

The Virgin Birth: Fact or Fiction?

This article tackles a few more obstacles that Jews (and Gentiles for that matter) appeal to when rejecting the NT witness that Jesus was supernaturally conceived in Mary by the power of God. To a lot of folks talk of the Virgin Birth sounds more like a fairy tale than historical reality. On the other hand, the NT grounds the nativity of Messiah Jesus in literal history. So let's get down to tin-tacks. What are some of these specific objections to what purports to be apostolic Christianity?

1. The Virgin Birth is not Found in the Rest of the New Testament.

On his website *Torah of Messiah*, A.B. (Bruce) Barham expresses his doubts about the validity of the Virgin Birth narratives in Matthew and Luke this way:

“IF Messiah was born of a “virgin” with no earthly father, why is it so rarely mentioned in the New Testament? IF such an event occurred, it would have been an astounding miracle and a subject of frequent discussion! Yet, the New Testament authors virtually never even mention it! This fact alone makes its actual occurrence unlikely.

1. It is NEVER mentioned in ANY of the epistles.
2. It is NEVER mentioned by Yeshua (Jesus) the Messiah.
3. It is NEVER mentioned in ANY recorded presentations of the "gospel" in Acts or the epistles.
4. It is NEVER mentioned ANYWHERE as part of a necessary belief a person must accept! EVER!
5. The ONLY place it is mentioned, or even hinted at, is in the alleged (and contradictory) birth accounts of Matthew and Luke!
6. Yet Christianity, counterfeit Messianism, and many monotheistic Messianics consider it a crucial doctrine even though
 Scripture most certainly shows it to NOT be crucial!" (Emphases original).

<http://torahofmessiah.org/the-birth-of-yeshua-messiah-jesus-christ>

These are typical denials and must be honestly faced by anybody wanting to ground their faith in fact, rather than

fiction. So, is it right to say the Virgin Birth, "is NEVER mentioned in ANY of the epistles", or "even hinted at" apart from the contradictory birth accounts of Matthew and Luke? We looked at some of the alleged contradictions in the birth accounts of Matthew and Luke in the previous article, *Jesus' Genealogy ... Let the Genie Out of the Jar!* We found that Matthew and Luke write complimentary accounts from different perspectives of the same history.

A History Lesson.

Even if we did not have any of the New Testament itself, we would still know the First Century Church believed in the Virgin Birth of Jesus. How so? Well, the earliest Baptismal Creed is the Old Roman Creed. It has been dated to 100 AD, give or take a decade or so either way. This is the confession candidates for baptism recited:

"I believe in God the Father Almighty; And in Christ Jesus His only Son our Lord; Who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary; Crucified under Pontius Pilate and buried; The Third Day He rose from the dead; He ascended into heaven; He sits at the right hand of the Father; Thence He

shall come to judge the living and dead.
And in the Holy spirit, the Holy Church,
the Remission of sins, the Resurrection of
the flesh.”

When it comes to creeds the rule is, the further we get from Jesus and his apostles, the further we are from the Jewish roots of the NT faith they delivered. To be blunt, the further from the days of Jesus, the more Greek philosophy and non-Bible ideas infiltrate Christianity. (1)

However, this extra-canonical source -- the Old Roman Creed -- is very early indeed. It is fair to say this Old Roman Creed seems unembellished by later church debates and councils.

The salient point is that the clause affirming belief in the Virgin Birth appears in the days when the last apostle John was still living, or had just died. There were folk still living who had known and been taught by the apostles themselves. Therefore, we may be reasonably sure that belief in the Virgin Birth was universally believed by the early First Century Christians, having been taught by the apostles.

It is logical to conclude that if this is the case, then we will find mention of the virginal conception of Jesus in the NT even outside of the two Gospels that specifically address the issue. Barham asserts it is NEVER mentioned (his emphasis) or even "hinted at" outside the nativity accounts of Matthew and Luke? In Jewish law a matter was established by two or three witnesses. Let's see.

The Gospel of Mark.

The majority of NT scholars are of the opinion that Mark's Gospel was written by John Mark who was the personal assistant of the apostle Peter. (2)

Does Mark give any "hints" that Jesus was born differently to all others? It is possible, for Mark records the people in Jesus' hometown synagogue asking this question:

"Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses, and Judas, and Simon? Are not his sisters here with us? And they took offense at him" (Mark 6:3).

