

Hail Mary, Mother of God?

When a sincere Roman Catholic recites the Rosary, "Hail Mary, mother of God, blessed is the fruit of thy womb", we on the Protestant side tend to cringe. The idea that one day the Almighty should have approached the Jewish virgin with the request, "Mary, would you please be my mother?" sounds horribly awry.

We also spot the splinter in the Roman Catholic eye when they decree Mary was a perpetual virgin who never had sexual intercourse with Joseph, even after she gave birth to her firstborn son, Jesus (cp Matt. 1:25; 12:47).

But wait. There's more. Centuries later a papal decree mandated Mary was herself "immaculately conceived". With no Scriptural justification, the Roman Church said Mary was without sin, so did not die the normal death of all humans, but was miraculously lifted up into heaven to be glorified next to her Son to be 'co-

redemptress (the official Roman Catholic doctrine of the Assumption).

But before we try to pry the splinter out of our neighbour's eye, is it just possible that we might have a log jammed in our own theological eye? Have we swallowed hallowed myth by insisting Jesus was virgin-conceived and virgin-born? It is after all, "orthodox" to confess Jesus is both Divine and human, which is to say, "God in the flesh". It seems we believe the same thing as the Roman Catholics, but we just say it in a more finely nuanced style!

Indeed, a constant refrain from skeptics of the virgin birth of Jesus is that Christianity is only mimicking the old pagan folklores of miraculous birth stories of super-heroes from yesteryear. Go to any web site forum discussing the virgin birth and you will get an eye full of this kind talk!

So, in order to determine whether the virgin birth of Jesus is a pagan myth imported into

Christianity, we first need to take a look at a sample of these pagan myths for comparison.

'The Buddha'.

Siddhartha Gautama is affectionately called 'The Buddha' by millions around the world. Stories of his miraculous birth are often appealed to as proof that at the very least the story of the virgin birth of Jesus Christ is not unique. So what are the facts?

The earliest records available indicate Buddha was the son of a king of the Sakyas, a people of the warrior cast near the Himalayas (Nepal). One ancient document speaks of his being wellborn on his mother's and father's sides for seven generations (*Digha Nikaya* i.113). But this document gives absolutely no *early* indication of a "virgin" birth of Buddha.

There are no authentic accounts of Buddha's early life from historians contemporary with him. The oldest information relating to the life of Gautama is found in the Pali canon,

which is believed to have originated about two hundred years after his death. And the even later stories of a supposed “miracle birth”, enter the story some five to ten centuries after the philosopher’s death. (1) By no stretch of the imagination is this credible history.

So, it was not until centuries after Buddha’s death (*circa* 483 BC), that supra-legends regarding him evolved, some of which suggested an “unusual” birth. For example it is said that at the time of his conception his mother dreamed that a white elephant with six tusks entered her belly. Supposedly, Gautama left his mother’s womb (from her side) like a man descending “from a ladder.” (2). Further comment regarding such absurdities is not necessary.

Krishna

The Hindu deity Krishna allegedly fits this category of a deity born into the world by miraculous means. According to the religious Hindu text, Vishnu Purana, Krishna

was mentally transmitted from the mind of the god Vasudeva (an incarnation of Krishna himself) into the womb of the princess Devaki. This appears at first glance to be a striking parallel, but it cannot be classified a virgin birth because Devaki and Vasudeva had previously borne seven children together!

Egypt.

The supposed “virgin birth” of the Egyptian god Horus is a most frequently encountered parallel. According to the mythology, this falcon-headed god was the offspring of the goddess Isis. Her husband, the god Osiris, was killed by his enemy Seth, the god of the desert, and later dismembered. Isis managed to retrieve all of Osiris’s body parts except for his phallus, which was thrown into the Nile and eaten by catfish. Isis used her goddess powers to temporarily resurrect Osiris and fashion a phallus of gold. She was then impregnated, and Horus was conceived. It hardly goes without saying that this myth does not resemble the

story of the birth of the man Jesus at all.

Rome.

The Roman god Mithras is often appealed to as proof that Christianity simply adopted and modified its account of the miraculous begetting of Jesus. But anyone who knows the myth understands that Mithras was not human at all, yet the claim is made again and again on many web sites and discussion forums.

