

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Website: [www.churchredeemeraz.org](http://www.churchredeemeraz.org)

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**Pastor/Teacher**

**Gary L. W. Johnson**

### **The Annunciation of the Lord: His Birth Foretold to Joseph**

**P**olly Toynbee, a British journalist (and granddaughter of the noted historian Arnold Toynbee) and very vocal atheist, positively hates the religious overtones of C. S. Lewis' famous *The Chronicles of Narnia*, especially the emphasis on substitutionary atonement declaring, "Of all the elements of Christianity, the most repugnant is the notion of the Christ who took our sins upon himself and sacrificed his body in agony to save our souls. Did we ask him to?"<sup>1</sup> For people like Toynbee who do not see themselves as sinners deserving God's judgment, the whole concept of atonement is repulsive. James Orr long ago observed, "It is a truism that, with defective and inadequate views of sin, there can never be an adequate doctrine of redemption: it is, in fact, precisely because so many superficial views of sin are abroad, that there is at the present time so general a recoil from the Biblical declarations on the need and reality of atonement."<sup>2</sup> In a similar fashion, B. B. Warfield wrote that individuals (like Toynbee) who see themselves as having no dilemma before a holy God, abhor the thought of needing an atonement. "It would indeed be truer to say that it excites in them a positive distaste. It does not seem to them to have any particular fitness for their case, which they very naturally identify with the case of men in general. It appears to them to foster a morbid preoccupation with faults which are in part at least only fancied. It does scant justice, as they think, to the dignity of human nature, with its ethical endowments and capacities for self-improvement. It presents, as they view it, insufficient and ineffective motives for moral effort, and tends therefore to produce weak and dependent characters prone to acquiesce in an imperfect development, merely because they lack the vigor to go forward. Men turn away from it in proportion as they are inclined to put a high estimate on human nature as it manifests itself in the world, and especially upon its moral condition, its moral powers, its present and possible moral achievements. It is a gospel for sinners, and those who do not think of themselves as sinners find no attraction in it. It has accordingly been in every age the shining mark of attack for men of what we commonly speak of as the Rationalistic temper. It should not surprise us, therefore, that in our own age also it should have been made an object of assault by representatives of this general tendency of thought."<sup>3</sup> Sadly, much that passes for Evangelicalism today has become indifferent to theology and now embraces sentimentalism with a constant emphasis on being culturally relevant. This in turn leads to utilitarianism and an obsession with subjective spirituality that amounts to nothing more than undiluted mysticisms. In this context, all that matters is a sense of feeling personal awareness and significance. Feelings trump theology. Imagine how Joseph would have responded to his situation with this kind of mindset!

The Bible nowhere promises that we will never be victims of misunderstanding. Mary had to bear the silent stares and whispers behind her back – and what about Joseph! Think of his initial reaction when he discovered that Mary was with child! No doubt it was a heavy blow. How could Mary possibly explain? There is a statement that goes something like this: "If we concern ourselves with God's glory and God's purposes, God will take care of our reputations." Christians have often had to suffer false accusations and the like. Mary is a great example of one who trusted God with her reputation, even when the one she loved had reservations about her character, who had even determined to once and for all distance himself from her personally and forever – a decision made with great reluctance and pain. But God is faithful. He can be trusted in every situation regardless of circumstances.

## I. JOSEPH'S SITUATION

The Jewish understanding of “engagement” was viewed as legally binding (Note the expression, “Joseph her HUSBAND” – v. 19, and where Mary is called Joseph’s WIFE – vv. 20, 24). Therefore, although legally married, sexual relationships were not allowed until after the actual marriage ceremony. During the engagement, Mary was “found” to be with child – Joseph ascertained this from Mary’s physical condition – and not from Mary’s having told him. Mary did not try to explain (something Joseph would probably have found impossible to accept); she left the matter in God’s hands. The dilemma that confronted Joseph was staggering.