To our modern ears there is nothing unusual about this question. We often say for instance, that Jack is the son of his mother.

However, in Jesus' day no Jew would have ever referred to a man as "the son of his mother." You may ask, "But what if Joseph was already dead? Wouldn't Jesus then be called the son of his mother Mary?" No. Universal Jewish custom was that whether a man's father was dead or alive, he was always named from his father. (3)

Furthermore, it seems the townsfolk of Nazareth further distinguished Jesus from the rest of his (half) brothers and sisters by this unique description. He and he alone was "the son of Mary"!

Now, I am not suggesting the people of Nazareth knew anything at all about the Virgin Birth (at this stage anyway). But it is clear they knew the "brothers" of Jesus were not to be called the sons of Mary! Did Mark thus give just a hint that it was common knowledge that there was something different about Jesus' birth? Let's not be dogmatic here. Let's consider more evidence.

A Grammar Lesson ... Sorry!

The apostle Paul wrote much of the NT and when he speaks of the "birth" of Jesus Christ we notice a very unusual thing. He avoids

the only verb ever used of human birth in the entire New Testament, the verb *gennaoo* (4).

When Paul speaks of the birth of Messiah he uses a description unique to the NT. He uses derivatives from the verb *ginomai*, which means 'to come into existence, to be created, to exist by creation, to arise, to occur, to become'.

Here is more than a "hint" that something extraordinary about the birth of Messiah is being taught. Let's demonstrate the contrast between these two words for "born" where they appear in Galatians chapter 4.

Speaking of the birth of Abraham's sons Ishmael and Isaac, Paul writes:

"But the son by the bondwoman was born (*gegenneetai* ... "has been born" from *gennaoo*) according to the flesh..." (Gal.4:23).

"But as at that time he who was born (*genneetheis* ... "was born" from *gennaoo*) according to the flesh ..." (Gal. 4:29)

This is the way every normal birth is described in the NT. Now see how Paul describes Jesus' birth in the same chapter:

“But when the fulness of time came, God sent forth His son, born (*genomenon* from *ginomai*) of a woman, born (*genomenon*) under the Law” (Gal. 4: 4).

English readers would not pick up here how unusual Paul’s description of Jesus’ birth is. Of the six hundred and sixty cases where the verb *ginomai* occurs in the NT it always means, “to be, to come into existence, to become, etc.” Paul is making a distinction between normal human births and the birth of Jesus Messiah.

What Paul actually wrote was, “But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, who *came into existence* from a woman, *came into existence* under the Law.”

This is even more remarkable because in the same chapter the births of Ishmael and Isaac are spoken of in the usual way. Elsewhere Paul similarly writes:

“...concerning His Son, who was born (*genomenou*, that is, who came into existence!) of David’s seed ...” (Rom.1:3).

The fourth time Paul alludes to the birth of Jesus reads:

“He took the form of a servant and *came into existence (genomenos)* in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:7).

Is it not passing strange that when Paul speaks of the “birth” of Christ he does not say “born” in the usual manner? (Of course, Matthew and Luke in their nativity accounts use the ordinary word for the birth of Jesus (*gennaoo*) because their object is to explain the process by which Jesus was supernaturally begotten in the virgin Mary.)

Thus, four times over when speaking of his birth, Paul says Jesus the Messiah “came into existence”, that is, he began to be, was caused to exist. To repeat: When speaking of Jesus’ birth *Paul uses language which is in the whole NT never used of any other birth!*

The Theological Necessity of the Virgin Birth.

Well may we ask why Paul would make such a graphic distinction? The answer is that he not only understood the historical reality of the virginal conception of Jesus, but he also knew its theological necessity.

The apostle Paul taught that every human born into this world inherits the

consequences of Adam's sin, which is death (e.g. see Romans 5:12; I Corinthians 15:22.) Paul regarded the natural union of a man and a woman to be a death sentence for every human baby born into this world. "In Adam all die." We confirm this fact by our own willful choices to sin and disobedience.

Paul's answer to this Adamic death sentence on every single human being is that God has begun a new humanity, a new creation, in Christ Jesus.

If Jesus had been conceived and born the usual way he too would have inherited Adam's mortality. This is why Paul is very careful to say Jesus came "in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom. 8:3). (5)

From the moment of his miraculous conception Jesus was free from the drag, the bias, the ballast of Adam's legacy of death operating in him. Of course Jesus must constantly walk by faith and obedience to his Father if he was to maintain that condition of innocence free from death and to avoid Adam's mortality.

