



CHRISTIAN ANSWERS TO HARD QUESTIONS

**WAS JESUS
REALLY BORN
OF A VIRGIN?**

BRANDON D. CROWE

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Christian Interpretations of Genesis 1

Christianity and the Role of Philosophy

Creation, Evolution, and Intelligent Design

The Morality of God in the Old Testament

Should You Believe in God?

Was Jesus Really Born of a Virgin?

Peter A. Lillback and Steven T. Huff, Series Editors

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ONE OF THE JOYS of Christmas is the opportunity to reflect at length on the incarnation of Christ—that time in history when Jesus, who was rich beyond all measure, became poor for our sake by becoming one of us, that we might become rich in him (2 Cor. 8:9). To this end, I find that many Christmas hymns provide great food for thought. For example, this December you might hear these words from “Silent Night”:

Round yon virgin mother and child. / Holy infant, so tender
and mild.

Or from “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing”:

Late in time behold him come, / Offspring of the Virgin’s womb.

These may be part of Christmas tradition, but do we really need to dwell on the supposed virginity of Jesus’ mother? Is this really a necessary component of the Christmas message, or does it merely reflect a prescientific, romanticized way of thinking that is untenable for us today? We are certainly more scientifically advanced than the early Christians who lived two thousand years ago. We now know about things such as germ theory and DNA. We are seldom without a computer or smartphone, and all it takes is a quick search on WebMD or Wikipedia to confirm that children are not conceived without the fertilization of an egg by a sperm. Perhaps, then, we should view the virgin birth as reflecting a mythological understanding of the world, or maybe as making a theological (though not historical) assertion. Are these not better ways to approach the virgin birth in today’s scientific world?

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These are the questions that this booklet will seek to answer. As we begin, it will be helpful to define what we mean by *virgin birth*. The orthodox Christian view, deriving from the Bible, is that Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin named Mary. Thus, Jesus' conception was miraculous and unique, and did not occur via the normal process of sexual union. It should also be noted that what most people mean by *virgin birth* is actually the *virginal conception* of Jesus. Thus, when this booklet uses the term *virgin birth*, it will be referring to the manner by which Jesus was *conceived*.

Another caveat: the virgin birth of Jesus is not the same thing as the perpetual virginity of Mary—the view that Mary remained a virgin her entire life. Although this teaching is found in some circles, it has no foundation in Scripture. In fact, the New Testament actually mentions the siblings of Jesus (cf. Matt. 13:55), which is at odds with the theory of Mary's perpetual virginity.

So far the preliminaries. Let us now turn to the questions at hand. To begin, we will consider seven possible objections to the virgin birth of Jesus. Then we will look at what the biblical texts themselves say. Finally, we will briefly consider the theological significance of the virgin birth.

BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- ✦ What are the differences between belief in the *virginal conception* of Jesus, belief in the *virgin birth* of Jesus, and belief in the *perpetual virginity* of Mary?

OBJECTIONS TO THE VIRGIN BIRTH

Scientific Objection

We begin with the most obvious objection to the virgin birth—its seemingly stark contradiction with modern medicine.

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Is it not simply scientifically impossible for a woman to conceive a child apart from the process of fertilization?

Something very important should be noted from the outset. Given our more advanced scientific knowledge, it may be easy for us to underestimate the intelligence of previous generations. But those who lived at the time of Jesus were no less aware than we of how babies are conceived. No reasonable adult in first-century Palestine would have thought a baby could be conceived apart from sexual intercourse. In fact, as we will see below, the biblical accounts themselves assume that no one would have imagined that a child could be conceived out of wedlock in any way other than by promiscuity. It would therefore be an oversimplification to claim that early Christians invented the doctrine of the virgin birth simply because they did not understand how the process of conception normally occurs.

Let us focus now on the issue at hand: the reality is that we know of *no scientifically verifiable instances* in which a woman has become pregnant apart from the physical process of fertilization. What the Bible is asking us to believe is that a real baby boy was conceived in Mary's womb apart from this process. Given our knowledge of the way in which pregnancy begins, the Bible is asking us to believe against thousands of years of evidence to the contrary. Surely the burden of proof is on the Bible to prove its claim. On this objection, the Bible is unable to substantiate its claim satisfactorily.

To answer this objection, we should note the limitations of science. At its core, science deals with observable phenomena and seeks to describe them. But science does not provide the tools to explain whether supernatural events *can* occur or *have ever* occurred. Supernatural events by their very definition are those events that seem to supersede the normal laws of nature.

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They are therefore unable to be measured or explained by scientific means. Thus, the issue is not whether there is some scientific way for a woman to become pregnant apart from fertilization. Scientifically speaking, the answer is clearly no. The issue rather is whether God is able to work above and beyond the laws of nature (which, according to the Bible, he himself controls!) to accomplish his purposes. Here science cannot help us, for it does not possess the tools to determine whether the Holy Spirit is in fact the ultimate cause of an embryo *in utero*. Since miraculous claims are neither verifiable nor falsifiable by science, we are dealing with a question of presuppositions: can miracles happen?

Thus, asking whether the virgin birth is scientifically possible is a loaded question, since it assumes that science has the authority to adjudicate matters that are actually beyond its capabilities. Although science is a gift from God, the virgin birth is not scientifically verifiable because science does not possess the tools to measure or explain the direct, powerful, and mysterious activities of the living God. God is not constrained by what is “scientifically” explicable.

BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- ✦ Why do scientific objections to the virgin birth eventually boil down to the presuppositions held by the objector? Would adults in first-century Palestine have held different presuppositions? Why or why not?
- ✦ What presuppositions do Christians bring to this issue?

Philosophical Objection

One might still object that we should be skeptical of the biblical accounts because it is far more likely that the virgin birth did not happen than that it did happen. According to

Why do Christians hold so strongly to Christ's virgin birth as a significant doctrine? Can it be discarded from its key position in our faith? Crowe looks at seven objections to the virgin birth and investigates the relevant biblical texts.

"This booklet makes a valuable contribution to this series. It is difficult to imagine a similarly brief treatment of this topic that would be more helpful."

—Richard B. Gaffin Jr., Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

"Here is an excellent exposition of Jesus' miraculous conception, which is commonly called the virgin birth. Brandon Crowe explains the New Testament teaching, patiently deals with modern objections, and shows why the faith in the virgin birth not only remains tenable but is vital for Christians today. Readers will find his treatment both illuminating and edifying."

—Charles E. Hill, Professor of New Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

Written to equip and strengthen laypeople in their defense of the faith, *Christian Answers to Hard Questions* challenges contemporary opposition to Christianity with concise, practical answers.

Peter A. Lillback and Steven T. Huff, Series Editors

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