

## **MATT 1.18-25: ‘VIRGINS DON’T HAVE BABIES!’**

*[Chelmsford 13 December 2013]*

### **Newly married – and yet no sex!**

Today most people live together before they get married, whereas Mary and Joseph were in the eyes of the law ‘married’ but not living together. How come?

To our way of thinking it doesn’t make sense.

Newly married – and yet no sex. What was going on?

In ancient Judaism matrimonial procedures involved the taking of two steps:

- the first step involved a formal consent before witnesses;
- the second step involved the man taking his bride into his home.

In our culture we speak of ‘engagement’ and ‘marriage’, but such terms are unhelpful when it comes to understanding the relationship between Joseph and Mary.

‘Betrothal’ rather than ‘engagement’ is the term. And in the time of Jesus betrothal was a far more serious business than our custom of ‘engagement’.

From the moment the girl was betrothed, she was the man’s ‘wife’:

- if her ‘husband’ died during the period of the betrothal, she was regarded as a widow;
- if she committed adultery, she could be punished;
- the only way in which the marriage contract entered upon at the moment of betrothal could be annulled was by divorce.

Betrothal took place usually when a girl was between twelve to twelve and a half years.

Normally the betrothal period lasted for a year, during which time the girl continued to live in her parents’ home.

It was only after she moved into her husband’s house that the marriage was consummated – during the period of betrothal the man and the woman were not allowed to have sex.

### **Mary’s pregnancy was truly shocking**

This is the context in which Matthew wrote: **“This was how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. His mother Mary was engaged to Joseph, but before they were married, she found out that she was going to have a baby by the Holy Spirit”** (Matt 1.18)

Mary has yet to move in with Jesus.

Mary had probably yet to become a teenager.

We are not told Joseph’s age: he may well have been a teenager himself.

Suddenly, to Joseph’s undoubted alarm, he discovers that Mary is pregnant.

Wow – just imagine Joseph’s shock

**“She found out”**, says Matthew, that **“she was going to have a baby by the Holy Spirit”**.

But at that stage that was not at all evident to Joseph.

He must have assumed that Mary had been unfaithful to him.  
One thing for sure, he knew that he had nothing to do with the pregnancy.  
For Joseph was a “**righteous man**” (1.19 NRSV) – or as GNB puts it: “**Joseph was a man who always did what was right**”.  
He was a God-fearing man who observed the Law – and this ruled out having sex with Mary.

Joseph could have taken Mary to court with a view to determining whether she had been raped or whether she had consented to having sex; but he appears to have been a kind fellow.  
Rather than bringing public shame he decided upon a quiet divorce (1.19).  
Such a divorce would have involved him writing his own ‘bill of divorce’, which would then have had to be signed by two or three witnesses. Clearly, there was no way in which Mary’s pregnancy could be kept secret – but at least it would not have been sensationalised.

### **A virgin conception!**

It was at this point that an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream:  
“**Joseph, descendant of David, do not be afraid to take Mary to be your wife. For it is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived**” (1.20).

We can but imagine the thoughts that must have gone through Joseph’s head.  
Joseph was not naïve: he knew where babies come from – otherwise he would not have contemplated a divorce.  
It is probably not too much to suggest that he must have struggled with the idea of a ‘virgin birth’ as much as most people do today.

Actually, what was at issue was not a virgin ‘birth’, but a virgin ‘conception’.  
There is no reason to suppose that when Mary gave birth, the baby did not come in just the same way as all babies come – with all the accompanying pain and mess.  
No, Matthew (as also Luke) spoke of a virginal ‘conception’: “**it is by the Holy Spirit she has conceived**” (1.20).

At this point sceptics have had a field day.  
The idea of a virgin conception, they argue, is a nonsense, if not a ‘cover-up’.  
Mary must have had sex with someone - if not with Joseph then with some secret lover; alternatively she might have been raped by a Roman soldier.  
Every child, rationalists argue, has to have a father and a mother.

The suggestion is frequently made that Matthew – or his source - borrowed this idea from Greek legends, which tell of gods mating with human women.  
But there are no parallels to the virgin conception which we find in the Gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus. For such ‘divine marriages’ 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 to create new life – his role was purely creative, and not at all sexual.

