

Born of the Virgin Mary?

This is perhaps (along with “on the third day he rose again”) one of the two most controversial phrases of the creed. It is one some do not find it necessary to believe, while others find it impossible to believe. Why is this so? Can we believe that Jesus was born of a virgin, and is it necessary?

This is impossible!

This is the most common objection. Virgins just don’t have babies, and anytime there is a claim that a virgin birth has happened (and there have been a number of such claims), the motives behind the claim are the object of much suspicion. A virgin birth is not only contrary to the laws of nature. It is also very convenient! The argument about convenience cannot be gainsaid. But though while convenience may give the critical thinker grounds for caution, there is nothing to prevent a story being convenient *and* true. But is a virgin birth as impossible as all that? In the first phrase of the creed, Christians affirm their faith in God the Father “creator of heaven and earth”. If God can create heaven and earth, why should it be impossible for him, say, to create a sperm within Mary’s womb? No atheist would be convinced by such an argument, of course. But it remains a mystery why those who claim to believe in a Creator God balk at the idea of the Virgin Birth (and many do!). The problem with the Virgin Birth, one suspects, is really a problem with miracles in general.

But are miracles really impossible? To answer this question, we need first to consider what miracles are. If you were to ask the person in the street what a miracle was, you would be likely to get the answer that it was a happening that defied the laws of nature. Popular thought envisages the laws of nature being suspended and a supernatural power doing something special and otherwise impossible. But this is not the Bible’s view. The concept of “laws of nature” is one that came in with Sir Isaac Newton in the 17th century. Strictly speaking, they are not laws at all. What we call the “laws of nature” are merely a series of human observations about the universe around us – not immutable laws laid down by a higher power. The Biblical writers only knew of man’s laws and God’s laws. And since God framed his own laws, he had the sovereign right to lay down conditions and make exceptions. That may not be the way justice works in modern times, but it was the way things were done in the ancient world, and generally it was perceived that God operated the system more fairly than human rulers of the time. The terms the Bible uses to describe what we call “miracles” mean things like “wonder”, “powerful work”, or “sign”. None of these terms *necessarily* implies a supernatural action. For instance, the Ten Plagues of Egypt and the rolling back of the waters of the Red Sea before Egypt (recorded in the book of Exodus), bear some resemblance to events that have been recorded more recently following major volcanic eruptions. Some of these miracles may well be infrequent natural events. But they are still miracles, because God used them, and he ensured that his people were in the right place at the right time.

However, not all miracles can be readily explained in this way – though I suspect more and more *will* be as we discover more of the earth’s secrets. But the believer who wishes to take the Bible seriously will still have to leave some room for the possibility of supernatural events that have no natural explanation. As we have said, there should be no problem for anyone who believes in God as Creator in accepting that He can perform such supernatural acts where necessary.

Perhaps the real problem the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is not the practical possibility of miraculous happenings, but the philosophical questions they throw up.

To put it simply: if God can do miraculous things, why doesn't he put an end to world hunger and why do children die?

No-one can give a definitive answer to that question. My own attempt would be to suggest that God does not *normally* act in a supernatural manner. He is not a heavenly wizard. He only does the spectacular when He can accomplish His will no other way. And I believe He only acts supernaturally when it is absolutely vital to His plan for the salvation of mankind or the spread of the gospel. This would mean that a healing miracle would be performed, not purely for the sake of restoring the sick person to health, but with a view to the longer-term consequences that would flow from that action. Perhaps someone (the sick person, or one of their family or friendship circle) may come to faith in Christ, or the faith of those around may be strengthened and encouraged to the point where a revival may occur in that area, or the sick person may go on to do significant work for God in their later life (this list is not intended to be exhaustive). I am afraid I do not believe God does miracles just for the miracles' sake. This may be controversial, and some may think it heartless, say to suggest that God must have what could be interpreted as an "ulterior motive" before he agrees to heal a sick child. But I continue to believe that every time God performed a miracle in Bible times, and every time He performs miracles today, there was or is some wider purpose behind it.

