

Joseph and The Birth of Jesus

The churches claim the Bible records the virgin birth of Jesus. This claim relies heavily on the Bible being read with a mindset that causes the reader to interpret things in a way never intended by its authors, and to read into the accounts things that are not there.

This has the effect of not only distorting the biblical account, but also obscuring what the writer wants to point out. How the churches have dealt with the information about Joseph in the New Testament is a case in point. They have read into this information allusions to a virginal conception where there are none, and in doing this they have obscured the reason why two biblical writers want us to know Joseph was not the father of Jesus.

This article looks at what the New Testament says about Joseph, and for what purpose. It will then be evident why two New Testament writers felt it necessary to say what they did about Joseph and his situation, and that it had nothing to do with a so-called virgin birth.

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Joseph in the New Testament

The significance of Joseph to the messiahship of Jesus is found in the accounts of the birth of Jesus, which appear in the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Each account has a different emphasis. Matthew focuses almost exclusively on the role played by Joseph, and mentions Mary only incidentally. On the other hand, Luke gives Mary's side of the story, and makes little more than passing references to Joseph.

Despite their differences, each account states that Joseph was not the father of Jesus.

Matthew gives the genealogy of Joseph, who is the focus of his narrative. Luke gives the genealogy of Jesus which names Jesus' father, a matter dealt with at some length in the article *The Two Genealogies in the New Testament*.

To understand why these two gospel writers give the details they do, requires an appreciation of the following points:

- It was commonly supposed that Joseph was the father of Jesus.
- Because of his ancestry, Joseph could not be the father of the messiah.
- It was necessary to state Joseph was not the father of Jesus, in order to keep Jesus' claim to messiahship intact.
- The father of Jesus was necessarily a descendant of David from an eligible line.

Below is a summary of the issues that relate to these points, and the explanation of why Joseph acted as he did.

What we know about Mary's child

Matthew states Joseph was not Jesus' father. However, as we learn elsewhere, during Jesus' lifetime this was not commonly known. It was sometime after the death of Jesus that Matthew and Luke found an issue with Jesus' lineage that needed to be resolved, as we shall see shortly. But firstly, the situation to the time of Jesus' death was as follows.

An angel had appeared to Mary and told her she would conceive and bear a child who would be given "the throne of His father David". (*Luke 1:32*)

However the person to whom she was betrothed was not the father of this child. It is stated frankly that Mary fell pregnant before she and Joseph came together. (*Matthew 1:18*)

Nevertheless, during Jesus' lifetime it was commonly supposed that Joseph was his father. (*Luke 3:23, 4:22, John 6:42*) This was also the assumption of the first disciples when they identified Jesus as the messiah. (*John 1:45*)

Why Joseph could not be the father of the messiah

The disciples understood that for Jesus to be the messiah it was necessary for him to be a direct physical descendent of David and eligible to sit upon the throne of David. (*Acts 2:29-30, etc*) On appearances it would seem Jesus, as the son of Joseph, had at least fulfilled the requirement of messiahship that he be descended from King David. After all Joseph was of the house and lineage of David. (*Matthew 1:20, Luke 2:4*)

However, there was a complication, which is evident from Joseph's genealogy. Although Joseph was descended from David it was through Jeconiah, a matter that has a direct bearing on the claim that Jesus was the messiah. (*Matthew 1:6-11*)

God had decreed that no descendent of Jeconiah (Coniah) would ever sit upon the throne of David. Therefore no child of Joseph could be the messiah. (This crucial point is well known to theologians, but rarely is it explicitly stated in Bible commentaries or footnotes.) (*Jeremiah 22:30, Matthew 1:11*)

Once Matthew and Luke became aware of Joseph's descent from Jeconiah, it became important for them to correct the common belief that Joseph was Jesus' father, in order to keep intact Jesus' claim to messiahship.

Luke went one step further and named the father of Jesus, a matter dealt with in the article *The Two Genealogies in the New Testament*.

Joseph's role in events surrounding the birth of Jesus

There should be no confusion about the part Joseph played in events surrounding the birth of Jesus and the reasons he acted as he did, for the facts are set out clearly in *Matthew 1:18-25*.

Joseph was betrothed to Mary, and before they had sexual relations Mary became pregnant. (*Matthew 1:18, 25*)

On learning this Joseph decided to end the betrothal, but not wanting to make a public example of Mary he "was minded to put her away secretly". (*Matthew 1:19*)

While Joseph thought on these things an angel appeared to him in a dream, and gave two instructions. The first was for him to take Mary as his wife. The second was that the son who would be born to Mary was to be called Jesus. (*Matthew 1:20-21*)

Joseph was not receiving a request from the angel. He was receiving instructions. This is stated clearly: "*Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him...*". (*Matthew 1:24*)

Joseph complied with both instructions, whatever his personal inclinations may have been. He took Mary to be his wife and the child was called Jesus. (*Matthew 1:24-25*)

(By the way, after the birth of Jesus, Joseph received further instructions in three dreams. Again he acted according to the instructions given to him. (*Matthew 2:13-15, 19-21, 22-23*))

Common misconception of what the angel said to Joseph

The angel not only instructed Joseph on what he must do, but also gave an assurance about Mary's child. There is a widely held misconception that the angel's assurance was that no man was involved in the conception of Mary's child. This is not so. Before proceeding, it is worth looking at what the angel actually said.

But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins." (*Matthew 1:20-21*)

The angel told Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, "*for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit*". (*Matthew 1:20*) Because of their mindset, many mistakenly take these words as alluding to a virginal conception.

However, the angel was **not** talking about the manner of the child's conception. If one discards prejudice and applies the rules governing grammar, it is seen that the phrase "of the Holy Spirit" refers to the child in Mary's womb, not its conception.

The angel said a similar thing to Zacharias about the child Elizabeth would carry in her womb ("*He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb*"), and no one suggests a virginal conception in that case. (*Luke 1:15*)

Joseph's conduct does not support the virgin birth story

Some argue that Joseph would not have taken Mary as his wife if she had been pregnant by another man, and therefore this shows that Joseph believed in the "virgin birth".

This argument cannot be sustained. The reality is that Joseph knew Mary was pregnant by another man, and he had decided to end the betrothal. But after receiving instructions from the angel, Joseph acted contrary to his original intention.

It was not a matter of Joseph doing whatever he was inclined to do. It was a matter of doing what he was instructed to do.

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