

The Virgin Birth of Jesus.

Since early Christian times, the virgin birth of Jesus has been an important belief, encouraged to be believed by all followers of the Way. More recently it has become under significant question as to whether it is historically factual. Many ordinary church goers do not question this 'doctrine' and are not encouraged to do so. It features in both the Apostles' and the Nicene Creeds which are still often part of church liturgies of present times. It is an obligatory belief for present day Roman Catholics, declared by Pope Martin¹ in 649 CE.

If we look at the historical context in which the church was born, we will discover that the claim that Jesus was born of a virgin was not a unique claim which only applied to Jesus. Here are some similar claims, made in history, by different societies and religions.

Buddha was born of the virgin Maya, after the Holy Ghost descended upon her.

The Egyptian God, Horus was born of the virgin Isis.

The ancient Phrygian god of vegetation, Attis was born of the virgin Nama.

A Roman saviour Quirinus was born of a virgin.

In Tibet, Indra was born of a virgin. He ascended into heaven after his death.

The Greek deity Adonis was born of the virgin Myrrha, many centuries before the birth of Jesus.

In Persia, the god Mithra was born of a virgin on Dec 25th. Many Romans and people of Gaul worshipped Mithra.

Also in Persia, Zoroaster was born of a virgin.

In India there are two main stories of the birth of Krishna, one of the incarnations of Vishnu, and the second person within the Hindu trinity. In one story Krishna was said to have been born to his mother Devaki while she was still a virgin. In the other, Krishna had normal conception and birth.

Another Hindu reference to a virgin conception, is the story where the woman's physical virginity is explicitly maintained by the god who impregnates her. It is written in a Hindu sacred writing, a Purana. *The sun god said: "O beautiful Prtha, your meeting with the demigods cannot be fruitless. Therefore, let me place my seed in your womb so that you may bear a son. I shall arrange to keep your virginity intact since you are still an unmarried girl."*

Virgin births were claimed for many Egyptian pharaohs.

Greek heroes, like Alexander the Great and Roman emperors, like Caesar Augustus, had miraculous births, born of a virgin.

Historical research reveals that there were many mythical figures, including: Hercules, Osiris, Bacchus, Mithra, Hermes, Prometheus, Perseus and Horus shared a number of factors. They all -

- lived in pre-Christian times,
- had a god for a father,
- had a human virgin for a mother,
- had their birth announced by a heavenly display, accompanied by celestial music,
- had an attempt on their life by a tyrant while they were still an infant,
- met with a violent death,
- rose again from the dead.

Almost all were believed to have -

- been visited by "wise men" during infancy,
- fasted for 40 days as an adult.

Mention has been made that these heroes were 'mythical' but in the 1st Century, both before and for some time after, people who had a very different worldview, believed these stories as being 'true'. Procreation involving 'heavenly beings' with 'human beings' was not completely foreign to the tradition of the Hebrews/Israelites. See Genesis 6:1-4.

And as I say in Study 6E, when speaking of different worldview of biblical writers, I quote Bultmann –

Heaven is the abode of God and of celestial beings - the angels. The underworld is hell, the place of torment. ... Even the earth is more than the scene of the natural, everyday events, of the trivial round and the common task. It is the scene of supernatural activity of God and his angels on the one hand and of Satan and his demons on the other. These supernatural forces intervene in the course of nature and in all that men think and will and do. Miracles are by no means rare.

More specifically on this supernatural activity involving procreation, John Shelby Spong states in his book, 'A New Christianity for a New World' on page 119 – *To assert a divine origin, one only had to replace the human father with some kind of divine agent. Every virgin birth story – **and there were many in the ancient world** – made that paternal substitution. In Jesus' case, the male agent was the Holy Spirit. In the same author's book, 'Jesus for the non-religious', on page 31, he states – *Virgin births were **a familiar tool in the ancient world** to explain the extraordinary qualities of a leader. At some stage in his other book, 'Born of a woman', he claims that **'In the ancient world, virgin births were tuppence a dozen'**.**

This all brings into question a commonly held belief that the virgin birth story about Jesus is unique. By no means. If we claim that Jesus' virgin birth is historically factual, is it appropriate for us to claim that all other similar stories are fiction? If there were so many other virgin birth stories believed at the time of Jesus, could it reasonably be suggested that the gospel writers and the early church borrowed from them, in their effort to claim that Jesus was a god-man worthy of adoration and even worship?