

## What Child Is This?

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"Who was this person Jesus of Nazareth?" has been the consuming question of this whole series of studies. The answer of the New Testament is clear and consistent; he was "one of us" and he was also "God with us." This answer is anything but simplistic, and this is a problem because we love simplicity. The visitation of God to the human race, by its very nature, is not a simplistic thing to consider. Such a concept is filled with wonder and mystery, and the wonder and mystery gives it fascination, and the quest for insight and understanding concerning such themes as these cannot help but generate passion in our beliefs.

In the lesson before us we are confronted with more wonder and mystery, and, hopefully, because of the wonder and mystery, more fascination and passion concerning our beliefs in this person Jesus of Nazareth. Some of the material developed here in this lesson has been discussed in earlier lessons (esp., the study of the incarnation). The material is presented here again because of its essential nature to any discussion of the virgin conception and birth of Jesus of Nazareth.

### The Wonder of the Miraculous Conception

It is in the miraculous conception that the mystery of the unity between deity and humanity is revealed. To what extent was Jesus deity? To what extent was he human? How did these two natures become one in the incarnation? Did Jesus have two personalities? Did he have both a human spirit and a divine spirit? The answers to these questions are found in the miraculous conception.

Jesus did possess a divine and a human spirit, but the divine and

human were not two separate entities (or personalities) within his being. The divine spirit of Jesus and his human spirit were one, and it took a miracle to bring about a total union of the two. Jesus is the only human who ever possessed a spirit that was both human and divine, and the two were made one by the miraculous conception.

### *The Power of the Most High Will Overshadow You*

In human conception it is a living human body that is brought into existence through the fertilization of the female ovum by the male sperm. This is what happened in the conception of Jesus of Nazareth, and the Biblical writer presents this very concept in this text. The "me" for whom the living human body was prepared, however, existed before this miraculous conception occurred. Luke 1:31-35 gives the details of how this conception was accomplished. The angel of God explains to Mary:

*And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called **the Son of the Most High**; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end." And Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" And the angel said to her, "**The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God,**" (Luke 1:31-35).*

The human female ovum was miraculously fertilized by "the power of the Most High." This act is referred to as "an overshadowing" (*episkiazo* - to cast a shadow over). One can only speculate as to how this metaphor is to be understood or comprehended. What we can know is that whatever happened, the result was the conception of the Son of God within the womb of the human female Jewess named Mary.

### *Divine Father and Human Mother*

The offspring of a conception receives the characteristics of both

the father and the mother producing that conception; so it was with Jesus. He received from his human mother his human characteristics, and from his divine Father his divine characteristics. His human body, soul, spirit, and all characteristics essential to full humanity, he received from his human mother; and from God came his eternal divine spirit with all the characteristics essential to deity. This is not to say, however, that Jesus possessed two separate spirits or personalities any more than anyone receives two separate sets of essential characteristics from a human father and mother. Rather, the characteristics of both progenitors became one in the offspring, as would be the case in any other conception.

In his conception and at his birth he possessed one spirit that was both human and divine; and at his death he gave up that same spirit, as is evidenced in the Gospel narratives (cf. Matt 27:50; Mark 15:37; Luke 23:46; John 19:30; cf. also James 2:26). His spirit was as much human as was the spirit of his Mother and his spirit was as much divine as was the Spirit of his Father. Jesus of Nazareth was as truly human as was Mary his mother from whom he received his human nature; and he was as truly divine as was God his Father from whom he eternally received his divine nature.

Here we are dealing with concepts so filled with wonder and intellectual challenge they shake us at the very foundation of our being. Such concepts as the incarnation of God, the miraculous conception of God, the coming of God into our world to share our existence by their very nature should be "soul shaking." What must be believed here is not only soul shaking but life transforming, and that belief centers in the fact that our God became "one of us" in order to become our savior.

### Behold a Virgin Shall Conceive

*Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the*

*Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means, God with us), (Matt 1:18-23).*

Of critical importance to the New Testament doctrine of the virgin birth (or more accurately, "the miraculous conception") of Jesus of Nazareth, is the statement of the angel to Joseph concerning the pregnancy of Mary, recorded in Matt 1:22-23, "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel." The Biblical text quoted by Matthew is Isa 7:14. Some Biblical scholars question whether the prophet here had actually prophesied a miraculous conception of the Son of God within a young Jewish virgin. A strong case, however, can be made for this interpretation of Isa 7:14.

In the Hebrew text the term for "virgin" is the word *Ha Almah*, which was used throughout the ancient Hebrew speaking for a young woman, female, or maiden; especially, a young virgin, but not necessarily so (see: Gen 24:43 and Exod 2:8). If *Ha Almah* in this text is to be understood as a virgin, other factors must make that clear rather than the exclusive lexical meaning of the word. There are such factors which lead to this conclusion concerning this term as used in this text.

