

The Stigma of Jesus' Virgin Birth

The discussion I had with the late Yasser Arafat during my first visit with him in Ramallah in 2002 was almost entirely theological. I stressed that **Jesus Christ** is the Son of God and that He died on the cross for our sins. Arafat reached for his Quran to show me something he thought would impress me. Pointing to a certain passage (as if I could read Arabic), he said, "Did you know that the only woman mentioned in the Quran is the **Virgin Mary**?"

"Well, how interesting, Rais [Arabic for president]," I replied, "it sounds as if the Quran is *proving* that Jesus had no earthly father and therefore must be the Son of God."

Do *you* believe that **Jesus of Nazareth** was born of a virgin and had no earthly father? Muslims do. In fact, one of the most successful evangelistic approaches when talking to Muslims is to focus on the virgin birth of **Jesus**. They are committed to the Quran, which teaches this truth.

And yet Muslims say they do not believe Jesus is the Son of God. Noting the contradiction in their beliefs, you can lovingly point out to them that if Jesus had no earthly father, it can mean only one thing—that God Himself is His father, and Jesus is therefore God's Son.

The **virgin birth** of Jesus is one of the clearest teachings in the New Testament. The accounts in Matthew 1:18-25 and Luke 1:26-38 are unambiguous and leave no doubt that Jesus of Nazareth had no earthly father but was born of Mary, who had never known a man.

Why is this fact significant? Primarily because it is in the Bible. But there are other reasons for exploring the truth of the **virgin birth**.

First, it shows the stigma, or offense, Christians must bear in upholding this truth. The word *stigma* is a Greek word. It refers to a mark or tattoo on the body, often used on a runaway slave in the ancient world so he would be easily identified. Paul used the word to show he was unashamed of being a slave of Jesus: "I bear in my body the marks [*stigmata*] of the Lord Jesus" (Gal. 6:17, NKJV).

The stigma of the **virgin birth** is made clear in the New Testament. Consider what an offense it was for Joseph to accept Mary after she disclosed to him that she was pregnant. It was a horrible moment for him—and for her.

Why should he believe her when she assured him that she had been faithful to him, knowing he had never slept with her? They were engaged, but "before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 1:18). Joseph's immediate reaction was to break their engagement quietly.

To have remained engaged would have demanded that he bear a stigma of incalculable proportions. Being pregnant out of wedlock is no big deal today. But in Joseph and Mary's day, having sex before marriage was possibly the worst thing a couple could do. Everyone would assume this is what Joseph and Mary had done. The couple knew they hadn't, but who would believe them? And why should Joseph believe Mary?

This is the reason God graciously stepped in on Mary's behalf. "An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit'" (Matt.1:20). That was news to Joseph, but it made sense in the light of what Mary had claimed. It meant she had certainly not been unfaithful to him.

But it also meant that he had a major decision to make—namely, whether to leave her entirely and let her bear the stigma of being a single parent, or to stay with her and be seen for the

rest of his life as the man who got Mary pregnant out wedlock. If he stayed with her, they would bear the offense together. They alone would know the truth and would be able to comfort each other in this sublime knowledge—that it was a miracle of God.

Could they tell anyone? No. For one thing, nobody would believe them. But also they would not tell because they had to be willing to suffer for the glory of God.

This unseemly situation meant the loss of their reputations, a stigma for which they suffered the rest of their lives. They would never outgrow it.

As a matter of fact, more than 30 years later, people were still talking about it. As long as Jesus was performing miracles and feeding thousands with the loaves and fishes, the people appeared to be willing to overlook the rumor that He had been born an illegitimate child.

But the moment Jesus said things such as, “‘I am the bread which came down from heaven,’” they resorted to the gossip of the day: “‘Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?’” (John 6:41-42). This comment shows that the followers of Jesus probably suspected Jesus was illegitimate but let their suspicions surface only when His message became a stigma too.

In any case, Joseph made the hardest decision of his life. When he woke up from the dream, he “did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son” (Matt.1:24-25). Joseph determined to live with his decision and became the unsung hero of the Christmas story.

An Untold Mystery

There is another reason the virgin birth of Jesus is relevant; it shows the importance of being able to keep God’s secrets.

Consider this comment by Luke: "But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). There is reason to believe that Mary never told the miracle of Jesus' birth until years after He had died and ascended to heaven. At that point she apparently broke her silence and told Luke what had happened.