The Virginal conception of Jesus was therefore *essential* if he was to avoid entering this world as a man already under

the reign of death! Fact of the matter is this: If Jesus had been born of natural processes, he could not be our Saviour for he would have been "in Adam" and unfit to be the Head of God's new and redeemed humanity.

So where did Paul get this teaching that the natural man is born with an already defeated and cursed nature in desperate need of supernatural salvation? Why, his lord and master Jesus of course! Had not Jesus himself taught, "that which is of the flesh is flesh"? Had not Jesus said, "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again'"? (John 3: 1-15). According to Jesus every single human born on this planet must be born a second time if we are to see God. But there was and is only one exception to this rule ... guess who?

Jesus made it quite clear then, that ordinary birth can never achieve the kind of relationship with God that a man must have in order to 'be saved' and to inherit 'eternal life', which is the life of the Age to come.

Why then, did Jesus himself not need to "be born again"? In contrast to every human born "of the flesh" from Adam onwards, Jesus describes himself as the first one

whose origin is "from above". He was born of 'the Spirit' of God.

At what precise point in time and history did Jesus begin to exist? From whence his generation and origin? How could this man be born without inheriting Adam's death? The angel Gabriel declared Jesus would be "begotten" by the overshadowing of God's Spirit in Mary (Luke 1:35). (6)

When Paul speaks of the birth of Jesus in unique terms he is showing he understood Jesus' own teaching about the nature of "the flesh" of all natural-born men and the necessity that Jesus be **not** born like the rest of us.

Those who deny the imperative for a supernatural generation of Jesus in the womb of his mother Mary are (whether they realize it or not) denying the possibility for a supernatural regeneration in their own lives by the power of God through Christ Jesus, for on this count, Jesus would have been as cursed by Adam's death-nature as the rest of us.

The Text Has Been Tampered With!

It is common amongst those who deny the miraculous conception of Jesus in Mary by the Spirit of God to allege the NT has been corrupted at this point. Personally, I only use this argument as a last resort, when all other evidence seems to point that way. It is my humble opinion that a first resort to textual corruption to prove a doctrine smacks of *a priori* and subjective motives. It is usually a dead giveaway of circular reasoning. My starting position with any difficult text is that the NT Scriptures are trustworthy and reliable and we must deal with the general consensus of textual evidence before darting off to a minority report purporting textual corruption. (7)

Does this mean I deny that the NT suffers from some scribal corruptions, whether by careless or deliberate attention? Not at all. But in reality we mostly know where these corruptions occur due to the huge numbers and antiquity of the NT Greek manuscripts.

In our current discussion as it relates to the Virgin Birth, we need to realize the argument of possible textual corruption can run both ways. Let me illustrate.

John 1:11-13

I propose that the scribal corruptions are actually biased ***against*** the Virgin Birth. I propose that the miraculous conception of Jesus was a later embarrassment to some within the early church and that some scribes deliberately tried to expunge from the NT the idea of Jesus' miraculous birth.

Let me demonstrate one clear case where this is almost certain to have occurred. Our modern translations read:

“He came to his own, and those who were his own did not receive him. But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in his name, who *were born* not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:11-13).

As this reads, and as traditional commentary has it, these verses are talking about the new birth Christians experience through faith in Christ. That is, our relationship with God through Christ is not something of human origin, or human desire and will-power, or human genius. Our salvation is all of God's doing through His Son.

However, this is almost certainly not what John originally wrote. We know these verses were the subject of much early debate. For example, Tertullian accused the Valentinian Gnostics of having altered the text to read as you just did above. According to Tertullian the plural verb "were born" should actually be the singular verb "was". This means the verse should read:

"But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become the children of God, even to those who believe in his name, who **was** born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

As you can see, this singular verb changes the sense completely: Instead of it being the Christians who are born by God's will, it is now Messiah himself who is born by God's will and initiation.

Tertullian thus accused the Gnostics of trying to eliminate the idea of Jesus' miraculous birth ("who was born") by making it relate to their own experience ("who were born").

In support of this understanding, Irenaeus and Justin Martyr argue for the singular verb. A strong point in favour of this reading is

that these references to the singular verb *antedate* any of our extant NT manuscripts. Also of interest to my Jewish friends, the *Jerusalem Bible* supports the singular verb here!