The first is the immediate context of the term in Isa 7. Here in this text, Ahaz, the king of Judah, is told to ask God for a sign that his kingdom will not be destroyed. The king refuses to ask for a sign, fearing God would interpret such a request as "putting God to a test." So the prophet Isaiah informs him that he will be given a sign. The prophet reveals a vision in which he sees a young maiden, a virgin, she is conceiving and bearing a son, she calls his name Immanuel, he is eating butter and honey until such a time as he is able to know the difference between good and evil (in Jewish tradition, the age of

twelve), at which time the nations threatening Judah will be no more. The meaning of the vision is that within twelve years God will have removed the threat to Judah. Now, what is significant to see here is that this vision serves two functions: (1) it reveals God's deliverance of Judah, and (2) it reveals the birth of a son, conceived by a young maiden, whose name was to be called *Immanuel*, which in Hebrew means "God with us." Of critical importance here is the term used to identify this vision. It is the Hebrew *owth*, which is an omen, miracle, or revelation of God. Within this revelation of God is a son whose name is "God with us."

When this text was translated from the Hebrew language into Greek, somewhere around 250 BC, the Hebrew scribes translated *Ha Almah* by the Greek *he parthenos*, which means "the virgin." These translators could have used the Greek *gune* or *gunaikos* if they wished to convey the idea of a woman or maiden. The term *parthenos*, however, is a very specific term in both Classical and Hellenistic Greek, with the exclusive meaning of a virgin, with the adjective form *parthenia* meaning "virginity." The meaning given to the Isa 7 text, by these Hebrew scribes, at least 250 years before the first century, was that here in this vision given the prophet Isaiah was the glimpse of a young virgin who conceives and gives birth to a son who is identified as *Immanuel* - God with us. It is of no little significance that this term, and this interpretation, is applied by Matthew and Luke to the miraculous conception of Jesus within the womb of the young virgin Mary, in the words of the angel, "to fulfil what the Lord had spoken to the prophet."

### *Son of the Living God*

In the final days of his ministry, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do men say the son of man is?" Their response: "a prophetic figure." Then he asked them, "Who do you say that I am?" Their answer, as voiced by Peter, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God" (Matt 16:16). Whereas some could (or would) only see him as a prophet, the twelve saw him as more. Jesus of Nazareth was clearly more to his disciples than a man with supernatural powers; their belief in him ran far deeper than this. It was their belief that he was the very "son

of the living God." But what is meant by this expression? Implied in this title are, at least, two things: the idea of sonship, and, in some special sense, a relationship to deity, or even divine identity itself.

God is called **the Father** in view of his relationship to us (and all of creation) as the creator, but in what sense may he be called **the Son**? The New Testament tells us that the sense in which he is to be understood as **the Son** has something to do with his experience of sonship in his incarnation. God became "the Father" at the time of his creative activity; he became "the Son" at the time of his created state - in the incarnation by means of miraculous conception. In what sense could he be called "the Son" prior to the incarnation unless he was a created being prior to the incarnation? If this is the case, how could he be called an eternal being who was one and the same with God? (Cf. John 1:1ff; Phil 2:6ff.)

Concerning the sonship of Jesus, some scholars argue that this term could mean that he was a son of God in the sense that we are all sons and daughters of God (2 Cor 6:17-18; Hos 1:10) or in the sense that the kings of Israel were God's sons by divine adoption on the day of their coronation (cf. Psalms 2:6-7). But the fact is that Jesus is not simply call "a" son of God; rather, he is called "the Son" and "the only begotten Son," expressions which clearly imply more than adoptive sonship.

*All things have been delivered to me by **my Father**; and no one knows **the Son** except **the Father**, and no one knows **the Father** except **the Son** and any one to whom **the Son** chooses to reveal him (cf., Matt 11:27; Luke 10:21-22; cf. John 5:17-20; 10:33-36; 11:4; 17:1).*

### *Implications of "Only Begotten Son"*

Of critical importance to this whole discussion is the expression found throughout the writings of John, "the only begotten Son," a Greek expression that is translated "only son" in most modern English versions. The Greek phrase is *monogenes huios*. *Monogenes* is a word made up of two words: *monos* (only) and *genes* (when used of persons it is a noun meaning to be conceived or begotten, taken from

the verb *gennaō* - to beget or impregnate; when used of things it is often translated as "one of a kind, unique"). The translators of the more modern English version have chosen to translate *monogenes* as "one of a kind" as a description of Jesus; but this is not the primary meaning of the term when used with reference to persons. It would appear to the concept of Jesus as having been "begotten of God" is problematic for some scholars. The Greek term *huios* is the word for "son". To translate *monogenes* as "only" is to translate the adjective prefix *monos* and ignore the noun *genes* (to be begotten or conceived) to which it is attached. The reason given by the scholars standing behind this translation as to why they rendered *monogenes huios* as "only son" is that "only begotten" is awkward and archaic. But the result of this reasoning and translation is that a tremendous theological truth has been compromised in the name of "good English."