Also, according to Roman legend, Romulus and Remus, twin brothers and central characters in that city's foundational myth, were born of the Vestal Virgin, Rhea Silvia. In one variation of the myth, the god Mars seduces and impregnates her.

Greece.

The Hellenistic gods and heroes born of human mothers are similar to that of Romulus and Remus; virtually all of them were conceived through sexual intercourse. Dionysus, for example, was the product of

an affair between Zeus, the king of the gods, and a mortal woman named Semele. According to the Dionysus myth, Zeus' wife Hera learns of the affair and disguises herself as an old woman to befriend Semele. Her purpose was to cast a seed of doubt in this mortal woman's mind, that the father of her unborn baby was not really Zeus. Semele demands Zeus reveal himself, but mere mortals could not look upon undisguised gods without dying, and so she perished in flames. Zeus rescued the fetus and sowed him into his leg. Several months later, Dionysus was born.

Amongst the popular stories of individuals born to a divine mother and a human father, were Achilles (son of the divine Thetis and the human Peleus), and Aeneas (son of Aphrodite and the mortal Anchises).

Those believed to be the offspring of a god and a human mother included Asclepius (son of Apollo and the mortal Coronis) and Hercules (son of Zeus and the human

Alcmene). None of these myths bears any semblance with the account of the virgin birth of Jesus.

Alexander the Great.

Of the pagan gods we have discussed so far, none were ever believed to be historical figures like Jesus. This is not the case with Alexander the Great. He is very much a real man of history. Alexander was born in Pella around 356 BC to Phillip II, the king of Macedon and his wife Olypias. He later became a student of Aristotle, and eventually became the king of Macedon, one of the largest empires in the ancient world.

According to the late first-century Greek biographer Plutarch, Alexander may have been the son of Zeus. This is based on his interpretation of alleged dreams that were had by Alexander's parents. Plutarch also tells us that there was no consensus among the commentators of his day. There does not appear to be a consistent narrative either, and the only evidence we have for

this is found in Plutarch's interpretation, which he did not even write until the end of the first century, almost 70 years after the stories of Christ had been in circulation.

In Plutarch's 'Life of Alexander' (written around 100 CE) we read, *"it happened not through semen but by another power of God that God begot in matter the principle of generation, ... not by a physical approach, like a man's, but by some other kind of contact or touch that a god alters mortal nature and makes it pregnant with a more divine offspring"*.

Legends of miraculous conceptions and births were also told about rulers and philosophers who were historical characters. Among the philosophers, Pythagoras was said to be the offspring of Apollo and the human Pythais. Plato was believed to have been the son of Apollo and Amphictione; and Apollonius of Tyana was thought to be the son of Proteus, a divinity of Egypt, or Zeus.

A number of these miraculous conceptions involved some form of spiritual encounter with a virgin mother. Aeschylus is an early example: "In '*Suppliants*' 17-19, Lo is said to be impregnated by Zeus in the form of the 'on-breathing of his love.'"

Hollywood.

In the Western world we have no problem in identifying these legends as myths belonging to past eras, right? But this does not stop us moderns from entering into that make-believe world via Hollywood. Who does not remember, for example, Sigourney Weaver's blockbuster movie series *Alien*, just to name one example of many? Humans being impregnated by aliens makes for good theatre!

So why not consign the virgin birth of Jesus to the same genre? And if similar themes from Egypt, Rome, Greece, India, or anywhere else in the ancient pagan world were a way to explain an individual's superiority above other humans, a way to

venerate their heroes' lives and deeds, what's so wrong about Christianity wanting to do the same for Jesus? Isn't Jesus' divine begetting necessary to explain "orthodoxy's" belief that Jesus is 100% God and 100% man? Why not just say, "Hail Mary, Mother of God" and get on with the show?

Obvious Differences.

It ought to be obvious to anybody claiming the Virgin Birth of Jesus is only a "copycat" of these pagan legends that this theory fails on a number of levels.

For starters, it strikes at the very heart of the historicity of the gospel narrative. Most of the real historical men such as Buddha, Alexander the Great, and Plato, are the products of physical relations or by some other miraculous event. Unlike the stories of paganism which had maidens consorting with the gods, there is no indication whatever in the biblical accounts that Mary had any sort of sexual union with God through His Spirit. It was by the "power" of

God that “came upon” Mary that she became pregnant (Luke 1:35). Throughout Israel’s history the power of the Spirit of God had “come upon” many of her heroes without any overtones of sexual involvement or intimacy.

