

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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

Series:	The Birth of Christ		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	1		Gary L.W. Johnson
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THE ANNUNCIATION OF THE LORD: HIS BIRTH FORETOLD TO JOSEPH

The Washington Post on Christmas Day a few years ago announced, with its usual bravado, that evidence Jesus actually existed is very doubtful. This was not the first time they made this claim -- but to do so on Christmas Day made it all the more galling. Back in 2014, they carried an op. ed. piece by Raphael Lataster with the subtitle “There are clearly good reasons to doubt Jesus’ historical existence.”¹ Relying on the “authority” of the noted arch-athiest and Jesus-denier Richard Carrier, Lataster dismisses not only the New Testament claims but also the historical credibility of Tacitus and Josephus, who both asserted the existence of Jesus.² Even the noted agnostic New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman, who is no friend to anything resembling orthodox Christianity, finds this reprehensible scholarship.³ The New Testament records the details of the life of Jesus from beginning to end as historical facts. Jesus of Nazareth was a real historical figure. 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. Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: the word translated *birth* leads the mind a little farther back in thought than to the mere nativity. It suggests the idea of *genetic origin*. It is in fact the word *Genesis*. The evangelist is about to describe, not the genesis of the heaven and the earth, but the genesis of Him who made the heaven and the earth, and who will yet make a new heaven and a new earth.⁴

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 concerned about Mary – he did love her – and was not willing to put her through public disgrace (comp. Deuteronomy 24:1).⁵ “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,”⁶ 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.”⁷ 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.”⁸

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 (2 Samuel 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 Hebrew is Joshua, a contraction of Jehoshuah, which means Jehovah is salvation (cf. Numbers 13:16; 1 Chronicles 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!⁹

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 Old Testament text predicts no such a 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.”¹⁰ In response to this charge, note the words of the late Old Testament 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.”¹¹ 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.”¹² *Emmanuel* is found here only and is the transliteration of the Hebrew word meaning *God with us*, as Matthew goes on to explain. As far as our information goes, nobody ever called Jesus “Emmanuel;” it was not the child’s name in the same sense as “Jesus” was. Matthew surely intends his readers to understand that “Emmanuel” was his name in the sense that all that was involved in that name found its fulfillment in him. The quotation and the translation of the Hebrew name underline the fact that in Jesus none less than God came right where we are. And at the end of this Gospel there is the promise that Jesus will be with his people to the end of the age (28:20) – God with us indeed.¹³

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. The marriage was thus formally completed, but not consummated before the birth of Jesus. The Greek expression for *not until* would normally suggest that intercourse did take place after the end of this period, and that therefore Jesus' *brothers* (12:46, *etc.*) were subsequently born of Joseph and Mary in the normal way. There is no biblical warrant for the tradition of the *perpetual virginity* of Mary.¹⁴

CONCLUSION: The Lord of glory is born the Son of man, and is named by God's command, and by man's mouth, JESUS, the Saviour. He *is* what he is called. He saves us from the punishment and the guilt of sin, and then from the ill effect and evil power of sin. This he does for “*his people*,” even for all who believe in him. It is his nature to do this, as we see in the fact that his very name is JESUS – Saviour. We still call him by that name, for he still saves us in these latter days. Let us go and tell out his name among men; for he will save others.¹⁵

ENDNOTES

¹cf. the thoughtful analysis by Wm. M. Briggs, “Washington Post to Christians on Christmas Morning: Jesus Didn't Exist,” *The Stream*, Dec. 26, 2017.

²The Roman historian Tacitus, who wrote early in the second century, describes Christians as those who had received their name from “Christ who had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius” (*Annals*, 15:44). These details mesh perfectly with the information found in the New Testament. Writing about five years later than Tacitus, another Roman historian of the day, Suetonius, refers to the expulsion of Jews from Rome in the time of the emperor Claudius (AD 41-54). The cause for this imperial edict he attributes to rioting “at the instigation of Chrestus” (*Cladius* 25:4). Josephus was a Jewish historian, who wrote during the second half of the first century AD, would seem to offer much more promising material. In his *Jewish Antiquities*, he makes passing mention of “James, the brother of Jesus, who was called the Christ,” who he claims was delivered up to the Sanhedrin to be stoned sometime in the decade of the 60s (*Ant.* 20:200). Josephus also tells of John the Baptist, whom Herod killed even “though he was a good man and had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practices justice towards their fellows and piety towards God, and so doing to join in baptism” (18:117). But the most striking and significant passage occurs in 8:63-64: “About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Messiah. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvellous things about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so-called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.” Cf. Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of The Gospels* (IVP, 1987), pp. 196-200.

³Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (Harper One, 2012). His disdain for the kind of nonsense in the *Washington Post* is obvious. He declares that these outrageous claims are stunning. “I was surprised because I am trained as a scholar of the New Testament and early Christianity, and for thirty years I have written on the historical Jesus, the Gospels, the early Christian movement, and the history of the church's first three hundred years. Like all New Testament scholars, I have read thousands of books and articles in English and other European languages on Jesus, the New Testament, and early Christianity. But I was almost completely unaware – as are most of my colleagues in the field – of this body of skeptical literature. I should say at the outset that none of this literature is written by scholars trained in New Testament or early Christian studies at the major, or even the minor, accredited theological seminaries, divinity schools, universities, or colleges of North America or Europe (or anywhere else in the world). Of the thousands of scholars of early Christianity who do teach at such schools, none of them, to my knowledge, has any doubts that Jesus existed. But a whole body of literature out there, some of it highly intelligent and well-informed, makes this case. These sundry books and articles (not to mention websites) are of varying quality. Some of them rival the *Da Vinci Code* in their passion for conspiracy and the shallowness of their historical knowledge, not just of the New Testament and early Christianity, but of ancient religions generally and, even more broadly, the ancient world. But a couple of bona fide scholars – not professors teaching religious studies in universities but scholars nonetheless, and at least one of them with a Ph.D. in the field of New Testament – have taken this position and written about it. Their books may not be known to most of the general public interested in questions related to Jesus, the Gospels, or the early Christian church, but they do occupy a noteworthy niche as a (very) small but (often) loud minority voice. Once you tune in to this voice, you quickly learn just how persistent and vociferous it can be. Those who do not think Jesus existed are frequently militant in their views and remarkably

adept at countering evidence that to the rest of the civilized world seems compelling and even unanswerable. But these writers have answers, and the smart ones among them need to be taken seriously, if for no other reason than to show why they cannot be right about their major contention. The reality is that whatever else you may think about Jesus, he certainly did exist. Serious historians of the early Christian movement – all of them – have spent many years preparing to be experts in their field. Just to read the ancient sources requires expertise in a range of ancient languages: Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and often Aramaic, Syriac, and Coptic, not to mention the modern languages of scholarship (for example, German and French). And that is just for starters. Expertise requires years of patiently examining ancient texts and a thorough grounding in the history and culture of Greek and Roman antiquity, the religions of the ancient Mediterranean world, both pagan and Jewish, knowledge of the history of the Christian church and the development of its social life and theology, and, well, lots of other things. It is striking that virtually everyone who has spent all the years needed to attain these qualifications is convinced that Jesus of Nazareth was a real historical figure.”

⁴ James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1981), p. 9.

⁵ 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.

⁶ A. B. Bruce, *the Synoptic Gospels*, in *the Expositor’s Greek Testament* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1970), p. 67.

⁷ A. H. McNeile, *the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Macmillan, 1949), p. 8.

⁸ “(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.

⁹ “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; 2 Kins 19:15-19; 2 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.

¹⁰ C. M. Connick, *Jesus, the Man, the Mission, and the Message* (Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 102.

¹¹ E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, I (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 288.

¹² Gromacki, op. cit., p. 79.

¹³ Leon Morris, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According To Matthew* (Eerdmans, 1992), p. 31.

¹⁴ R. T. France, *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Matthew* (Eerdmans, 1985), p. 80.

¹⁵ C. H. Spurgeon, *The King Has Come: Matthew* (rpt. Revell, 1987), p. 19.