

The Virgin Birth Controversy

(from David Stern's Jewish New Testament Commentary)

- 23 The virgin will conceive and bear a son.** This verse introduces a major controversy concerning the use of the Hebrew Bible in the New Testament. Following are three objections which non-Messianic Jews and other skeptics often make to (Matthew's) Mattityahu's quoting Isaiah 7:14b in this verse, along with Messianic Jewish replies.

(1) **Objection:** A virgin birth is impossible.

Reply: In liberal scholarship miracles are characteristically explained away as natural phenomena in disguise. One might pursue this line here by pointing to observed instances of parthenogenesis in the animal kingdom or modern cloning experiments. But there is no instance of human parthenogenesis. Therefore one must regard a virgin birth as supernatural.

Usually objection to a virgin birth as impossible follows as a logical consequence of objecting to any and all supernaturalism. But the God of the Bible is literally "supernatural," above nature, since he created nature and its laws. Therefore, if it suits his purpose he can suspend those laws. The Bible in both the *Tanakh* and the New Testament teaches repeatedly that God does intervene in human history and does sometimes overrule the natural course of events for his own reasons.

Frequently his reason, as in this instance, is to give humanity a sign of his sovereignty, presence and concern. In fact, Isaiah 7:14a, immediately preceding the portion quoted, reads, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign." The Hebrew word for sign (" *ot* ") means an extraordinary event that demonstrates and calls attention to God's direct involvement in human affairs. The "God" of Deism, pictured as starting the universe like a man winding a watch and leaving it to run by itself, is not the God of the Bible.

(2) **Objection:** Isaiah, in using the Hebrew word " *almah* ," was referring to a "young woman"; had he meant "virgin" he would have written " *b'tulah* ."

Reply: " *Almah* " is used seven times in the Hebrew Bible, and in each instance it either explicitly means a virgin or implies it, because in the Bible " *almah* " always refers to an unmarried woman of good reputation. In Genesis 24:43 it applies to Rebecca, Isaac's future bride, already spoken of in Genesis 24:16 as a *b'tulah* . In Exodus 2:8 it describes the infant Moshe's older sister Miryam, a nine-

year-old girl and surely a virgin. (Thus the name of Yeshua's mother recalls this earlier virgin.) The other references are to young maidens playing on timbrels (Psalm 68:25), maidens being courted (Proverbs 30:19) and virgins of the royal court (Song of Songs 1:3, 6:8). In each case the context requires a young unmarried woman of good reputation, i.e., a virgin.

Moreover, Mattityahu here is quoting from the Septuagint, the first translation of the *Tanakh* into Greek. More than two centuries before Yeshua was born, the Jewish translators of the Septuagint chose the Greek word "*parthenos*" to render "*almah*." "*Parthenos*" unequivocally means "virgin." This was long before the New Testament made the matter controversial.

The most famous medieval Jewish Bible commentator, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki ("Rashi," 1040—who determinedly opposed Christological interpretation of the *Tanakh*, nevertheless explained that in Song of Songs 1:3 "*almot*" (the plural of "*almah*") means "*b'tulot*" ("virgins") and refers metaphorically to the nations.

Victor Buksbazen, a Hebrew Christian, in his commentary *The Prophet Isaiah*, quoted Rashi as writing that in Isaiah 7:14 "*almah*" means "virgin." In the first four editions of the Jewish New Testament Commentary I cited this Rashi. It has been pointed out to me that Rashi did not write what I represented him as having written, so I have removed the citation from the main body of the *JNTC* and herewith apologize for not checking the original source.

In fact, the Hebrew text of Rashi as it appears in *Mikra3Cot G'dolot* says something quite different and far less supportive of the case I am making that in Isaiah 7:14 "*almah*" means "virgin." Following is a literal translation of Rashi's remarks in *Mikra3Cot G'dolot*:

[Isaiah:] God gives you (plural) a sign.

[Rashi:] He gives it to you (plural) by himself upon you against your will.

[Isaiah:] Pregnant.

[Rashi:] In the future she will be like we found with Manoach's wife, that was spoken to her by the angel and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son, and it was written, and he will say to her: here you are pregnant, etc.

[Isaiah:] The young girl [*almah*].

[Rashi:] My wife pregnant this year? and it will be the fourth year of King Achaz?

[Isaiah:] And she will call his name.

[Rashi:] The Holy Spirit will descend upon her.

[Isaiah:] Immanu'el.

[Rashi:] This will be to say that God is with us. And this is the sign that after the *na'arah* who will have never prophesied in all her life and with him (the son) will come the Holy Spirit. And that has been said in [Talmud tractate] Sotah, “and he will draw near to the prophetess,” etc. We never find a prophet's wife is called a prophetess unless she prophesied. And there are some who understand this to be referring to Chizkiyahu (Hezekiah). But this is impossible. After you count the years you will find that Chizkiyahu would have been born nine years before his father's kingship began. And there are some who interpret this to mean that this is the sign, that she was an *'almah* for whom it was not appropriate that she give birth — or, with Hebrew *r'uyah* translated differently, the *'almah* was not suited to giving birth, i.e., she was too young.

