

# Is Jesus God Because of His Virgin Birth?

by Servetus the Evangelical

One of the most important elements of church doctrine has been Jesus' virgin birth. (The miracle was conception, not birth, so it should be called "the virginal conception.") Jesus' virgin birth is only mentioned in two New Testament (NT) gospels (Matthew 1.18-25; Luke 1.26-38; 2.1-21). Together, they relate that Mary miraculously conceived in her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit, and she remained a virgin until Jesus was born.

Many Christians have believed that Jesus was God because of the miraculous nature of his conception. This view has been defended by some Christian scholars. For example, leading Evangelical theologian Alister McGrath asserts, "The way Jesus was conceived confirms ... that Jesus is indeed both God and man." And Roman Catholic theologian Gerald O'Collins explains, "Traditionally the major value of his virginal conception has been to express Jesus' divine origin. The fact that he was born of a woman pointed to his humanity. The fact that he was born of a virgin pointed to his divinity."

If Jesus' virgin birth signifies that he was God or divine, it is surprising that neither Matthew nor Luke expressly state this in their birth narratives. And if Jesus was God, he must have preexisted. Yet no less of an authority on this subject than preeminent Roman Catholic NT exegete Raymond E. Brown concludes concerning these birth narratives, "Matthew and Luke show no knowledge of preexistence" of Jesus. Such silence strongly suggests that they did not believe that Jesus preexisted or that he was God.

An angel prophesied to Mary about Jesus' birth, saying he "shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1.35, cf. v. 32), not due to an ontological preexistence but a supernatural conception. Both this miracle and title merely signaled that Jesus would have a special relationship with God. Luke implies that Jesus' conception being accomplished by God's Spirit is a basis for identifying him as the Son of God. Reginald H. Fuller explains that Jesus is called "the Son of the Most High (God)" in this birth-pronouncement "because of the salvation he is to accomplish in history, not because of his inherent nature."

Logically, the virgin birth cannot indicate that Jesus is God only because it was a miracle. Miracles can only indicate a supernatural source. God did a miracle by causing a virginal conception and birth; but that does not indicate that the miracle itself is God.

Consider the first man, Adam. Accepting the two biblical accounts of his creation as literal (Genesis 2-3), Adam became a human being due to God's direct creation, as Jesus did. Yet no one would claim that Adam's supernatural origin indicates that he was God.

Many Christians have further insisted that the virgin birth is an essential element of Christian belief. Thus, they have contended that a person must believe in Jesus' virgin birth in order to be a genuine Christian. Yet no such requirement exists in the NT. This silence is significant in the two recorded birth narratives, but even more so in the several evangelistic sermons and brief descriptions of sermons recorded in the book of Acts.

In fact, Jesus' virgin birth is not even mentioned anywhere else in the NT, unless implicitly and sarcastically by Jesus' opponents in John 8.41. Many scholars think that because the Apostle Paul died before the gospels of Matthew and Luke were published, Paul probably didn't even know about the virgin birth. Regardless, N.T. Wright, who believes in the virgin birth, well observes, "The virginal conception of Jesus is not, in

itself, a central, major doctrine of the New Testament.” Hans Kung likewise states that “belief in Christ in no way stands or falls with the confession of the virgin birth.”

In the Old Testament, Isaiah 7.14 has been a pivotal text in the debate about Jesus’ virgin birth. This verse is about the prophet Isaiah prophesying to King Ahaz, “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.” The Hebrew word here translated “virgin” is *alma*. There has been a long-running scholastic debate about whether *alma* here means “a virgin” or “a young, married woman.” Most contemporary scholars think the latter.

Matthew, in his birth narrative, quotes Isaiah 7.14 and explains Immanuel. It reads, “‘BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD, AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,’ which translated means, ‘GOD WITH US’” (Matthew 1.23).

The word Immanuel represents the joining of two Hebrew words: *immanu* and *el*. Since *el* is the shortened Hebrew form for “God” (*elohim*), some Christians have asserted that ascribing the title Immanuel to Jesus effectively identifies him as God.

On the contrary, calling Jesus “Immanuel” means only that God is present with his people through Jesus as his agent. It means what someone exclaimed when Jesus raised the widow’s dead son to life, that “God has visited His people” (Luke 7.16). And the Apostle Peter once preached that Jesus “went about doing good and healing” people because “God was with Him” (Acts 10.38). Jewish NT scholar Geza Vermes explains, “Jews would have known that the name Emmanuel (‘God is with us’) signified not the incarnation of God in human form, but a promise of divine help to the Jewish people.”

Most scholars who have written extensively that Jesus is God concede that Matthew 1.23 does not. Murray Harris explains, “Matthew is not saying, ‘Someone who is “God” is now physically with us,’ but ‘God is acting on our behalf in the person of Jesus.’”

Calling Jesus “Immanuel” is similar to the names of some OT saints. For example, Israel, Elijah, Elisha, Daniel, Michael, Ezekiel, and Joel contain *el*, meaning “God;” yet parents who so named their son did not deem it a declaration that their child was God.

In conclusion, Jesus’ virgin birth does not necessitate that he was more than a man. John A.T. Robinson is right, that Jesus “was totally and utterly a man—and had never been anything other than a man or more than a man,” so that he never was God.