Whenever I read John 1:11-13 now, I confess the plural verb is incongruous, even though it is in keeping with the Bible's general tenor that our salvation is entirely of God's grace. Surely the more natural sense is to understand this as a reference to the birth of Jesus without human intervention?

If we take it as plural (that is, that it speaks of the new birth of Christians) it points out in a puzzling manner the blatantly obvious --- that the believer's spiritual birth "of God" has nothing to do with sexual intercourse, fleshly craving, or male will! On this reading, we must ask who would have supposed it did anyway?

The more it is pondered, the more baffling it becomes that John should have three times over differentiated spiritual regeneration from physical generation in his introduction. Yes, it is true that later in John's Gospel this difference is discussed with Nicodemus. In John chapter 3 Jesus discusses spiritual

regeneration *vis a vis* natural birth plainly indicating he himself was not born of “the flesh” like everybody else (see above pg.11-12).

Is there a clue as to how John wants us to understand his introduction at John 1:11-13? Is he referring to the spiritual birth of all believers or is he referencing the unique way Jesus entered the world via the virgin birth? I think there is.

I John 5:18

“We know that those who are born of God do not sin, but the one who was born of God protects them.” (NRSV)

John is talking about two classes of people, and he uses two different tenses for the one verb used to differentiate the two classes.

The first group, literally, “everyone having been begotten of God”, refers to all Christian believers. And how have they/we become Christians? John uses the Greek *perfect tense* – “having been born” – to say our new birth by God began at a point in the past but the effects of that new birth are on-going. That is, the one who is born of God does not habitually practice sinning. John’s phrase,

“those who are born of God” has been used already 6 times in this epistle to refer to the believer, and each of those 6 times the verb is in the perfect tense.

The second class John mentions has only one person in it – “the one begotten of God”. As he describes this one man, in a class all on his own, John uses a unique turn of phrase, and he employs the Greek *aorist tense*. Think of the *aorist tense* like you took a photo, a snapshot, of some family member years ago. You hold in your hand a reference to a once and for all, never to be repeated event from the past. And what snapshot does John hold up for us to look at here? The one who “was born of God”, that is, Jesus.

John is explaining the birth of Jesus as a once and for all, never to be repeated, event. Jesus “was begotten of God” (which by the way, is a statement contradicting Trinitarian belief that Jesus is the “eternal Son of God” and did not come into existence!).

So, lets put John’s two statements together. One statement from his Gospel and one from his epistle: John 1:13 in the singular --- “Who was born of God” matches the “He who was born of God” in I John 5:18!

Therefore, John 1:11-13 is an exact statement of the Virgin Birth, for Jesus was born "of God" without human initiation, will, or natural craving. The birth of Jesus was a "birth of God" because it was initiated and brought about by God's power outside of the normal human pairing needed for the rest of us.

The Only Begotten Son.

Jesus called himself "the only begotten Son" (*monogenees*) (John 3:16, 18). John says Jesus was "the only begotten of God" (John 1: 14,18; 1 John 4:9). The word means exactly that, *only* or *uniquely born of God*.

Defining *monogeneses* the prestigious *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* states:

"The meaning of the compound is 'of a single kind' ... [and] To be sure, the identification of Jesus as *monogenees* does allude to his origin as Son of God (cf. esp. John 1:14,18) and possibly also to the notion of begetting ..." (8)

Attempts are made to explain away this straight forward and easy definition. Some say that "only begotten" does not mean

uniquely born, but rather specially chosen, loved, called or favoured. Appeal is made to the description of Isaac being called Abraham's "only begotten" in Hebrews 11:17. Abraham had two sons, and his first-born was Ishmael. So Abraham had more than one son born from his fathering.

We do not deny that the description "only begotten" also carries the idea of the son being the object of the father's delight and choice, however a little reflection will prove this is not the primary meaning of the term.

Isaac, being born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age according to God's promise, was unique in his birth. Ishmael was produced by Abraham's union with the handmaid Hagar. He is described as being born "according to the flesh" (Gal. 4:23,29). So, far from deflecting the primary meaning of Isaac's unique birth by promise through Sarah, this example actually confirms it. Abraham had one uniquely born son "according to the promise" whom he greatly loved and favoured (Gal. 4:28).

