

Who Can Believe in a Virgin Birth?

Thomas Robinson, *Advent for Grown-ups 1*, November 27, 2011

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel **Gabriel** was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a **virgin** betrothed to a man whose name was **Joseph**, of the house of **David**. And the virgin's name was **Mary**. ²⁸ And he came to her and said,

“Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!”

²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ And the angel said to her,

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor (grace) with God.

³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

³² 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,

³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

³⁴ And **Mary** said to the angel, *“How will this be, since I am a virgin (do not know a man)?”*

³⁵ 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.”* ³⁶ 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. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God.”

³⁸ 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.

Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸ Now the **birth of Jesus Messiah** took place in this way. When his mother **Mary** had been betrothed to **Joseph**, before they came together she was **found to be with child from the Holy Spirit**.

¹⁹ And her husband **Joseph**, being a **just man** and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to **divorce** her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an **angel of the Lord** appeared to him in a **dream**, saying, *“Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”* ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name **Jesus**, for he will save his people from their sins.”

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

²³ “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, “God with us”). [Isa 7:14]

²⁴ When **Joseph** woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife,

²⁵ but **knew her not until she had given birth to a son**. And he called his name **Jesus**.

Isaiah 7:10-16

¹⁶ Again the LORD spoke to **Ahaz** (through the prophet **Isaiah**), ¹¹ *“Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.”*

¹² But **Ahaz** said, *“I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.”*

¹³ And he (**Isaiah**) said, *“Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin (maiden) shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. ¹⁵ He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶ For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted.”*

Advent for Grown-ups!

Advent (Jesus' coming to earth) focuses on the character of expectancy that lies deep in the Gospel story and in the kind of life that the Gospel creates. Jesus' birth and ministry came in a time of a turmoil of expectation among God's people. His death and resurrection place humanity between the "already" begun and the "not yet" fulfilled of God's Kingdom.

Christmas is for children; Yes! But it also goes to the heart of human existence. What is the nature of the universe? What are the boundaries of our lives? What can/do we believe?

Distorted Meanings of the Virgin Birth

Both NT narratives of Jesus' birth (Luke and Matthew) emphasize that Mary was a virgin at the time of Jesus' conception. One of few points in common, from different traditions. The virgin birth is not discussed much in NT. It easily became expanded, distorted.

Not because of a taint of sexuality and sin. There's no suggestion that Mary was kept from sin, nor that sexual intercourse carries some taint of original sin. No value is given to virginity except that it points to God's initiative in Jesus' birth.

Not to elevate one woman to "Queen of Heaven" status. Mythology of Mary expanded in later centuries. Mary is indeed blessed for all generations, but as a believer, a disciple.

Not because of Isaiah 7:14, as though believers knew the prophecy and created the story as a fulfillment – a mechanical pattern: prophecy/foretelling requires fulfillment. Is 7:14 in context does not create any expectation beyond Isaiah's time. It's a sign given King Ahaz that God indeed fulfilled. Mt's fulfillment phrase should be translated: "*this happened so that what the Lord said by the prophet may be filled up (with new meaning).*"

Impossible for Modern People to Believe

The Virgin Birth is often said to be a throwback to a gullible age. Now we know so much more. But Mary and Joseph both knew that virginal conception was impossible.

Sometimes it is seen as unworthy of God: the great, distant, impassible, immutable God, intervening in odd miracles. Philosophical ideas push out biblical conceptions of God until God is pushed off the edge of existence. Miracles are seen as breaking natural law rather than as a focused, purposeful sign of God's pervasive presence in his universe.

Always, the question is God. If there is no God, if we live in a closed, mechanical universe, a virgin birth is impossible. But if the God of the Bible exists ... "*nothing is impossible.*"

What Does the Virgin Birth Mean?

"Behold, I am doing a new thing." (Isa 43:19). Sarah's pattern was scriptural. God chose the related but new sign to mark a new beginning. Can God break in in a new way?

It begins the redefinition of God in Jesus. The "*Most High*" becomes most low. What does the coming of God to his people and world look like? Human and God's own self.

Isa 7:14: God's vulnerable, rejected sign. In spite of rejection, God is gracious and faithful.

Mary (& Joseph) are called to sacrifice. Discipleship means commitment, suffering, putting our lives in trust at the disposal of the God who calls us: "*the servant of the Lord.*"

Trusting in, sharing with God who creates the future: "*His kingdom will have no end.*"