- A. **Joseph’s Actions.** The text implies that Joseph was very concerned about Mary – he did love her – and was not willing to put her through public disgrace (comp. Deut. 24:1).<sup>4</sup> “After he had considered this” (ENTHUMETHENTOS, aorist passive genitive absolute, “indicates the time of the vision and the verb the state of mind: revolving the matter in thought without clear perception of outlet,”<sup>5</sup> or as another has put it, ““These thoughts having passed through his mind;’ a short but tragic struggle between his legal conscience and his love.”<sup>6</sup> Joseph had made his decision; with a broken heart he resolved to break the engagement.

## II. THE ANGEL’S APPEARANCE

God steps into the picture. Mary’s moral integrity is at stake, so God dispatches an angel (his name is not given), but he appears to Joseph in a “dream.”<sup>7</sup>

- A. **The Angel’s Message.** It is important to note how Joseph is addressed: “son of David,” a direct descendant of the royal line, to whom God had promised an heir to the throne, the Messiah (II Sam. 7). “Do not fear (lit. cease fearing) to take Mary home as your wife.” She has not been unfaithful, Mary’s pregnancy is ascribed to the power of the Holy Spirit. She will have a son, and He is to be named “Jesus.” The Heb. Is Joshua, a contraction of Jehoshuah, which means Jehovah is salvation (cf. Num. 13:16; I Chr. 7:27). Mary had likewise been told that the child will bear the name “Jesus,” but Joseph is told why; “. . . He will save his people from their sins.” The pronoun “He” in the Greek text is very emphatic, lit. “He himself and no other.” He will do what only Jehovah God can do!<sup>8</sup>

- B. **The Fulfillment of Scripture (v. 22).** Matthew quotes the LXX version of Isaiah 7:14.

**NOTE:** A great deal of debate has raged over this text, especially between liberal and orthodox scholars. Liberals contend that the O.T. text predicts no such thing. For instance, C. M. Connick writes, “Matthew correctly quoted the Septuagint (LXX), a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scripture. The Septuagint itself was inaccurate. It translated the Hebrew word ALMAH (which means strictly a young woman of marriageable age) by PARTHENOS (which normally means virgin). Other Greek versions properly translate ALMAH by NEANIS (a young woman). While it cannot be denied that Matthew is a vigorous advocate of the virgin birth of Jesus, in this instance his supporting evidence is unjustified. Isaiah 7:14, in the original Hebrew does not predict a virgin birth for him who shall be called Emmanuel.”<sup>9</sup> In response to this charge, note the words of the late O.T. scholar E. J. Young, “Often it has been said that had the prophet desired to designate the mother as a virgin, there was at his disposal the word BETHULAH. At first sight this might seem to be a perfectly good word; upon closer examination, however, it proves to be most unsatisfactory. True enough, BETHULAH may designate a virgin, but it may also refer to a betrothed virgin (BETHULAH ME’ORASAH). In Deuteronomy the laws make clear that betrayal of the state of betrothal was as heinous as adultery and punishable with death. In Joel 1:8, the BETHULAH is clearly a married woman, and in later Aramaic incantation texts, the Aramaic equivalent of BETHULAH refers to a married woman. If Isaiah had used this word BETHULAH, he would have left us in confusion. We could not have known precisely what he had in mind. Would he have been speaking of one who was truly a virgin or would he rather have had in

mind one who was betrothed or one who was actually a wife? In light of these considerations it appears that Isaiah's choice of ALMAH was deliberate. It seems to be the only word in the language which unequivocally signifies an unmarried woman. No other available Hebrew word would clearly indicate that the one whom it designates was unmarried. Consequently, no other word would have been suitable for fulfilling the requirements of the sign such as the context demanded. None of these other words would have pointed to an unusual birth. Only ALMAH makes clear that the mother was unmarried."<sup>10</sup> The point is "both PARTHENOS and ALMAH refer to sexual virginity, and regardless of which Old Testament text he used, that concept was there. These critics, by their criticism of Matthew, also reveal their denial of any supernatural ministry of the Holy Spirit in lives and compositions of the Biblical authors. They see the sixty-six books as mere human literary works."<sup>11</sup>

The child is "Immanuel, which means 'God with us,'" lit. it means "with us God." He is God "manifested in the flesh" (I Tim. 3:16); "In Him all the fullness of the godhead dwells bodily" (Col. 2:9); "He that has seen ME has seen the Father (Jn. 14:9).

