

I BELIEVE IN THE VIRGIN BIRTH

Baptist Times 8 December 2005

The idea of a virgin birth is often dismissed as a nonsense. Mary must have had sex with someone, if not with Joseph then with some secret lover.

The suggestion is frequently made that this idea was borrowed from Greek legends, which tell of gods mating with human women. But such 'divine matings' always involved the god impregnating the woman either through normal sexual intercourse or through some substitute form of penetration. By contrast the Spirit's work in Mary was not at all sexual.

There are also no parallels to virgin birth in Judaism or in the Old Testament. True, Matthew cites Is 7.14, but there this Scripture had never been linked with the Messiah; nor had it ever been interpreted of a virgin birth. It was only after the event that Matthew saw a special significance in this prophecy: there was no way in which it could have created the event.

From time to time parallels are drawn with parthenogenesis ('virgin birth') present in about one in a thousand species. Bees, frogs and worms reproduce in this way. It means that eggs begin to divide and develop of their own accord, without fertilisation, and eventually produce a new individual. Parthenogenesis, however, is unknown in humans. Furthermore, if Jesus had been conceived by parthenogenesis, then he would have had to be a girl, because women can only pass on X chromosomes. In normal reproductive intercourse girls are conceived when the male sperm adds a second X to the ovum's X chromosome; boys are conceived when the sperm adds a Y chromosome. Sam Berry, emeritus professor of genetics at University College, London, speculated that in the absence of a sperm to import a Y chromosome, Mary could have been male, but suffered a genetic mutation that had the effect of preventing target cells in her body from 'recognising' the male sex hormone testosterone; Mary would have been chromosomally XY but would appear as a normal female. Although, as a result of androgen insensitivity, she would normally then be sterile and lack a uterus, Berry points out that the differentiation of the sex organs can be variable, and it is possible a person of this constitution could develop an ovum and a uterus. If this happened, and if the ovum developed partheno-genetically, and if a back-mutation to testosterone sensitivity took place, we would then have the situation of an apparently normal woman giving birth without intercourse to a son! But such rationalising is not helpful. For what Matthew describes here is an event totally out of the ordinary – totally beyond the normal course of nature. The virgin conception is unique. The only parallels which we may draw are either the creation itself, or God's re-creation evidenced in resurrection. Indeed, once we believe in the God of creation and resurrection, difficulties in believing in the virgin disappear. True, such an argument could be seen to encourage general credulity. However, once all other options have been examined and no adequate basis found for abandoning the essential tradition of a virginal conception, then surely faith in the living God must step in.

Paul Beasley-Murray