

Christmas

The Virgin Birth (1)

A tale of mistranslation, midrash and myth

WHAT, in this secular age, are we to make of the virgin birth of Jesus? Can it be literally true that the young Mary conceived a baby boy without benefit of a male's sperm? If it isn't factual, what's the story doing in the Bible? What point is it making?

If the churches' creeds, hymns and liturgies are anything to go by, the response is yes, the story is literally true. Jesus is human through being born of Mary and divine by virtue of the intervention of the Holy Spirit. That, some would say, lies at the heart of Christian faith.

Not so. Other interpretations are possible. Indeed, American Episcopal (Anglican) Bishop John Spong goes so far as to say: "Continued belief in a literal, biological virgin birth for Jesus of Nazareth is based only on a faith or a dogmatic commitment . . . Such a belief is no longer defended on the basis of Scripture [in scholarly circles], not even by Roman Catholic scholars, who have much more invested theologically in the possibility than Protestant Christians do." To many in the pews, that would have to be one of the best-kept secrets of the past 100 years.

The origins of the myth (using the word in the sense of a story told to convey truth about life) lie in a combination of the religious climate of the Mediterranean world in Jesus' day, a Jewish interpretative technique, and the first Christians' experience of the adult Jesus.

Without that experience there would have been no call to explain his origins: stories of childhood become of wide interest only when a person has become famous in later life. And it was the first Easter, not Christmas, that convinced Jesus' followers that he was indeed the long-awaited messiah.

Matthew and Luke wove a virgin birth into their accounts of Jesus more than 50 years after he was put to death. Matthew was intent on showing how Jesus fulfilled the Jews' long-standing dream of a messiah, and found in the Old Testament book of the prophet Isaiah a verse he could build on. Unfortunately, he relied on a mistranslation.

About 730 BC Jerusalem was besieged by two armies. Isaiah, urging his king not to give way, offered as a sign of hope that "a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (meaning "God is with us"). The implication was that if God was with them, the king was right to stand firm – and the son was clearly expected in the near future.

In Hebrew the word for "young woman" is *almah*, and modern versions of the Bible translate it that way – the Old Testament word for "virgin" is quite different. When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek about 500 years later, however, the translators used *parthenos* (virgin) for *almah*, so introducing an idea that was absent from the original.

Matthew picked up the mistranslation and applied it to Mary, giving it a new lease of life in a context far removed from Isaiah's world of national crisis and royal reassurance. Over time the idea of the virgin birth blossomed in the evolving faith of the church.

The Old Testament also carries accounts of heroes who were born miraculously to old or barren women. Stories of divine calling follow a pattern of announcement, doubt, assurance and promise of a sign – and Luke uses the same sequence in relating the announcement of Jesus' birth.

Jewish listeners would immediately recognise the literary tradition of midrash, where a current story is told in such a way as to make connections with key figures and events of the past, so conveying that the present experience is part of the same eternal reality.

The world beyond Palestine was also awash with stories of virgin births: examples include Plato, Alexander the Great and Caesar Augustus. To non-Jews, the claim of a virgin birth for a man such as Jesus would therefore not have been so unusual.

Acknowledging that the gospel accounts include poetic embroidery, midrash and myth does not mean they are worthless. Rather it recognises that the writers were calling on their whole literary and imaginative repertoire to convey the central truth that mattered to them – that in Jesus could be glimpsed the ultimate meaning and mystery of life. All they understood of God shone through him.

Saying he was born of a virgin through the power of the Holy Spirit was a graphic way of expressing that.

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