### III. JOSEPH'S RESPONSE

The readiness to obey is seen in Joseph's prompt action – he does not waver or doubt – he responds in obedient faith. The expression, "he had no union with her," lit. he knew her not – OUK EGINOSKEN AUTEN – is the imperfect tense. "It is against the tradition of the perpetual virginity of Mary. This has been questioned; but it hardly needs argument that in such a context, 'he used not to' or 'he was not in the habit of' means more than 'he did not.' It is quite true that the aorist, 'he knew her not until,' would have implied that she subsequently had children by him. But the imperfect implies this still more strongly."<sup>12</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** Ross Douthat's insightful review of the new movie *Avatar*, notes how fitting it was that director James Cameron's blockbuster arrived in theaters at Christmas time. "Like the holiday season itself, the science fiction epic is a crass embodiment of capitalistic excess wrapped around a deeply felt religious message. It's at once the blockbuster to end all blockbusters, and the Gospel According to James. But not the Christian Gospel. Instead, 'Avatar' is Cameron's long apologia for pantheism – a faith that equates God with Nature, and calls humanity into religious communion with the natural world. In Cameron's sci-fi universe, this communion is embodied by the blue-skinned, enviably slender Na'Vi, an alien race whose idyllic existence on the planet Pandora is threatened by rapacious human invaders. The Na'Vi are saved by the movie's hero, a turncoat Marine, but they're also saved by their faith in Eywa, the 'All Mother,' described variously as a network of energy and the sum total of every living thing. If this narrative are sounds familiar, that's because pantheism has been Hollywood's religion of choice for a generation now. It's the truth that Kevin Costner discovered when he went dancing with wolves. It's the metaphysic woven through Disney cartoons like 'The Lion King' and 'Pocahontas.' And it's the dogma of George Lucas's Jedi, whose mystical Force 'surrounds us, penetrates us, and binds the galaxy together.' Hollywood keeps returning to these themes because millions of Americans respond favorably to them. From Deepak Chopra to Eckhart Tolle, the 'religion and inspiration' section in your local bookstore is crowded with titles pushing a pantheistic message. A recent Pew Forum report on how Americans mix and match theology found that many self-professed Christians hold beliefs about the 'spiritual energy' of trees and mountains that would fit right in among the indigo-tinted Na'Vi. As usual, Alexis de Tocqueville saw it coming. The American belief in the essential unity of all mankind, Tocqueville wrote in the 1830's, leads us to collapse distinctions at every level of creation. 'Not content with the discovery that there is nothing in the world but a creation and a Creator,' he suggested, democratic man 'seeks to expand and simplify his conception by including God and the universe in one great whole.' Today there are other forces that expand pantheism's American appeal. We pine for what we've left behind, and divinizing the natural world is an obvious way to express unease about our hyper-technological society. The threat of global warming, meanwhile, has lent the cult of Nature qualities that every successful religion needs – a crusading spirit, a rigorous set of 'thou shalt nots,' and a piping-hot apocalypse. At the same time,

pantheism opens a path to numinous experience for people uncomfortable with the literal-mindedness of the monotheistic religions – with their miracle-working deities and holy books, their virgin births and resurrected bodies. As the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski noted, attributing divinity to the natural world helps ‘bring God closer to human experience,’ while ‘depriving him of recognizable personal traits.’ For anyone who pines for transcendence but recoils at the idea of a demanding Almighty who interferes in human affairs, this is an ideal combination. Indeed, it represents a form of religion that even atheists can support. Richard Dawkins has called pantheism ‘a sexed-up atheism.’ (He means that as a compliment.) Sam Harris concluded his polemic ‘The End of Faith’ by rhapsodizing about the mystical experiences available from immersion in ‘the roiling mystery of the world.’ Citing Albert Einstein’s expression of religious awe at the ‘beauty and sublimity’ of the universe, Dawkins allows, ‘In this sense I too am religious.’ The question is whether Nature actually deserves a religious response. Traditional theism has to wrestle with the problem of evil: if God is good, why does he allow suffering and death? But Nature is suffering and death. Its harmonies require violence. Its ‘circle of life’ is really a cycle of mortality. And the human societies that hew closest to the natural order aren’t the shining Edens of James Cameron’s fond imaginings. They’re places where existence tends to be nasty, brutish and short. Religion exists, in part, precisely because humans aren’t at home amid these cruel rhythms. We stand half inside the natural world and half outside it. We’re beasts with self-consciousness, predators with ethics, mortal creatures who yearn for immortality. This is an agonized position, and if there’s no escape upward – or no God to take on flesh and come among us, as the Christmas story has it – a deeply tragic one. Pantheism offers a different sort of solution: a downward exit, an abandonment of our tragic self-consciousness, a re-merger with the natural world our ancestors half-escaped millennia ago. But except as dust and ashes, Nature cannot take us back.”<sup>13</sup>

Christ came into the world, declared the Apostle Paul, to save sinners (I Tim. 1:15-16). We are not only sinners but enemies of God and it was while we were hostile towards God that Christ came to save us (Rom. 5:1-11). The very glory of the atonement is that Christ died for his enemies. We were not seeking after a Saviour from heaven, but running and hiding from the God who is really there. As Paul reminded the Colossians, it was for those who were hostile in their minds toward God that Christ hung on the cross. It was by that death that he made peace and effected reconciliation with God (Colossians 1:19-22). Like Polly Toynbee, I never asked him to do this. That he did it at all, is all to the praise of his glorious grace.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Polly Toynbee, “Narnia represents everything that is most hateful about religion.” The Guardian (Monday 5 December 2005).

<sup>2</sup> J. Orr, God’s Image in Man (rpt. Eerdmans, 1046) p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield VII (rpt. Baker 1981) p. 132.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph chose a “private” rather than a “public” divorce. “It is true that the involved parties in the sin of adultery could be sentenced to death (cf. Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22), but strict conformity to that legislation was not widely practiced in the first century. Joseph opted for the relaxed method.” R. G. Gromacki, The Virgin Birth: Doctrine of Deity (Thomas Nelson, 1976), p. 77.

<sup>5</sup> A. B. Bruce, The Synoptic Gospels, in The Expositor’s Greek Testament (rpt. Eerdmans, 1970), p. 67.

<sup>6</sup> A. H. McNeile, The Gospel According to St. Matthew (Macmillan, 1949), p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> “(Edersheim) shows that the Jews attached great importance to dreams. There was probably something connected with such dreams as really gave divine guidance to distinguish them from ordinary dreams.” J. A. Broadus, Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew (Judson Press, 1886) p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> “The marked and prevailing emphasis which, already in the Old Testament, is placed upon the fact that God is sovereign and that He alone can save is evident from such passages as Gen. 49:18; II Kings 19:15-19; II Chr. 14:11, 20:5-12; Ps. 3:8, 25:5, 37:39, 62:1, 81:1; Isa. 12:2; Jer. 3:23; Lam. 3:26; Dan. 4:35; Mic. 7:7; Hab. 3:18; Zech. 4:6; and a host of other passages equally clear and precious.” Wm. Hendriksen, New Testament Commentary: Matthew (Baker, 1973), p. 133.

<sup>9</sup> C. M. Connick, Jesus, the Man, the Mission, and the Message (Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 102.

<sup>10</sup> E. J. Young, The Book of Isaiah, I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 288.

<sup>11</sup> Gromacki, op. cit., p. 79.

<sup>12</sup> I owe this citation to Martin Downes, <http://against-heresies.blogspot.com/2009/12/polly-toynbe-on-repugnancy-of.html>.

<sup>13</sup> New York Times Dec. 20, 2009. It should be noted that James Cameron was also involved in the notorious The Jesus Family Tomb: The Discovery, The Investigation, and The Evidence That Could Change History that aired on the Discovery Channel in March of 2007.