers to a young maiden who has never had sexual intercourse. The wife of Isaiah who bore the son in fulfillment of the first aspect of the prophecy was a virgin until she conceived by Isaiah. However, Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a complete fulfillment—a virgin when she conceived Jesus (Matthew 1:24–25).

Other arguments for this position also fit the supernatural birth-only view. Both of these views reject the idea that the significance of Isaiah 7:14 is exhausted in the natural birth of the prophetess's son.

*Single Reference to a Supernatural Birth.* Some scholars defend the position that Isa. 7:14 refers only to the supernatural virgin birth of Christ. Contrary to the first option, *'almâ* is only translated “virgin” in the Old Testament and has no other options. The prophetess, therefore, does not qualify. The Greek Old Testament (*Septuagint*) translated *'almâ* by the unambiguous word *parthenos* which can only mean “virgin.” These translators, working before the advent, evidently believed that this was a prediction of the virgin birth of the Messiah. The inspired New Testament sanctioned this work by quoting from the *Septuagint* in Matt. 1:23. Further, to translate *'almâ* as a young girl who is not yet married, but would soon marry Isaiah means that it would be no longer a *virgin* who is conceiving, but a married woman. Isaiah 7:14 regards both the conception and birth as by a virgin.

Proponents of the supernatural-birth-only view point out that the prediction obviously goes beyond Ahaz to the whole “house of David” (Isa. 7:13). That hardly would apply to a natural birth by the prophetess in Isaiah's day. Also, the emphasis is on some wonderful, unheard of “sign” (Isa. 7:11–14). Why should an ordinary birth be understood as an extraordinary sign?

The whole context of Isaiah 7–11 (cf. Micah 5:2f.) forms an unbreakable chain of messianic prophecy:

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” [7:14]

“Its outspread wings will cover the breadth of your land, O Immanuel!” [8:8b]

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. [9:6]

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD—and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash round his waist. [11:1–5]

Matthew 1:22 both interprets Isaiah 7:14 as prophetic with the phrase “that it might be fulfilled” and adds an intensifying phrase, “*now all this was done* that it might be fulfilled . . .” (emphasis added). The manner of the quotation emphasizes the supernatural quality of the birth and the deity of Christ. Most scholars on both sides of the issue acknowledge that the phrase “that it might be fulfilled” does not necessarily refer to a predicative prophecy. However, indications are that Matthew 1:23 is an example of one that is predictive.

Finally, the same verse cannot refer to the birth of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, for the same verse cannot mean two different (opposing things). If both the *Septuagint* and the inspired New Testament affirm that this refers to an actual virgin, it must refer to Christ alone.

*Translating the Name Immanuel.* A final issue that arises in this debate regards whether the name *Immanuel* mandates that Isaiah was referring to God incarnate. It does not. *Immanuel* can mean “God is with us.” While the translation “God with us” seems to mean the name-bearer has deity, it is linguistically possible to translate “Immanuel” as “God is with us,” which does not denote deity for the name-bearer. The name of a child can refer to a situation meaningful to the giver of the name. Thus Sarah named her son *Isaac*, meaning “laughter.”

However, overall evidence indicates that the traditional translation is correct. When a point is made of a biblical name, it most often refers to the one who bears it: *Eve*, mother of the “living” (Gen. 3:20); *Noah*, related to the Hebrew for “comfort” (Gen. 5:29); *Abram*, “father” and *Abraham*, “father of many” (Gen. 17:5); *Sarai*, “princess,” and *Sarah*, “princess of God” (Gen. 17:15); *Esau*, “hairy” (Gen. 25:25); *Jacob*, “He grasps the heel” or “deceiver,”

and *Israel*, “He struggles with God” (Gen. 27:36; 32:28); *Naomi*, “pleasant,” and *Mara*, “bitter” (Ruth 1:20); *Nabal*, “fool” (1 Sam. 25:3, 25); *Jesus*, “Yahweh saves” (Matt. 1:21); *Peter*, “rock” (Matt. 16:18); and *Barnabas*, “son of encouragement” (Acts 4:36).

Both the immediate and broad contexts show that *Immanuel* refers to the character of the one bearing the name. The event is a supernatural sign. The whole “house of David,” is in view, especially within the “messianic chain” of Isaiah 7–11. The New Testament interprets it as referring to Christ. All these factors support the view that it is a reference to Christ.

*The Reliability of the New Testament Record.* The evidence that Jesus was conceived of a virgin is based in the reliability of the New Testament documents and the New Testament witnesses. Both of these have been established with strong evidence. In fact, as is shown elsewhere, the evidence for the authenticity of the New Testament is greater than for that of any book from the ancient world. It remains only to show that these records do testify to the virgin birth of Christ.

There can be no doubt that the New Testament clearly affirms that Christ was born of a virgin.

*Matthew 1:18–23.* Matthew wrote:

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but *before they came together*, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, *he had in mind to divorce her quietly*. But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because *what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit*. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” *All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”* — which means, “God with us.” [1:18–23]

The emphasized sections point to four factors which demonstrate that Christ was virgin born: First, Mary conceived “*before they came together*,” thus revealing that it was not a natural conception. Second, Joseph’s initial reaction reveals that he had not had sexual intercourse with Mary, since when he found that she was pregnant “*he had in mind to divorce her quietly*.” Third, the phrase “*what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit*” reveals the supernatural nature of the event. Finally, the citation from the *Septuagint* translation of Isaiah 7:14 about a *parthenos*, “virgin,” giving “birth” to a child indicates that Mary had not had sexual relations with anyone. She was not simply a virgin before the baby was conceived, but after it was conceived and even when it was born.

*Luke 1:26–35.* Mark begins immediately with Jesus’ ministry, in accord with his stress on Christ as “Servant” (cf. 10:45). But we would expect a physician, Dr. Luke, to give attention to the circumstances of the birth. He begins with the announcement of Christ birth of a virgin:

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a *virgin pledged to be married* to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The *virgin’s* name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are *highly favored!* The Lord is with you.” Mary was *greatly troubled* at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.” . . . “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” The angel answered, “*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.* So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.” [1:26–35]

The emphasized text again demonstrates that the conception of Christ was supernatural: Mary was a “virgin” (*parthenos*), “pledged to be married.” Mary’s reaction of being “greatly troubled” and being “afraid,” as well as her astonished question, “How will this be?” reveals that she was a virgin. The angel gave some description of how the conception would happen through the Holy Spirit and “the power of the Most High.”

*Luke 2:1–19.* When Luke records the birth he again stresses that Mary was only “pledged to be married,” which in that culture meant she had not yet had sexual intercourse with Joseph. The supernatural appearance of the angel and the heavenly choir demonstrate that something extraordinary had happened. Mary’s reaction was to contemplate in awe the mystery of it all. Obviously she knew something supernatural and holy had occurred (vs. 19).

*John 2:2–11.* John stresses the overall divinity of Christ, and doesn’t dwell on particulars. Nevertheless, there are a couple of strong intimations in John’s Gospel that Jesus was virgin born. When Jesus performed his first miracle at Cana of Galilee his mother was obviously aware of his supernatural origin and confident that he could do the supernatural. John wrote: “On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus’ mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus’ mother said to him, ‘*They have no more wine.*’ ‘Dear woman, why do you involve me?’ Jesus replied. ‘*My time has not yet come.*’ His mother said to the servants, ‘*Do whatever he tells you.*’ ” Indeed, the emphasized text reveals that Mary seems not only to believe that Jesus could do a miracle but to be requesting one, even though she had never seen him do one since this was Jesus’ “first miracle” (vs. 11).

Her understanding of his supernatural ability came from her past relationship with Jesus, including his birth.

*John 8:41.* Even the insult of Jesus' enemies shows that the circumstances of his birth had stirred general gossip, as might be expected if the story spread. Jesus said to them, "You are doing the things your own father [Satan] does." "We are not illegitimate children," they protested. "The only Father we have is God himself." The Jews may have simply been responding defensively to Jesus' attack on their misplaced confidence in the fatherhood of Abraham. If so, it is an odd rejoinder. But it makes perfect sense if they were turning the argument back on Jesus' own legitimacy. Even Joseph had needed an angelic visitation to be convinced Mary's purity (Matt. 1:20). He and Mary likely faced a continuing shadow on their reputations. But Jesus faced the matter boldly in responding to his sniggering accusers, "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?" (John 8:46).

*Galatians 4:4.* The Epistles are filled with references to Jesus' sinlessness. In the context of teaching about the innate sinfulness that adheres to each descendant of Adam (for example, Romans 5), these teachings themselves indicate that God had done something different in Jesus (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 1 John 3:3). Paul's reference to Jesus as "born of a woman" is relatively explicit. He wrote, "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law" (Gal. 4:4). This refers to Genesis 3:15. In a Jewish patriarchal culture one is begotten of a male (the father). To bring attention to being "born of a woman" is to show that something unusual is occurring—in Jesus' case a virgin birth.

### *The Charge of Mythology*

It is difficult to deny that the New Testament teaches the virgin birth of Christ. The easier attack is to say that it is a myth patterned after Greek and Roman gods and was not really a historical event. . . . In brief:

- Evidence is unassailable that the New Testament was written by contemporaries and eyewitnesses (cf. Luke 1:1–4). Second-century dating theories have now been thoroughly discredited by archaeological and manuscript evidence, allowing no time for legend development.
- Virgin birth records do not show any of the standard literary marks of the myth genre.
- Persons, places, and events of Christ's birth precise and historically substantiated. Luke in particular goes to great pains to note historical detail (Luke 3:1–2).
- No Greek myth even remotely corresponds to the literal incarnation of a monotheistic God in human form (cf. John 1:1–3, 14) by way of a literal virgin birth (Matt. 1:18–25). The Greeks were polytheists, not monotheists.
- Stories of Greek gods become human via miraculous events like a virgin birth postdated the time of Christ. Hence, if there is any influence it is from Christianity on mythology, not the reverse.

### **Conclusion**

Historical evidence that Jesus was supernaturally conceived of a virgin is more than substantial. Indeed, there are more eyewitness contemporary records of the virgin birth than for most events from the ancient world. The records show no signs of myth development. Indeed, they are surrounded by historical references to real people, places, and times. Thus, there is no reason to believe Jesus was not literally, biologically born of a virgin just as the Bible claims he was. Only an unjustified anti-supernatural bias is ground for any conclusion to the contrary.

A particular battleground text is Isaiah 7:14, which is cited by Matthew. Critics argue that it has no predictive value. At worst the text refers to events in Isaiah's time only, which were applied typologically to Christ but have no predictive value. There is reason to believe the text refers, in part or whole, to a prediction of the virgin birth. In any case, there are other clear predictive texts in the Old Testament.

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