Contrary to the Buksbazen citation, Rashi never explicitly says that the *na'arah* has never in her life had intercourse with any man (i.e., is a virgin). Rather, he simply defines the *'almah* as a *na'arah* and then says that some interpret this to mean either that it was improper for her to give birth (presumably because she was unmarried, in which case what would be proper is that she would be a virgin) or that she was too young to be physically capable of giving birth (in which case, unless she had been abused, she would be a virgin).

I regret misrepresenting Rashi. Nevertheless, even without the Rashi paragraph, I believe the overall case I have made for understanding the *'almah* of Isaiah 7:14 as a virgin remains convincing.

(A friend says that Rashi did write the paragraph as quoted, but it is not in *Mikra3Cot G'dolot*. However, until someone directs me to a genuine Rashi source for it, the matter remains as I have left it in this note.)

Also in the earlier editions I referred to a 1953 article in the *Journal of Bible and Religion*, in which the Jewish scholar Cyrus Gordon held that cognate languages support translating “*'almah*” in Isaiah 7:14 as “virgin.” However, Michael Brown, a Messianic Jewish scholar with a Ph.D. in Semitics, informs me that Gordon's observations were based on an early incorrect reading of a key Ugaritic text. In this case, my error stemmed from unfamiliarity with recent scholarship.

However, the Bible itself shows us how we can know when an *‘almah* is a virgin. Rivkah is called an *‘almah* at Genesis 24:43, but it can be deduced from Genesis 24:16 (“Neither had any man known her”) that she was a virgin. In the same way, we know that the *‘almah* Miryam was a virgin from Lk 1:34, where she asks the angel how she can be pregnant, “since I am a virgin?”

A possible reason for Isaiah’s using the word “*b’tulah*” instead of *b’tulah* is that in Biblical (as opposed to later) Hebrew, “*b’tulah*” does not always unambiguously mean “virgin,” as we learn from Joel 1:8: “Lament like a *b’tulah* girded with sackcloth for the husband of her youth.” Deuteronomy 22:19 speaks of a woman after her wedding night as a *b’tulah*.

(3) **Objection:** In Isaiah the context (vv. 10–17) shows that Isaiah was predicting as a sign to King Achaz that before the *‘almah*’s as yet unconceived and unborn child would be old enough to choose good and refuse evil, Syria and the Northern Kingdom would lose their kings, and Assyria would attack Judah. This prophecy was fulfilled in the eighth century B.C.E. Therefore the prophet was not predicting an event some 700 years in the future.

Reply (for which I am grateful to the Jewish believer Arnold Fruchtenbaum): On the contrary, the context, which includes all of Isaiah 7, not just eight verses, shows that the “sign” of v. 14 was not for King Achaz, who is referred to as “you” (singular) in vv. 11 and 16–17, but for the entire “House of David,” mentioned in v. 13, and referred to as “you” (plural) in vv. 13–14.

The sign for Achaz was that before the *na‘ar* (“child,” at least a toddler, never a newborn baby) should know how to choose good and refuse evil, the events of vv. 16b–17 would occur. That child was Isaiah’s son Sh’ar-Yashuv (v. 3), who was with him as he prophesied and at whom he was probably pointing, not the son (Hebrew *ben*) of v. 14. This leaves v. 14 to provide a sign to the whole House of David, including all the descendants of David from that time onward until the prophecy should be fulfilled—which it was by Yeshua’s virgin birth.

Occasionally persons unacquainted with Christian tradition, specifically Roman Catholic tradition, confuse the term “virgin birth” with “immaculate conception.” The virgin birth of Yeshua—his being conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit of God in Miryam before she had ever had sexual contact—is accepted by all Bible-believing Messianic Jews and Gentile Christians. The immaculate conception, the Roman Catholic doctrine (first taught by the Church Fathers) that Miryam herself was sinlessly conceived, is not accepted by Protestants because the New Testament makes no mention of it.

Immanu’el is the name given to the Messiah at Isaiah 7:14, 8:8. As Mattityahu himself explains, it means “**God is with us**”—which is how Hebrew

immanu El is translated at Isaiah 8:10. However, Yeshua was not known by that name during his life on earth; rather, the name gives a hint (*remez*; see 2:15N) at who he is by describing him: he is God-with-us. God's people experience the final fulfillment at Rv 21:3, where in the new heavens and new earth "God-with-them" dwells among them.

In the *Tanakh* names frequently describe an aspect of the person named. In fact the *Tanakh* uses several names to refer to the Messiah, including "Shiloh" (Genesis 49:10), "Branch" (Isaiah 11:1), "Sprout" (Jeremiah 23:5, 33:15), and the longest, "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:5–6(6–7)). All describe the Messiah, yet he was known by just one name, Yeshua.

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¹Stern, D. H. (1996, c1992). *Jewish New Testament Commentary : A companion volume to the Jewish New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Mt 1:23). Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications.