

Systematic Theology for the Local Church

#38—Christology—Part IV¹

The Virgin Birth

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The next study will be on the results of the virgin birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. Helpful for the present study and the next is Reymond, pp. 547-552.

G. Campbell Morgan called it “The Holy Mystery.” James Orr described it as “the most stupendous miracle in the universe.” Two of the four gospels record this event that is so crucial to God’s plan for the Person and work of the Redeemer—the virgin birth of the Lord Jesus Christ². This is the first of two studies on the virgin birth. The second will present the results of the virgin birth.

The biblical narratives are clear: the betrothal period, Joseph’s conflict, the appearance of an angel to Joseph after Mary and the birth in Bethlehem. But the Bible nowhere explains the mystery of how a virgin conception, with subsequent virgin birth, could take place. Philippians 2:1-11 provides the theological side, and Lk. 1:35 describes it in relation to Mary:

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.

Do you believe in the Virgin Birth of Christ? Undoubtedly you do. I do not think that I would need to convince you of this. But stop and think for a moment. Assume that it was God’s desire that the pre-existent Second Person of the Trinity enter into the human realm and be joined with humanity (remember that the Second Person did not “become human” or “become humanity”), for the purpose of dealing with sin, as we see in Lk. 9:10: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” Is it terribly important just how God would do it? Perhaps there might have been other ways, such as these:

1. The Son might indwell an existing human body. But what about the person who got kicked out? Besides, the incarnate Son would be indwelling a sinner and would not really be human.
2. The Son could have indwelled a new human body. Again, he would be indwelling a sinner and not really human.
3. The Son might just appear to have a body. But then he wouldn’t really have been a man.
4. The Son could have created the appearance of being a man—a trick.
5. He could have appeared as an angel, as in Gen. 18 or as in the angel of the Lord appearances. But he still would not have been a man.

The clear testimony of Scripture is that he was inwardly and outwardly a bondservant, a real, although lowly, human being. He looked like human beings, too. J. I. Packer underscores the fullness of the requirements of the incarnation³:

The really staggering Christian claim is that Jesus of Nazareth was God made man—that the second person of the godhead became the ‘second man’ (1 Cor. 15:47), determining human destiny, the

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² For a fine treatment of the virgin birth by S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. from a different perspective from that in this study, see http://www.plymouthbrethren.org/article.php?article_id=1709

³ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 46.

second representative head of the race, and that He took humanity without loss of deity, so that Jesus of Nazareth was as truly and fully divine as He was human. Here are two mysteries for the price of one—the plurality of persons within the unity of God, and the union of Godhead and manhood in the person of Jesus.

James Denney said⁴

“He came from God, all the apostles believed, in a *sense* in which no other came: does it not follow that He came in a *way* in which no other came?”

Errors that have cropped up over the centuries concerning the person of the Lord Jesus Christ underscore the importance of maintaining his full deity and full humanity.

1. In the early second century the Ebionites held that Christ was merely a man who had a special relation to God, since God couldn't be joined with humanity.
2. The Docetists (ca. 70-170 AD) held that Christ did not have a real human body. He was a theophany—a mere appearance of God—who had no real life or death.
3. The Arians (ca. 325 AD) held that the Logos in Christ was a created being who joined himself to humanity.
4. The Apollinarians (ca. 381 AD) asserted that Christ was only partly human and had no human spirit. His body was human but his mind was divine.
5. The Nestorians (ca. 431 AD) held that Christ was only a man in a very near relation to God. His human and divine natures were not unified.

While some use the term virgin (or ‘virginal’) conception⁵, I am using the term virgin birth instead for two reasons: 1) Theoretically there could be a virgin conception but not a virgin birth; if there is a virgin birth, there is automatically a virgin conception, and 2) The Bible actually speaks of both a virgin birth and a virgin conception (Mt. 1:18, 20, 23, 25). The term virgin birth includes birth and conception.⁶ However, we should keep in mind that the actual birth of the Lord Jesus Christ was not unusual. What was unusual and miraculous was the way in which the God-Man came into existence inside Mary.

The biblical evidence for the virgin birth

The Bible teaches that there was an event corresponding to what theologians call the virgin birth. If a person does not believe in the virgin birth, he cannot do so based on the claim that the Bible is unclear. Here are the biblical texts that speak explicitly to the virgin birth:

Isa. 7:14: 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.

Mt. 1:16: and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.

Mt. 1:20-23: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”

⁴ James Denney, *Studies in Theology* (London, 1902), p.64.

⁵ See, for example, Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of The Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 547-552.

⁶ See Daniel Phillips at <http://bibchr.blogspot.com/2005/12/virgin-birth-vs-virgin-conception.html>.

Lk. 1:26-27: ²⁶ In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

Lk. 1:35: 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."

In this study we will concentrate on the prophecy in Isa. 7 and its fulfillment in Mt. 1.

The Old Testament prophecy of the virgin birth—its setting and details

The earliest prediction of this birth is found in Gen. 3:15, where the first words about a redeemer also tell us that the one who would defeat the Satan/Serpent would be an offspring of the woman. The most specific prophecy, however, comes in Isa. 7, where God informs a rebellious king that he would be judged and a miraculous birth would bring God to human beings. This passage prepares us for the New Testament account of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ as it connects blessing to come with sin and rebellion in Israel. In other words, grace is implicit in the prophecy because of its setting. Since the Bible emphasizes in both the birth narratives and Isa. 7 that the virgin birth brings one who will remove sin, it is important to consider some of the details and the flow of Isaiah's account. Here is the text of Isa. 7:14:

7 When Ahaz son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, was king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and Pekah son of Remaliah king of Israel marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not overpower it. ² Now the house of David was told, "Aram has allied itself with Ephraim"; so the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind. ³ Then the LORD said to Isaiah, "Go out, you and your son Shear-Jashub, to meet Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washerman's Field. ⁴ Say to him, 'Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood—because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and of the son of Remaliah. ⁵ Aram, Ephraim and Remaliah's son have plotted your ruin, saying, ⁶ "Let us invade Judah; let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves, and make the son of Tabeel king over it." ⁷ Yet this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

"It will not take place, it will not happen,

⁸ for the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is only Rezin. Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people.

⁹ The head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah's son. If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.' "

¹⁰ Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, ¹¹ "Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights."

¹² But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test."

¹³ Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also? ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. ¹⁶ But 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. ¹⁷ The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah—he will bring the king of Assyria."

1. The setting

The overriding issue is of trusting God for safety. The time is 734 BC. Ahaz—an evil king—is ruler of the southern kingdom, Judah, with its capital in Jerusalem. The northern kingdom, Israel, also called Ephraim,

with its capital at Samaria, was ruled by Pekah (son of Remaliah). When Ahaz learns that Israel has allied itself with Syria (Aram), just to its north, with its capital Damascus, he is terrified. God graciously sends Isaiah with his son Shear-Jashub to meet Ahaz to encourage him to trust. ‘Shear-Jashub’ means ‘a remnant will return.’ His presence, along with Isaiah’s words, was designed to encourage Ahaz to trust God. God through Isaiah offers him a sign to strengthen his faith, but Ahaz will have none of it. His answer in v. 12 has the ring of false piety. So in v. 13 Isaiah delivers a message of judgment to the entire government (v. 13—‘house of David’ and the plural ‘you’ in v. 14). God will give Ahaz a sign anyway. It would not be a sign to encourage him, but a sign of doom. The threat from the north would be erased (we know this was by the Assyrian captivity of Israel/Ephraim in 522) within the space of time equivalent to the first few years of the life of the boy who is the subject of the prophecy of v. 14. We know from history that Pekah and Rezin died in 732 BC and that the northern kingdom Israel was shattered by 669—65 years after this incident in 734—exactly as predicted in v. 8! And although Assyria did not take the southern kingdom captive, Ahaz had to pay heavy tribute, fulfilling v. 17.

