

Questions Surrounding Jesus' Birth

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Is the Virgin Birth Credible or is the Story Based on Ancient Mythology?

Dr. John Ankerberg: Now, there are some scholars that assert that the accounts of Jesus' virgin birth in the Gospels are similar to Greek and Roman mythologies. They point to the myth told about Caesar Augustus in which his mother was made pregnant by the Greek and Roman sun god, Apollo. Well, what about this?

Dr. William Lane Craig: Well, methodologically, I would say that you approach these narratives with an open mind that the miraculous could have actually occurred in history and then let the evidence speak for itself. Follow the evidence where it leads.

If, for example, if you have good reason to believe that these stories are of the same form as the Greco-Roman myths of divine men or supernatural figures, then you would have good reason to think that these stories are not historical. But if they break those forms, if they are not parallel to other mythological tales in ancient history; if we have good reason to believe that these are historically credible accounts, then you've got to be open to following the evidence where that leads.

Dr. Gary Habermas: Let's take our mystery religion pattern or Hellenistic religion, Hellenistic divine man pattern. Let's take a New Testament pattern and just look at the Hellenistic or non-Christian miracles for example. And what you'll find, first of all, is a totally different philosophical framework. We're talking about anthropomorphic gods. We're talking about gods who are finite. We're talking about cycles of vegetation. This is a cyclical view of history, not a linear view of history, totally different. Now, that's one category, philosophical differences.

You've got historical differences. These people like to tell you when they find a case of resurrection on the third day, for example, they don't tell you that's it's much later than the New Testament, or that there are similar teachings on the 1st, 2nd, and 4th days, so you have to look at differences there. Take Isis and Osiris. One account says he's cut up in 14 pieces, his wife or sister or mother—I mean the accounts varies so much—she finds 13 of the 14 pieces, puts them together and he revivifies, then he descends to the underworld. But another myth, she puts the pieces together and flaps her wings over Osiris, so we have to look at the differences here. Philosophical differences, historical differences.

Keep moving down the line. The gaps and the lateness of the accounts are amazing. Most of the Hellenistic divine man accounts, most of the mystery religions postdate Christianity. Some of the earliest are mid-first and mid-second century. Almost nothing is early.

Fourthly, these early accounts they are known to have virtually no affect in Palestine. For example, there are dozens of temples to Isis in Egypt. Dozens more around the Mediterranean world. One in Israel and it's late. So there's very little influence in Palestine. And fourth, this is one of my favorites, these characters are not historical persons. They never lived in history, so what's the grounds for comparison? And I love the words of Plutarch, who, in his famous story of Isis and Osiris, says, "Now listen don't you guys think that this is a historical account, I'm telling you a story here," and he says that twice. So, I think that's important that there's a contrast.

Dr. Darrell Bock: I think when I compare the virgin birth and its simplicity, you know: God

comes to Mary and says, 'You're going to have a child' and basically does it, and there are no—to use the Jennings example—there are no snakes that have to appear in the night to impregnate the woman. It's just done by the verbal command. See, it's the simplicity of the way the miraculous is displayed in the Bible.

Dr. N. T. Wright: Matthew and Luke both, I'm sure, knew that out there in the wider pagan world there were people who told stories about Alexander the Great being conceived when his mother was a virgin, about Augustus similarly, about various heroes and demigods. And since Matthew and Luke both want to talk about Jesus as the fulfillment of Judaism, which didn't have stories like that, this is really kind of dangerous ground for them to be getting into. And so I ask myself as a historian, Why would they do that, particularly when the obvious sneering retort to such a report is a, "Well, we know Mary was just sleeping around with Roman soldiers" or whatever, which is precisely what some of the enemies of Christianity went on to say. So it seems to me that Matthew and Luke would not have included those stories unless they really believed that something very strange like this had happened.

Dr. Claire Pfann: I think the last thing in the world that early Christians wanted to do was to import anything from Greek and Roman mythology into Christianity. If anything, they had turned their backs on paganism and polytheism and mythology, and what they wanted to do was to preserve as much as possible, the truth about the historical Jesus. When they talked about the virgin birth, it was because they believed that, in Jesus, for a unique moment in all of history, the divine and the human combined in one Son of God, who became the son of man so that he might cause the children of men to become sons of God.

Dr. John Ankerberg: The big question for many people is, "Can we accept the miracle of the virgin birth?"

Dr. N. T. Wright: Now, of course, I cannot prove the virginal conception of Jesus, and I don't think you can prove it in the same way as I would prove the Resurrection—that you can't explain the rise of early Christianity without it. Then, that forces me to hold my modern mind open to say, If God was really in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, ought I not to expect some other strange things as well? And when I then have these stories which look so strange and yet, Why would they do that?—maybe it really did happen. Because you see, as far as I know, nobody in Judaism was going around and saying, "Ah ha! Isaiah 7:14—Messiah must be born of a virgin." I don't know that anyone was taking that text like that before, so it's not that Matthew had that text in mind and had to pin it on Jesus. I suspect that Matthew would have been quite happy not to mention that. But it's rather the case that he's got this story and he wants to find something in the Old Testament to go with it. And likewise, Luke, it's not the case that he has stories about angels and shepherds which he's wanting to pin on Jesus; rather, this is the stuff that he's got to work with.

Dr. John Ankerberg: In examining the accuracy of the Gospel writers, Peter Jennings implied Luke's account of the birth of Jesus could not be historical since the question remained, "Why would Joseph ever bring Mary on such a difficult journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, through the desert, especially when she was very, very pregnant?"

Dr. Claire Pfann: Well, there are just so many things wrong with that question, aren't there? Starting off with the fact that maybe she wasn't "very, very pregnant" at the time they made the journey. We pointed out in Luke 2 that it doesn't say that she was in labor when she was traveling to Bethlehem, it says, "while she was in Bethlehem she went into labor: "the time came for her to be delivered" number one. Number two: it's not that dangerous of a journey to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and we see that probably the practice was to travel in groups of people. It would be a three or four day journey. They would camp out under

the stars. They would bring food with them. And there were not bandits on every side waiting to attack every traveler. So I think that we find a few basic presuppositions that are just our own modern skepticism and really don't deal with the reality of the fact that, if Joseph and Mary had come to live together as a married couple at this point, why on earth would he leave her at home when he faced a prolonged absence, waiting for the census to be accomplished?