It is not the case that Jesus is an "only son," which in Greek would be *monos huios*, or, as is found in the writings of Paul, *idios huios* (God's "own son" - Rom 8:32). The point the apostle John makes here in the expression he has chosen has been eliminated, and that point is that Jesus is a son by means of a begetting, this is the significance of the Greek *monogenes huios* - only begotten Son.

*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of **the only begotten Son** (*monogenes huios*) from the Father (John 1:14).*

*No one has ever seen God; **the only begotten Son** (*monogenes huios*) [some older manuscripts read "only begotten God"], who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known (John 1:18).*

*For God so loved the world that he gave **his only begotten Son** (*monogenes huios*), that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent **the Son** (*ho huios*) +into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of **the only begotten Son of God** (*monogenes huios*) (John 3:16-18).*

*In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only begotten Son (monogenes huios) into the world, so that we might live through him (1 John 4:9).*

Also of significance here is the language the angel uses in Luke 1:35 to describe the miraculous conception. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you," the angel states, "and that which is begotten (*gennomenon*) shall be called holy, the Son of God." The Greek word *gennomenon* is a participle taken from the verb *gennaō* meaning "to beget or conceive," and is the verb from which the noun *genes* in the word *mono[genes]* (i.e., begotten). There can be no question but that the New Testament teaches that Jesus was begotten of God by miraculous conception within the human female virgin, Mary of Nazareth.

## Conclusion

The language of the angel of God to Mary was that she would miraculously conceive and give birth to a son. This son would be begotten by means of the Spirit of God coming upon her and the power of the Most High overshadowing her. The Greek term for overshadow, here in Luke's text, is of great significance. It is the word *episkiazo*, meaning, "to cast a shadow upon or over." We obviously have a piece of figurative language here, but to the reader of the Greek Old Testament, it was not a new word or figure. It is the term given to the miraculous phenomenon by which God manifested his presence within the midst of Israel during the period of the Exodus wanderings. The last verses of the book of Exodus read:

Then the cloud of the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud **abode upon it** (*episkiazo* - overshadowed it), and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. (Exodus 40:35)

The significance of this figure given to Mary by the angel is that what was to happen to Mary was what had happened to the tabernacle in ancient Israel when the overshadowing phenomenon occurred in the Exodus 40 event and the glory of the Lord (the

presence of God) entered into the tent. As in that ancient event, when the overshadowing occurred with reference to Mary, the presence of God would enter into her and nine months later she would give birth to a son - and they called his name "Jesus." The conception or impregnation of the virgin Mary was miraculous in that she was a virgin at the time of the conception and the birth of her son. Although the birth in the stable in Bethlehem appeared to be ordinary, the one born was extraordinary. This extraordinary child was Jesus of Nazareth, and he was "one of us" because his mother was one of us. But he was also *Immanuel*, i.e, "God with us" because his father was none other than God himself, *Elohim* (God) or *HaRuach Elohim* (the Spirit of God), the Holy One of Israel.

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### Questions for Discussion

1. Should the intellectually and spiritually challenging nature of such a topic as the virgin birth or miraculous conception of Jesus discourage us from discussing such matters as how such a thing could have happened?
2. How should we handle the element of mystery and wonder associated with our beliefs?
3. In what way is there mystery and wonder associated with belief in the virgin birth of Christ?
4. How does the miraculous conception enhance our understanding of how Jesus could have been both "one of us" and "God with us"?
5. Do you think Isaiah 7:14 is a prophecy of the virgin birth of Christ? If so, is there a twofold fulfillment of this prophecy; i.e., one for Isaiah's day and one for the time for the birth of Christ? Does believing this compromise our belief in inspiration of the Bible?
6. What significance do you give to the expression "only begotten Son" given to Jesus in the writings of John?

7. What contribution does this title make to our understanding of the nature of Jesus' sonship with reference to God?

8. What meaning do you see in the expression "the Most High will overshadow you" found in Luke 1:35?

9. What insights does the Exodus 40:35 text give to your understanding of what happened to Mary in the miraculous conception?

10. Do you think the virgin birth is an essential belief of the Christian religion? If so, why?