2. The prophecy in Isaiah

The prediction of the virgin birth has two problems associated with it. First there is the question of the meaning of the word translated ‘virgin’ in the NIV. The second problem has to do with the time of the fulfillment.

a. The details of the prediction

The actual prophecy has several significant features:

1. The Lord would provide a sign, suggesting the special involvement or presence of God. Note the NIV footnote: the sign is given to a plural group, not just Ahaz.
2. The birth of the child would be a sign.
3. The verse makes the startling statement that ‘the virgin’ would be pregnant.
4. She would subsequently give birth to a son.
5. The mother would assign the child the name ‘Immanuel’—‘God with us.’ In other words, this birth would bring God to be present with human beings, certainly in this case Israel.

b. The meaning of ‘virgin’

The word translated ‘virgin’ is *almah*. Other words that could have been used to refer to a woman were *yaldah*, which meant ‘young girl’ or ‘child,’ *naarah*, which denoted any woman, any female, and *bethulah*, which referred to a virgin or a married woman. If Isaiah had used the last term, there might have been confusion as to what he meant. *Almah* is the only word in Hebrew that unequivocally signifies an unmarried woman. The word may have been used in the OT to denote an immoral woman (Prov. 30:19) but not a married woman. In the context of Isa. 7:14 the woman must be morally good, since the prophecy brings God to human beings, so she was not an unmarried promiscuous woman. The Septuagint renders *almah* in 7:14 with *parthenos*, the normal Greek word for ‘virgin.’ So the summary is that a moral, unmarried woman will bear a child. The woman is a good woman, and the birth is legitimate and miraculous.

c. The time of fulfillment⁷

⁷ I recommend two articles in connection with the question of where Isa. 7:14 is fulfilled: 1) “The Prophecy of Isaiah 7:14” by Donna Morley (see <http://www.faithandreasonforum.org/index.asp?PageID=31&ArticleID=412>) and 2) “The Immanuel Prophecy” by William Brooks (see <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/m.sion/brooalma.htm>). I do not agree with everything in these articles, but I believe that their points concerning the time of fulfillment are valid.

There are three main views as to when this prophecy was fulfilled. Some say that a woman who was a virgin at the time of the prophecy later married and had a son. The big problem with this is it does not bring Immanuel, God-with-Us, to Israel. Further, this scenario would not seem to qualify as a notable sign, which 7:14 in context seems to describe. The second view is that the prophecy is entirely fulfilled in Mt. 1. The third view is a combination of the first two and sees a fulfillment in Mt. 1 and a fulfillment within Ahaz' time, in great part because of the time period associated with the birth of the boy who is the subject of the prophecy. I believe that the second view is best, for the following reasons:

1. The birth in Matthew certainly qualifies as a notable sign.
2. It brings God to Israel in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ.
3. Matthew 1:22-23 says that all the events of vv. 18-21 are a fulfillment of Isa. 7:14:

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”

If the fulfillment in the Lord Jesus Christ had so many details associated with it, it seems to me that a rather trivial fulfillment in the time of Ahaz, involving a woman who was a virgin at the time of the prophecy but later married, simply isn't in the same league. In other words, we learn in Mt. 1 that the prophecy was of utmost significance. I believe that a fulfillment of any kind in Isa. 7 or 8 would fail to be weighty enough in any way.

The question of the destruction of Ahaz' enemies within the space of time of the first few years of the boy's life can be answered by taking the first few years of Jesus' life as equivalent to the time (over 730 years later) that would elapse prior to the kings' defeat.

3. The fulfillment in Matthew

In studying the use of Old Testament quotations in the New Testament, it is important to notice the surrounding contexts of the quote and of the place where it is used by the New Testament writer. In addition, it is almost always helpful to notice what is the same and what is different in the wording. We will look first at the context of the use of the words of Isaiah and then at the quote itself, with changes and similarities.

a. The setting

It is interesting that Ahaz appears in Matthew's genealogy (v. 9), along with the Babylonian captivity, which took away the southern kingdom. It is likely that a Jew in the first century who knew Israel's history would make a connection between Isaiah's prophecy and the setting that involved Ahaz. The genealogy would thus serve to bring to mind the sinful rejection of God's goodness by a rebellious king, and the fulfillment of Isa. 7:14 would then emphasize the grace of God, who would bless Israel in spite of such kings as Ahaz.

Here is Mt. 1:18-25:

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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.”

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”
²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

There are several key features in the setting of the quotation of Isa. 7:14 by Matthew:

1. The conception of the child is assigned to the work of the Holy Spirit in vv. 18 and 20. This complements the statement of virgin conception in v. 23.
2. Joseph knows that he is not the father of the child.
3. The angel that speaks to Joseph in a dream predicts the birth of a son and commands Joseph to name him Jesus.
4. The angel explains the purpose of the name Jesus as pointing to the child’s work of saving Israel (his people) from her sins. The name Jesus means ‘Jehovah saves.’
5. Matthew comments that all of the events he records have the purpose of fulfilling what God said through Isaiah in Isa. 7:14.
6. Matthew records that Joseph did what he had been told, emphasizing that Joseph could not possibly be the father of the child (v. 25).

To summarize, the context of the quotation contains reminders of sins in Israel and emphasizes that the event fulfilling Isaiah’s prediction would provide a significant miraculous step in dealing with that sin problem.

b. The use of Isa. 7:14 in Mt. 1:23

Matthew uses the words of Isaiah to show that the events surrounding the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ were prophesied in detail by Isaiah: “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet.” These events were therefore planned centuries before. The meaning of ‘fulfill’ is that what the prophecy pointed to became reality at Bethlehem through the sovereign hand of God.

Matthew appears to take pains to explain the meaning of ‘Immanuel.’ I believe that he does this not because there would be general lack of understanding of the meaning of the word, but because he wants to highlight the fact that this birth would bring God into the midst of human beings. The one born would be God.

Under the leading of the Holy Spirit, Matthew changes the wording of the prediction from “she will call” to “they will call.” I believe that this can be explained by the context and the meaning of Immanuel. The *fact* of change is not a problem, since the Holy Spirit is the author of both texts. He can change what he wishes. The *import* of the change is that, while in Isaiah only one person is involved in the naming, in Matthew the naming is widened, i.e. many people would view the son as Immanuel. We have no record of Jesus ever being called Immanuel. Does that mean that this prediction was never actually fulfilled? ‘Immanuel’ is not really a name, but a description. Calling Jesus Immanuel really means acknowledging that he is God and that in him God has stepped into space and time to be with the people of Israel. Although relatively few Israelites living in the first century made this confession, many Gentiles did, and many Jews and Gentiles have since then. These people constitute the ‘they’ of Mt. 1:23, and, if you are believer, you are part of the ‘they.’

c. Summary of the use of the quote

Isaiah 7:14 is placed in the Matthean account by the Holy Spirit in such a way as to contribute to the highlighting of man’s rebellion and God’s grace. The past sin of Israel can be seen in both Isa. 7 and the genealogy in Mt. 1, where Ahaz’ sin—a refusal to trust God—was a part of that national sin. The virgin

birth is a sign of hope for the salvation of a remnant in Israel. It brings to Israel Jesus, who would save from sin and be God present with mankind as Immanuel at the same time.

We should not miss this lesson for ourselves. Failure to trust God—particularly when he offers gracious encouragement and help—leads to terrible consequences. You and I are often like Ahaz and may even be hardened as the writer to the Hebrews describes (12:15-17):

¹⁵ See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. ¹⁶ See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. ¹⁷ Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears.

We must be thankful for God's grace that has brought a savior in spite of our sinfulness. The virgin birth brings God to humanity to save us from sin.

Study questions

1. What requirements are met by the virgin birth?
2. What kind of evidence is there for the virgin birth?
3. What does Isa. 7 contribute to our understanding and appreciation of the virgin birth?
4. What are the details of Joseph's relation to the virgin birth?
5. What noteworthy details in Matthew contribute to the picture of the virgin birth?

Running compilation of key definitions

1. Systematic theology: The organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.
2. Exegesis: The actual practice of studying or interpreting a document or other message to determine its meaning.
3. Context: Context in a document or utterance is the surroundings of a portion of a word, a word, or a group of words.
4. Bibliology: The doctrinal study of the nature of the Bible.
5. Biblical authority: The quality inherent in Scripture by virtue of which human beings are completely answerable to its content.
6. Revelation: The information about Himself given by God to human beings.
7. General revelation: God's disclosure of Himself, available directly to everyone, given through means other than dreams, visions, direct words and Christ Himself.
8. Special revelation: The disclosure of information from God that is not available directly to all human beings.
9. Inspiration: A term applied to the Bible denoting that it is the product of God's creative activity, figuratively breathed out from Him (2 Tim. 3:16); applies to the process of recording Scripture, not specifically to the people involved; actually, *expiration* would be a better term to reflect the concept of 2 Tim. 3:16; the result is *inerrancy*.
10. Textual criticism: The science and art of attempting to discover the original text of a literary work for which the original document does not exist. It is especially important for biblical studies, and the foundational endeavor to all subsequent investigation of the Scriptures.
11. Canon: Transliterated from a Greek Word meaning "standard"; as used of the Bible, it refers to books authenticated as possessing divine origin and therefore authoritative; the Jewish canon consists of thirty-nine books, the Protestant of sixty-six and the Catholic of eighty (including apocryphal books).
12. Inerrancy is a term applied to the Bible, although not specifically found in it; it denotes that the Bible, as originally written, possessed no humanly induced deviations from the message God intended to be recorded and that it is true in every respect; 2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Pet. 2:19.
13. Infallibility: Although some assert that this term has a different meaning from inerrancy, the two terms are, for purposes of biblical study, synonymous; the Bible is infallible because inerrant, and inerrant because infallible.
14. Illumination is the teaching ministry of the Spirit of God that imparts understanding of the message of Scripture to the believer; not to be confused with inspiration, which in the Bible is used of the work of God in giving Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16); 1 Jn. 2:20; Jn. 16:13.
15. Spirituality: God is not physical, but immaterial, incorporeal, invisible and alive.
16. Self-existence/Aseity: God exists independently of anything else. He is self-existent.
17. Immensity: God is infinite in relation to space.
18. Eternality: God is infinite with regard to time.
19. Simplicity: God is not a plurality and cannot be looked at as divisible into parts.
20. Pure actuality: There is nothing about God that is potential. He is not unfinished in any way.
21. Necessity: God is uncaused and exists because he must exist.
22. Immutability: God is unchanging and unchangeable.
23. Impassibility: God is incapable of being changed or disturbed by what he experiences and is incapable of suffering.
24. Transcendence: God and the world are distinct; he is not part of the world, and the world is not part of him.
25. Immanence: God is present in the world.
26. Infinity: There are no limits to God's person and his perfections.
27. Omnipotence: God can do whatever he wills.
28. Omniscience: God knows everything there is to know.
29. Omnipresence: God is present everywhere in his creation

30. Holiness: God is morally pure and separated from all moral evil and sin.
31. Goodness: A quality that describes or includes his love, benevolence, mercy and grace
32. Truth: God's person, actions, knowledge and revelations correspond to reality
33. Love: God's continual communication of himself to his creatures.
34. Benevolence: God's goodness toward his creatures.
35. Mercy: God's goodness toward those who are helpless.
36. Grace: God's goodness toward sinners.
37. Glory: The greatness of God's perfections.
38. Trinity: There is only one true God, existing as a single Being comprised of three Persons who are equal in every way, yet distinct in their tasks and relations to humanity.
39. God's decree: The decree of God is his plan for the universe that includes all things and is certain to come to pass.
40. Providence: God's care for and upholding of his creation.
41. Sovereignty: God's control over his universe.
42. Christology: The study of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.
43. Incarnation: The joining of deity and humanity in one person forever. The word is based on the Latin word for flesh: the Lord Jesus Christ is God joined with human flesh.
44. Pre-existence: Used of the Son, it means that he existed before Bethlehem.
45. Theophany: An appearance of God.
46. Christophany: An appearance of Christ.