In a previous article in this series, *The Virgin Birth: Fact or Fiction?* I pointed out that, 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 in the womb of Mary? If it took God’s miraculous creation to bring the first Man into being, on what logical basis is a miracle-born Jesus out of Mary precluded from also being a genuine man (cp. Luke 1:35)?

But to stay on topic, the absurdities uniformly characteristic of the pagan miracle births are completely absent from the Biblical history of the Nativity. Not a single one of these ancient myths bears any significant resemblance to the birth of Jesus recorded by Matthew or Luke. Even Thomas Boslooper, a modernist who repudiated the historical reality of a literal virgin birth of Christ, conceded:

“The literature of the world is prolific with narratives of unusual births, but it contains no precise analogy to the virgin birth in Matthew and Luke. Jesus’ ‘virgin birth’ is not ‘pagan’” (3).

Boslooper does not stand in isolation from other scholarship either. Following his own critical examination of this theme, Louis Matthews Sweet wrote:

“After a careful, laborious, and occasionally wearisome study of the

evidence offered and the analogies urged, I am convinced that heathenism knows nothing of virgin births. Supernatural births it has without number, but never from a virgin in the New Testament sense and never without physical generation, except in a few isolated instances of magical births on the part of women who had not the slightest claim to be called virgins. In all recorded instances which I have been able to examine, if the mother was a virgin before conception took place she could not make that claim afterward" (4)

In The Mouth of Two Witnesses.

We have in Matthew and Luke two independent accounts of the birth of Jesus. Scholars from all ends of the theological spectrum believe that these two writers were not familiar with each other's work. So we can test the historical accuracy of Matthew by comparing it with Luke, and vice versa. Plus, both writers were willing to lay their lives down on the credibility of their

histories. This cannot be said for any of the pagan myths.

Yes, there are a number of differences in their respective accounts. But this only goes to prove they (or the early Christians with access to their manuscripts) were not in collaboration trying to “doctor” the story up, trying to iron out inconvenient differences. Why preserve elements in the story the early Christians knew would not help their defense of the Jesus story?

N.T. Wright’s well-phrased insights are relevant here:

Even assuming that Matthew or Luke regularly invented material to fit Jesus into earlier templates, why would they have invented something like this? The only conceivable parallels are pagan ones, and these fiercely Jewish stories have certainly not been modeled on them. Luke at least must have known that telling this story ran the risk of making

Jesus out to be a pagan demigod. Why, for the sake of an exalted metaphor, would they take this risk – unless they at least believed them to be literally true?
(5)

Even though the birth stories seemed to have little evangelistic value in the second century, the early Christians let stand the stories that were at best ineffective, or at worst, potentially scandalous. They didn't change details that mattered only to Jews. Rather, they stuck by the stories they had. Why? The only answer that makes sense is this: They believed them to be true and worth preserving. The early church was primarily concerned to preserve the truth that had been passed on about Jesus, even when this truth didn't help their cause but may in fact have hurt it.

In any law court of the land where two eyewitnesses give exactly the same details in minutest of specifics over a wide-ranging case, the court understands collusion has

taken place; such testimony is dismissed as unreliable. So, if the early Christians really were in the business of making up smooth and seamless palatable stories, you can be sure they would have edited out the 'awkward' differences between Matthew and Luke.

That said, I hasten to add that these two independent historians, Matthew and Luke, do agree on the essential aspects of their histories. The big picture is not in doubt:-

1. Jesus had a mother named Mary and a [legal] father named Joseph (Matt 1:18; Luke 1:27).
2. Mary and Joseph were engaged, but not married, when Mary became pregnant with Jesus (Matt 1:18; Luke 1:27).
3. Joseph and Mary were both descendants of King David of Israel (Matt 1:20; Luke 2:4).

