

A Virgin Shall Conceive

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Matthew 1:18-25

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Matthew's Gospel

The first Bible I ever owned was a Gideon's New Testament with the Psalms and so the first "first book of the Bible" I ever knew was Matthew's Gospel. For some reason, I was not put off by the genealogy that begins Matthew's life of Jesus. It's only 17 verses after all, and I have a habit, in the immortal words of Linus Van Pelt, of "blipping" over names in a story, anyway. After that genealogy, Matthew tells Jesus's birth story. Of

course, this is all part of the same story. Here's a little fun fact about the Greek that Matthew wrote – the word for “genealogy” (in verse one) and the word for “birth” (in verse 17) is the same word in Greek. Can you guess what it is? Here's a hint – it's the name we give to another book of the Bible ... in fact, the *_first_* book of the whole Bible. Got it? That's right, *_genesis_*.

Matthew, in giving us Jesus's genealogy all the way from Abraham, is reminding us that Jesus's story is the next chapter in God's story and relationship with the Jews and even the whole world. Look what he does with the birth story. When the angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream, why does the angel tell him to name the boy, “Jesus”? Simply put, because this boy was to save the Jews from their sins. He is to be their “Joshua,” their “God saves.”

And the story of his conception – that his mother, Mary, never had sexual relations with anyone, yet conceived a child “from the Holy Spirit.” This itself is certainly remarkable! But Matthew declares this is the fulfillment of our Old Testament passage for today: “All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him “Emmanuel,”’ which means, ‘God is with us.’”

Matthew uses this idea of Jesus *_fulfilling_* what has been promised something like twelve times in his gospel (1). Matthew is interpreting the life of Jesus as the climax of God's dealing with humanity.

*The virgin shall conceive*

Let's dive into how this works out in our lectionary passages a bit. First, let's go back to Isaiah, where we get the promise. The background is this. We're at a crucial moment in Jewish

history. As is so often the case, the Jews are being threatened by a major regional power. In this case, it is Assyria. The northern kingdom, "Israel," and Syria are trying to co-operate in fending off the Assyrian threat. King Ahaz, of Judah, is being pressured by King Pekah of Israel and King Reza of Syria to join the coalition. Ahaz was a direct ancestor of Joseph's, according to the genealogy that Matthew gives. The prophet Isaiah, however, comes to Ahaz with a promise that God will not allow Assyria to defeat Judah. God goes so far as to give Ahaz a sign of Ahaz's own choosing, "let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." Ahaz demurs, saying he doesn't want to put God to the test. Rather than pleasing God, this "wearies" God – and it's a good reminder that when God gives us a promise, we should take God up on it. But it's important that Ahaz understand, so God gives Ahaz a promise of God's own choosing:

> Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

It is probable that the immediate reference of "the young woman" was Ahaz's wife, Abijah, and the promised son was Hezekiah. If we could translate this promise into less poetic language it might be something like this:

> Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Abijah is with child and shall bear a son, and his coming will remind you that the Lord is with you. In just a short while, by the time your son can tell right from wrong, the kings who are pressuring you, Pekah and Reza, will be defeated.

It's good to remember that Hezekiah was one of the good kings, one who really did seem to be able to tell the difference between good and evil.

Now, it's certainly possible to drain the poetry from this passage. It's also certainly possible to let this passage float along as a standalone "Bible prophecy" whose fulfillment is really in Jesus. The good Lord knows how frequently these are done. But in doing either of these things, we miss out on that all important fact – God is out to save a people. At the crucial time in Israel's history, God reminds Ahaz through Isaiah that God will remain faithful and save his people. At the most crucial time in world history, God sends the new Joshua, the Immanuel, the Messiah to save, not just Israel, but the whole world.

God is still saving the world

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(1) According to F.P. Viljoen, in his article on "Fulfillment in Matthew:"

- Four times in the story of Jesus' birth and childhood (Mt. 1:22-23 (Is. 7:14), 2:15 (Hs. 11:1); 2:17-18 (Jr. 31:15); 2:23)
- four times describing Jesus' public ministry (Mt. 4:14-16 (Is. 8:23-9:1); 8:17 (Is. 53:4); 12:17-21 (Is. 42:1-4); 13:35 (Ps. 78:2))
- twice in the events leading to his death (Mt. 21:4-5 (Is. 62:11; Zch. 9:9); 27:9-10 (Zch. 11:12-13; Jr. 18:3; 59:6-9))