There are also no parallels to virgin ‘conception’ in Judaism or in the Old Testament. True, Matthew cites Is 7.14, where the prophet declares: “**A virgin will become pregnant and have a son, and he will be called Immanuel (which means ‘God with us’)**”, but there is no evidence that this Scripture had ever before been linked with the coming of the Messiah; nor had it ever been interpreted of a virgin conception.

When Isaiah wrote these words he was not so much thinking of a virgin, as of a young woman. It was only after the event that Matthew saw a special significance in this particular prophecy: there was no way in which it could have created the event.

The fact is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to explain why Christians would create so many problems for themselves by promulgating such an idea, if it had no historical basis.

And yet many people have questioned the historical basis.

‘*Virgins don’t have babies*’ they say.

What’s more, it is not just non-Christians who have questioned Matthew and Luke’s account – but some Christians too,

They have pointed out that, apart from Matthew and Luke, there is no explicit reference to virginal conception in the rest of the New Testament.

The Apostle Paul, for instance, appears to have no knowledge of it.

Some people have thought there is a reference to the virgin birth in Gal 4.4 where Paul states that “**in the fullness of time God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law**” (NRSV). However, the phrase “born of a woman” refers to Jesus being truly man, and has nothing to do with the virgin conception. We find, for instance, the same phrase in Job, where the sage says that to be “**a mortal**” is to be “**born of woman, few of days and full of trouble**” (Job 14.1).

But at the end of the day, the fact that Paul was not aware, is neither here.

The fact that we have no reference to the virgin birth or conception outside the Gospels is not a compelling argument. We must take care in arguing from the silence of Scripture.

For example, had there been no abuse of the Lord’s Supper at Corinth, Paul might never have written down the words of institution which we find in 1 Cor 11, and as a result we might have assumed that Paul had no knowledge of the Lord’s Supper..

The fact that Paul reflects no awareness of the virginal conception is not really different from saying that he also reflects no awareness of much else found in the Gospels.

### **How can a virgin have a baby?**

From time to time parallels are drawn with parthenogenesis (‘virgin birth’) which is present in about one in a thousand species. Bees, frogs and worms are known to 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 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 (R.J.) Berry, emeritus professor of genetics at University College, London, has 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! <sup>1</sup>

But such rationalising is not helpful.

For what Matthew describes here in his Gospel 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.

But, 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 faith in the living God must step in.

In this respect some words of John Taylor, a former Bishop of St Albans, are helpful: "*I find it easier to accept that when God chose to reveal himself in a human life, he did it as a one-off exercise rather than go through what the bureaucrats call 'the usual channels'. A Saviour of the world, without a touch of the miraculous at the beginning, the middle and the end of his life, I would find totally perplexing*"! <sup>2</sup>

### **Why was Jesus 'born of a virgin'?**

Various explanations have been given:-

- Some have argued that only in this way could Jesus be born sinless: as though the stain of original sin was transmitted through the act of conception. But this is surely a perverted view of sex. We are children, not of our parents' sin, but of their love.

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<sup>1</sup> R.J. Berry, 'The Virgin Birth of Christ', *Science and Christian Belief* 8 (1996) 101-110

<sup>2</sup> John B. Taylor, *Preaching Through The Prophets* (Mowbray, Oxford 1983) 13

- Others have argued that only in this way could Jesus be divine, as though divinity is linked to biology. But it was his life rather than his conception which convinced people of his divinity.
- Perhaps the strongest theological argument for the necessity of the virgin conception is that in this way we see that it is God alone who has done all that is necessary for salvation. The virginal conception demonstrates that we have contributed nothing to the coming of Jesus amongst us. Jesus is God's gift to us. Our salvation is entirely of the grace of God.

Frankly, just as I do not understand the mechanics of Jesus being born of a virgin, neither do I understand the whys and wherefores of Jesus being born of a virgin

It is a mystery – just as ultimately the cross is a mystery.

But this is not surprising: for God is ultimately beyond us.

The moment I fully understood everything about God, that moment God would no longer be God. There are things which I am happy to – things which I am happy to believe – because this is the clear testimony of Scripture.

There was a virgin who had a baby – the virgin Mary!

Yet for all my 'agnosticism', one thing is clear: the doctrine of the virginal conception is a wonderful sign that God has come among us.

Right from the start we know that Jesus is more than a man.

And it was because he was more than a man, that he is able to save us from our sins.

Thanks be to God!