

Wait. What? TWO Virgin Births?

I love the story of Christmas. Not the secular one involving elves and reindeer, but The Story. The birth of Christ. One of the many amazing parts of the birth of Christ is that it wasn't something that just happened. Of course, no birth is spontaneous. Most parents anticipate and plan for the arrival of their child for months, but the birth of Jesus was anticipated and planned *for centuries*. The birth of Christ was on God's radar from the beginning.

We know this because of the many Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah's birth, life, and death. From our perspective on this side of the New Testament, when Christians read the Old Testament, those prophecies—those signposts pointing to Jesus—seem obvious. "LOOK AT THAT PASSAGE. IT SCREAMS JESUS!"

Yes, they do—but those who first heard them didn't necessarily see that. These prophecies were part of a specific message to a specific group of people. That means many prophecies refer to more than one event. The first fulfillment of the prophecy usually is found in an event close in time to when the prophecy was first given. The ultimate fulfillment, though, was found in the person of Christ.

A good example of this is the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14. Today we can easily see it as a prophecy of the virgin birth of Christ, but it also had significance at the time God spoke these words through the prophet Isaiah.

"Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: See, the virgin will conceive, have a son, and name him Immanuel" (Isa. 7:14).

So if this prophecy refers to two events, wouldn't that mean there are two virgin births?

Nope. Not at all.

There was only one virgin birth, but the prophecy still had an immediate meaning for King Ahaz. The difference comes in how the Greek and Hebrew languages use the word "virgin."

"Virgin" in Hebrew

The Hebrew word, *betula*, can refer to a young maiden or a woman who has never been sexually intimate. In Deuteronomy 22, the word is used to clearly refer to a woman who has never engaged in sex. But in other places, the context refers to a young woman regardless of her marital status. For example, in Jeremiah's prophecy about Israel, who had been unfaithful to God, the people were referred to as Virgin Israel (Jer. 31:4). Context dictates how the word is to be used.

The context of Isaiah 7 has to do with events surrounding King Ahaz. As the *New American Commentary* points out:

"The birth would be a sign for the king in the immediate circumstances. The Hebrew text reads, 'The young woman has conceived and is giving birth to a son.'"

"Ahaz probably knew the woman of whom the prophet spoke. Some have suggested it was Isaiah's wife and son. Others believe it was some other woman in Israel. The most likely candidate may have been a wife of Ahaz, since this would have been the surprise fulfillment of the oracle, a royal prince becoming a sign to the king, his name—Immanuel—constantly reminding the king that 'God is with us.' Such a sign would give hope to a king who trusted God, but would be a constant threat to one who followed his own strategy."

"Virgin" in Greek

The Greek word for virgin, *parthenos*, is not broad like the Hebrew word. It clearly refers to a virgin, one who has never had a sexual encounter. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, *the Septuagint*, it used this word in Isaiah 7:14. As Matthew was inspired to recount the birth of Jesus, he used this Greek translation of Isaiah 7:14. Matthew wanted us to see the miraculous virgin birth of Christ. Again, let me quote from the *New American Commentary*:

"The Septuagint interpreted this, 'The virgin will conceive,' a translation taken up in Matthew 1:23 and the continuing Christian tradition. The church has seen and continues to see that God often gives fuller and deeper meaning to his word at a stage after its original fulfillment. This is definitely the case here, for the New Testament shows us that Jesus Christ was virgin-born and is Immanuel, God with us."

The beauty of God's Word is seen in how God could make two declarations with one prophecy. His prophecy could declare a word to an individual or group in their immediate context, yet that same prophecy could carry a deeper, richer word concerning the coming of Jesus Christ.

Is the virgin birth of Christ really all that important? Yes, it is critical to our salvation. Only a perfect person could take our sins upon Himself. Jesus Christ had a human mother, and He was fully human. But only God—One without a sin nature—could die to pay the just penalty for our sins. Jesus was divinely conceived by the Holy Spirit. He was fully God with no sin nature. He was in a unique place to take the death we deserved and give us the new, forgiven life we desperately need.

I am eternally thankful for the virgin birth of Christ.