In the very first chapter of his Gospel, Luke records the occasion when the angel Gabriel came to Mary unexpectedly and said, "'Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you'" (Luke 1:28). Mary was puzzled by the angel's greeting, but the angel said to her, "'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus'" (v. 31).

Mary questioned the angel: "'How can this be, since I do not know a man?' [The NIV translates the last part of Mary's question, "since I am a virgin?"] And the angel answered and said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God'" (vv. 34-35).

Imagine having an experience with God like this and keeping quiet about it for many years! Yes, she did stay during her pregnancy with her cousin Elizabeth, who discerned Mary's condition by the Holy Spirit (see Luke 1:39-45). But there is no indication that anybody else knew, not even the disciples of Jesus.

Mary must have been tempted to reveal this extraordinary secret a thousand times, but she didn't. Why? First, she would have been doing so largely to clear her own name. She chose instead to bear the stigma. Second, it might have been like casting a pearl before swine (see Matt. 7:6). The enemies of Jesus would not have believed her, and the news could have been counterproductive. So Mary did not tell it until she

revealed it to Luke before she died.

There's a good possibility that the followers of Jesus were willing to follow Him *not* knowing what Mary knew and very possibly assuming that Jesus really was an illegitimate child, as implied in John 6:42. What would have been their thinking in following Jesus if indeed they believed He was born out of wedlock?

Peter could answer: "'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that you are the Christ, the Son of the living God'" (John 6:68-69). And yet it must have been a sweet consolation to their souls to have the word spread among the church many years later that Mary was in fact a virgin when Jesus was born, showing that He was truly the Son of God.

The virgin birth of Jesus reveals our helplessness in the face of God's commands and our need for His power to fulfill them. When Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her what God wanted, she had a significant question: "How can I have a child since I am a virgin?" (see Luke 1:34).

"'The Holy Spirit will come upon you,'" the angel replied, and added, "'For with God nothing will be impossible'" (vv. 35,37).

An Essential Truth

The virgin birth lays the foundation for the most essential truth of all—that Jesus was and is the *God-man*; He was *man* as though He were not God, and *God* as though He were not man. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the *only begotten* of the Father" the apostle John tells us (John 1:1,14, emphasis added).

Only God could have performed the miracle of His Son's

conception. He caused the Word to enter the womb of Mary and become a seed. At that moment, the Word became flesh. Even as an embryo, He was fully human as well as fully God. The God-man lived in Mary's womb for nine months and then was born.

God chose a virgin from the tribe of Judah living in Nazareth to be the mother of our Lord. She had the genealogical credentials to qualify, being in the line of David. God chose a virgin to prove that only He could have been Jesus' father.

The virgin birth of Jesus further demonstrates that salvation is ultimately the work of God. It was His idea alone and was brought about solely by His initiative. God had promised that the seed of the woman would ultimately destroy the serpent's head (see Gen. 3:15).

The virgin birth of Christ shows that salvation can never come through human effort; it must be by the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. In His perfect timing "God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons" (Gal. 4:4-5). The purpose of Jesus' coming was for Him to save His people from their sins (see Matt. 1:21). He was born to die.

If God had made Jesus a complete human being in heaven and then sent Him to earth without any human parent, it would have been impossible for Him to be human as we are. If, on the other hand, God had brought Jesus into the world with two human parents, both a father and a mother, it would have been impossible for Him to be fully God.

Besides the supernatural component of God's sending His Son to earth, there was a natural one that was essential for Jesus to be born: Mary had to agree to God's plan! She *might* have said "No," or perhaps, "Let me think about it." I fancy that all heaven waited with baited breath for Mary's consent.

That consent came immediately. “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word,” was her reply to the angel (Luke 1:38). *In that moment* the eternal Word left His glory with the Father and the Spirit and became flesh, to be the God-man forever and ever. It was the greatest moment in heaven and earth since creation.

Do you believe in the virgin birth? Will you accept the stigma of being a follower of Jesus, especially in this day of pluralism when His words, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6) are a tremendous offense?

Will you bear this stigma? Joseph did. Mary did. Let us follow in their steps and be willing to let our vindication come long after we are gone, in order to prove to the world that Jesus, born of a woman, was indeed the Son of God.

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