Too often this debate is befuddled with sentimentality. We talk of the cases of sick children and thousands starving in Africa. But we need to look at the bigger picture. God is responsible for law and order in the whole universe. And just as an earthly ruler may have to take what appears to be cruel action against an individual for the sake of the whole nation's good, so God has to consider the good of the whole human race in the long run, not just the immediate good of one particular member. In our modern society we seem to think that it is our right to sail through life with no problems or trials at all – if we are intelligent and successful enough (that is the way the world sees things) or if we have enough faith (which is the religious version of the same heresy). But let us consider for a moment what would happen if we got our way. If God prevented errors in operating nuclear power plants like Chernobyl from affecting innocent children, would the nuclear industry give a second thought to public safety? If global warming were not to flood people's houses or cause famines in Africa, would anybody care about protecting the environment? If criminals could rob, steal, and even murder with the knowledge that God would automatically heal and restore their victims, have you any idea what that would do to the crime rate? If nations could carry out genocide and oppression, safe in the knowledge that God would make things up to their victims, what kind of world would it be? Well, we know the answer to that last one, because many of the oppressive regimes of the past have ploughed their course in the assurance that, if they got it wrong, God would put everything right in heaven. The stark and uncomfortable truth is that, if bad things don't happen to good people, we end up with a world where nobody has any sense of responsibility. Perhaps we are already there, because we filter out uncomfortable truths from our consciousness. In the end, a world where there were too many miracles would bear a more accurate resemblance to hell, than one in which there were too few.

But to suggest that, because there are problems with the idea of a God who sometimes performs miracles, He never performs them, would appear to fly in the face of the evidence. Not all the amazing things that happen can be satisfactorily explained. Shakespeare has Hamlet say: "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy, Horatio." And many have felt it to be so. God doesn't

appear to leave creation to its own devices. He does step in to put things right when we go severely off course, and get ourselves into a mess we cannot get ourselves out of. That is what He did in Jesus. As the Virgin Birth is part of the drama of salvation, there would be sufficient reason (bearing in mind our previous discussion) for God to intervene, and so such an intervention should not be ruled out. Whether things actually happened like that, history cannot prove one way or the other. It is for each person to weigh up the circumstances and the evidence, and to make up their own mind. But there is certainly no reason why a believer should find it impossible to hold to this doctrine. The question that remains is: "Is it necessary?"

Why is it necessary to believe in the Virgin Birth? Matthew appears to think it was necessary to fulfil an Old Testament prophecy (Isaiah 7: 14), "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son". Though in fact the Hebrew word translated "virgin" here can mean no more than "young woman", and in context Isaiah's words probably meant no more than "by the time a young woman has time to fall pregnant and give birth, the kings you are fearing will be a threat no more". The passage was not generally used as a Messianic prophecy prior to the time of Jesus. It would appear the prophecy has been re-interpreted in the light of reflection on Jesus' life and ministry. This is not unprecedented. It was a common method of interpretation among Jewish rabbis in Jesus' time. But why dredge up this particular passage? Evidently, because there was something in Jesus' life that required it. Either he was born of a virgin or he was illegitimate, and the church was trying to hide it. The problem with the latter possibility is that, according to Jewish law, Joseph would have been *required* to break off his engagement to Mary. But the tradition that Joseph married Mary and acknowledged Jesus as his son seems fairly secure

But is belief in the Virgin Birth fundamental to Christian doctrine? Certainly, the belief that Jesus is both God *and* man is vital to the doctrine of the atonement. God could not offer up an innocent man as a sacrifice for the sins of others, He could only take that upon himself. But only a human could bear the punishment for human sin. No animal sacrifice would have sufficed for such a great sin. So Jesus had to be both man and God. The Virgin Birth produces a human child who has God as a literal father, Joseph as an adoptive father, and Mary as a real mother. The child is "born of a woman" in the normal way, and is entirely human. But also, in a mysterious sense divine. One could argue forever as to whether God could have achieved this some other way, but this is the way the Bible suggests God *did* achieve it. The question then comes down to a matter of one's estimate of the Bible. The position taken here is that there needs to be some kind of authority, some kind of objective control over Christian doctrine. Otherwise, everyone could believe just as they chose, and end up believing the opposite of what Jesus taught. It would appear that the best candidate for such an authority is the collection of writings Christians refer to as the Bible. These writings have been read, sifted, assessed, and approved by the universal Church over a period of centuries. They are written by people who have been recognised by the church throughout the ages as godly people. And the part of the Bible known as the New Testament (the specifically Christian Scriptures) is written by people close to Jesus' time (no document is dated later than about 70 years after Jesus' death) and much of it by people close to Jesus in his earthly life. Other Christians do take a different view, but in my opinion all the alternatives are far more open to human error and subjectivity than is the Bible. In the end, it is for each person to read the Bible, critically evaluate its record, and ask themselves "Are these documents trustworthy?"

If you answer “yes”, you should be able to accept the Virgin Birth on the Bible’s testimony. If you answer “no”, you will not. But then there will also be much else in Christian doctrine with which you will have a problem. And you have to answer the question, “On what basis can you believe anything?”