4. Mary conceived and became pregnant while she was still a virgin (Matt 1:18; Luke 1:27, 34).

5. The Holy Spirit of God, that is God's miraculous power, was the cause of Mary's conception (Matt 1:18; Luke 1:35).

6. The news of Mary's pregnancy was initially unexpected and troublesome (to Joseph in Matthew; to Mary in Luke).

7. Mary and Joseph remained together in spite of her premarital pregnancy (Matt 1:24:25; Luke 2).

8. An angel visits Jesus' parents to reveal his divine begetting (Matt 1:20-23; Luke 1:26-38).

9. An angel names the baby "Jesus" (Matt 1:21; Luke 2:21).

10. Through angels Jesus is identified as the “saviour” (Matt 1:21; Luke 2:11).

11. Jesus was born while Herod the Great was king of Judea (Matt 2:1; Luke 1:5).

12. Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea (Matt 2:1; Luke 2:4).

13. Jesus will be the messianic king of the Jews (Matt 2:2-4; Luke 1:32-33; 2:11).

14. Jesus’ birth is understood in light of Jewish prophecies (many times in Matthew and Luke).

15. Unexpected visitors are supernaturally summoned to visit Jesus (Matthew’s magi and Luke’s shepherds).

16. Jesus, though born in Bethlehem, was raised in Nazareth (Matt 2:23; Luke 2:39).

This means that we have two relatively early, but independent accounts of the birth of Jesus that confirm each other's reliability. They agree on the major characters, the major timing, the major places, and the major miracles of the Nativity story.

Both accounts were written within about fifty years of Jesus' death. Thus we have good reason to believe that Matthew and Luke were telling the story of what really happened in the birth of Jesus.

There were just too many people still living and contemporaneous with these historians for them not to tell the facts. It's therefore highly unlikely that either gospel writer made up the main elements of the story, even if you believe that they took some creative writing license (which I don't).

Even though the virgin birth story would have confirmed Roman prejudices, and even though they weren't neatly harmonized or finely detailed, nevertheless the early church didn't improve them. According to

the Nativity stories, Jesus was born in lowly surrounds in a small Jewish village which, from the Roman point of view, had no significance whatsoever. Only a few lowly shepherds and a small band of astrologers paid him any notice. This would hardly get Roman pagans excited about Jesus. On the contrary, it would strengthen their prejudice against Christianity.

The fact that the Virgin Birth was accepted in the first generation of the church does not fit with the notion that it was a pagan myth that gradually was attached to belief in Jesus.

On the contrary, Matthew and Luke reflect a thoroughly Judaic religious and cultural perspective totally out of sync with the pagan myths of miraculous births. The pagan stories mostly involved sexual relations between a god and a human and were often generously exaggerated, while the Nativity narratives are demure.

The theory that pagan myths are the

background for the virgin birth of Jesus forces us to believe a whopper of an historical tale. Let's quote N.T. Wright again. The passage is involved, but helpful:

“What would have to have happened, granted the skeptic's position, for the story to have taken the shape it did? To answer this, I must indulge in some speculative tradition history . . . This is how it would look. (a) Christians came to believe that Jesus was in some sense divine. (b) Someone who shared this faith broke thoroughly with Jewish precedents and invented the story of a pagan-style virginal conception. (c) Some Christians failed to realize that this was historicized metaphor and retold it as though it were historical. (d) Matthew and Luke, assuming historicity, drew independently upon this astonishing fabrication, set it (though in quite different ways) within a thoroughly Jewish context, and wove it in quite different ways into their respective narratives. And all this happened within,

more or less, fifty years. Possible? Yes, of course. Most things are possible in history. Likely? No . . . This theory asks us to believe in intellectual parthenogenesis: the birth of an idea without visible parentage. Difficult. Unless, of course, you believe in miracles, which most people who disbelieve the virginal conception don't." (6) (7)

A Jewish Objection.

In my previous article titled, *Immanuel: God Was One of Us?* I presented evidence that it was Jewish rabbis who first translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek long before the Christian era. Without any pre-conceived ideas their coming Messiah would be begotten by the power of God in the virgin, they translated *almah* (meaning a young woman of sexual maturity) as *parthenos* (definitely meaning virgin) in Isaiah 7:14.

However, it is a recurring theme amongst my Jewish friends that this is an unfortunate

mistranslation and that the Hebrew Bible knows nothing of a virginal begetting of Messiah. If it's not in the Tanak (the Old Testament Hebrew) they tell me, then it's not valid.

OK, let's accept for the moment this challenge that unless the virgin birth is found in the Hebrew Scriptures then the concept is pagan (specifically Greek) in origin. Let's stick only to the Hebrew at Isaiah 7:14. Let's take this legitimate Jewish criterion and see if it holds water. This is the acid test!