When we read that Jesus stopped the funeral procession of the grief-struck widow of Nain and raised her "only begotten son", the

obvious message is that this woman had only one single boy (Luke 7:12). Yes, because he was her only born son, she had put all her hopes and affections upon him.

Likewise, Jairus's dead daughter whom Jesus raised again to life is described as *monogenees* ... "only born" (Luke 4:42). And also the demon-possessed son is "my only born" (Luke 9:38). Greatly loved these "only born" sons and daughter were, yes. But the primary intention is to tell us they were their parents' only son or only daughter.

We are now in a position to make up our own minds as to whether Barham's assertion that the Virgin Birth of Jesus is never mentioned in any of the epistles, or anywhere else in the NT for that matter. Well, the writings of Mark might, but Paul and John certainly do! And the evidence is convincing that Jesus himself believed his origin and birth to be unique amongst men.

A Question For My Jewish Friends.

Why does a miraculous creation by God's holy Spirit preclude Jesus from being a real human being? Luke's genealogy makes the point that every ancestor of Messiah is traced all the way back to the original First

Adam who is called "the son of God" (Lk. 3:38).

In the case of Adam a supernatural creation is obviously no bar to him being genuinely human. God breathed into the lifeless clay and the first Man came into existence. So, if the First Adam comes directly by a special and supernatural creation by God, on what basis is Jesus the "second Adam" precluded from being genuinely human because he also came into existence by Divine fiat? If it took God's miraculous creation to bring the first Man into being, on what logical basis is a miracle-born Jesus precluded from also being a genuine man and indeed, the Son of God (cp. Luke 1:35)?

As the second Adam, Jesus was taken from the ova of Mary and God miraculously fathered her child. Both Adams were brought into being using natural materials already present: In the case of Adam, the lifeless clay was infused by the breath (Spirit) of God; and in the case of Jesus, the rich genetically and genealogically inherited ova of Mary was overshadowed by the Spirit (Breath) of God. (9) *Ipsa facto*

a supernatural beginning does not disqualify either of these two men from being truly or fully human, surely?

Adam is the type. Messiah is the antetype. Like the man Adam, the man Jesus had a unique origin. This is not mere fiction, but fact woven into the theology and Christology of the entire Scriptures. (TBC)

FOOTNOTES

1. I confess I have a strong aversion to creeds. It's my Churches of Christ training, I'm sure. In my book *They Never Told Me This in Church!* I trace the development (is that the right description?) of the various Church creeds (80pp).
2. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, Abingdon Press, New York, 1962, vol. 3, 266pp.
3. You see this practice at work when Salome, the mother of James and John, is twice described in Matthew's Gospel as, "the mother of the sons of Zebedee" (Matt. 20:20; 27:56). Neither is there

an exception in the OT when Joseph is said to pasture the flock “along with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father’s wives” (Gen. 37:2), for this description differentiates Joseph from his half-brothers. Note the phrase, “his father’s wives”! On the other hand, Mary the mother of Jesus had but one husband.

4. *Gennaoo* --- to father, to generate, to beget --- is the causative form of *ginomai* --- to be, to exist, to become, to occur.
5. “In the likeness of sinful flesh” is an interesting phrase. Theologians have wondered whether Adam & Eve before their rebellion actually had some kind of glow about their bodies. After all, God had made every animal with a covering of fur, feathers, hair, scales of some sort. It is unthinkable that Adam & Eve --the pinnacle of God’s creation and the bearers of His image and likeness – should have no covering. Could it have been that Adam & Eve were created with bodies that shone in some way? Was their covering an emanation of some kind? One thing is for sure, once

they sinned they lost their covering of innocence. They knew they were naked. Something had evidently been lost. Their bodies now were “sinful flesh”, that is, flesh now ruled by death with the bias towards sin.

6. Gabriel announces Jesus would be “fathered” (“generated”) by the overshadowing power of the Most High God and that ‘*on that account*’ (*dio kai*) he would be “the holy offspring”. That is to say, Jesus the Christ would be generated by the direct act of God and as a result Mary would conceive her baby without a human father.
7. Textual corruption is alleged to have occurred by scribes copying the original manuscripts when they either deliberately or innocently subtracted from, added to, or altered in any way what the author first wrote.
8. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Vol. 3, Moises Silva, Revision Editor, Zondervan, Michigan. 2014. *Monogeneses*, p. 334.
9. In Hebrew & Greek the words “spirit” and “breath” are interchangeable.