When Matthew quoted Isaiah 7:14 he used the Greek future tenses ("shall conceive" and "shall bear") as used in the LXX. However, the Hebrew text conveys a subtler possibility. The Hebrew *harah* ("shall conceive") is not a verb or participle, but a feminine adjective signifying "pregnant". It is here connected with an active participle ("bear"), to denote that the object is described as present to the

prophet's view. (8)

So, Isaiah 7:14 can read, "Behold the pregnant virgin is bearing a son and she calls his name Immanuel." Now concentrate ... this is critical ... **The sign God gives is that the virgin is still a virgin both at the time she is pregnant and when she brings forth her son!** She will be a pregnant virgin.

How can this be, for a virgin ceases to be a virgin after her first sexual encounter with her man. Quite possibly she could be a virgin at the time she becomes pregnant, but she could never be called a virgin during the length of her pregnancy!

Thus, no conception and pregnancy by the wife of either Ahaz (or Isaiah) could satisfy the full technical meaning of this verse. Besides, both the Hebrew and the Greek use the definite article, "the *alma*" shall conceive. A specific *alma* is in mind. Midrashic

commentary by Matthew brings out this underlying nuance and thus fulfils the sign. This argues strongly in favour of my contention that Isaiah 7:14 had a "near fulfilment" and a fuller, "far fulfilment".

Remember, it was God Himself who proposed this sign. Isaiah had challenged Ahaz to ask for a sign, "as deep as Sheol or high as Heaven", but the king did not want the sign. He protested, "I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD" (Isaiah 7: 11-12).

It certainly is not stretching it to say that a sign proposed by God Himself should not be supernatural in design and worthy of His character ... deep as Sheol or high as Heaven ... a miracle worthy of Divine proportions! I think that in spite of the very best of motives and intentions, my Jewish friends actually end up detracting from the supernatural aspect of God's prophetic word they so honourably wish to preserve.

Only the virgin birth of Jesus by Mary could satisfy the technical meaning of this verse in Hebrew! Mary was a virgin when she became pregnant, and yet her virginity was unbroken even after falling pregnant. She remained a virgin throughout her pregnancy, and even after Jesus was born she was still a virgin (until Joseph subsequently consummated their marriage as per Matthew 1:25).

So ... by my Jewish friends' own criterion that unless the concept is found in the Hebrew Bible it must be rejected as a later pagan intrusion ... I humbly suggest they submit to their own Hebrew Scriptures and accept that Jesus was virginally begotten and virginally birthed.

Final Word.

If you struggle with the whole concept of the virgin birth of Jesus, you are not alone. Many throughout the years since the first Christians

confessed it have similarly struggled with this miracle. Various objections and theories have been proposed. But if we take the Hebrew Bible and the apostolic New Testament witness as our authority, and if we accept their testimony that there is a Supernatural Creator God in Heaven who demonstrates His glory and wisdom in human history, then we may, I believe, accept His word on this: Jesus was begotten by God's power in the virgin Mary (Luke 1:35). This is precisely why Jesus is the Son of God, the Messianic Lord.

“Hail Mary, Mother of God”? No! That is a pagan misinterpretation of the Biblical evidence, to be consigned to pagan myth status along with the folklores of the pagan world. But, “Hail Mary, virgin mother of Jesus our Messianic Lord and Saviour”? Yes! Well may we say, “Blessed among women are you, and blessed is the fruit of your womb (Luke 1:42)!”

FOOTNOTES

1. Machen, J. Gresham (1930), *The Virgin Birth of Christ*. New York: Harper & Bros. p. 342
2. Boslooper, Thomas, *The Virgin Birth*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1962. pp 139.
3. Ibid, p. 136.
4. Sweet, Louis Matthews, *The Birth and Infancy of Jesus Christ*. Westminster, Philadelphia, 1906. P. 188
5. Wright, N.T. *Born of a Virgin?* In *The Meaning of Jesus, Two Versions*. Harper Collins. New York. p.176
6. Ibid, p.177
7. For those wishing some further in-depth study see Robert M. Bowman Jr. at IRR.org though I disagree with his "God in the flesh" take.
8. Alexander, J. A. *Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1953, p.172

