

Was Jesus Really Born of a Virgin? (Christian Answers to Hard Questions)

Brandon D. Crowe

P&R, 2013

30 pages

A Brief Book Summary from TGC

By Jordan Atkinson

About the Author

Brandon D. Crowe (PhD, University of Edinburgh) is Assistant Professor of New Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

Overview

This booklet is a short defense for the reasonableness of the traditional doctrine of Jesus' virgin birth. Crowe answers seven objections against the virgin birth of Jesus before briefly describing the significance of the virgin birth for upholding other biblical doctrines. This booklet is a brief but substantive defense of the actuality of Jesus' virgin birth.

Summary

Before he lists and answers objections to Jesus' virgin birth, Crowe briefly articulates the question and defines key terms. The virgin birth actually refers to the virgin conception of Jesus. The virgin birth is distinct from the supposed perpetual virginity of Mary.

The scientific objection to the virgin birth of Jesus disbelieves this doctrine because a virgin birth is scientifically unverifiable. Based on scientific observation, no human has ever been conceived apart from the natural process of conception between a biological man and biological woman. However, this objection overlooks a primary limitation of science, which is that science only describes observable phenomena. A virgin birth, as a supernatural event, by definition is beyond the bounds of science. The scientific objection to the virgin birth fails because it assumes that natural science can determine the reality of a supernatural event.

The philosophical objection to Jesus' virgin birth is that one should disbelieve that doctrine because the virgin birth much more likely did not happen than did happen. This objection, however, is impractical, because if one followed this principle consistently, then would doubt all kinds of unique events. Especially for Christians, who believe in God's supernatural work in the world and believe that God is all-powerful, Jesus' virgin birth stands up to this objection.

The mythological objection to Jesus' virgin birth claims that the Bible's accounts of Jesus' virgin birth are borrowing from virgin births in Greek mythology. These objections often reference Justin Martyr's second-century comparison of Jesus' birth to that of Perseus. However, differences between Jesus and Greek mythological figures outweigh the supposed similarities. A sexual union between a god and a virgin are often in Greek mythologies about a hero's virgin birth. Even Justin Martyr's example qualifies his comparison of Jesus to Perseus with differences

between the accounts. Martyr even says that Jesus' virgin birth is true, whereas Perseus' birth is a fantasy. Finally, this objection fails to appreciate that the worldview of the Gospel authors is much more akin to the monotheistic Old Testament than to polytheistic Greek mythologies.

Another objection to Jesus' virgin birth is that it derives from Jewish tradition. Ancient Near Eastern cultures believed that nations and kings were the physical offspring of gods, but God's fatherhood of Israel in the Old Testament is covenantal rather than physical. Philo of Alexandria's discussion of virgin births are allegories, not literal. Even Isaiah 7:14, which Matthew cites in support of Jesus' virgin birth, was not understood to require the Messiah to be virgin-conceived prior to Matthew.

Others object that the New Testament authors write of Jesus' virgin birth as an embellishment. However, the author of Matthew was most likely an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry, and the author of Luke's Gospel explicitly claims to base his narrative on eyewitness reports (Luke 1:1–4). Since both Matthew and Luke were written by the end of the first century, even by late estimates, eyewitnesses were probably still alive while the books were being written. Second-century Christian writers similarly assume, rather than argue for, Jesus' virgin birth. The virgin birth as recorded in Matthew and Luke is not an embellishment but rather a genuine part of earliest testimonies about Jesus.

Another objection to Jesus' virgin birth is theological. Some object that Jesus could not have been virgin born since the evidence comes from Gospel authors, who had a theological agenda in writing their books. However, every writer has a perspective on his or her subject matter, and a writer's perspective does not change the truthfulness of the facts he or she relates to the reader.

A final objection to Jesus' virgin birth is that the New Testament texts contradict one another. However, far from contradicting each other, Matthew and Luke are consistent accounts of Jesus' birth, even though they are clearly not identical birth narratives. Supposed contradictions between them are actually examples of different selections each author made about what to include in his account of Jesus' nativity. Other New Testament texts do not narrate Jesus' birth, but John emphasizes the pre-existence of Jesus (John 1:1–18), and Paul's comparison of Adam and Jesus presupposes the virgin birth of the latter (Rom 5:12–21). The New Testament texts portray different aspects of Jesus' incarnation, but none of them contradict the doctrine of his virgin birth.

Jesus' virgin birth is an important doctrine to defend because of its relationship to other doctrines. The virgin birth supports the truth of God's initiative in salvation. It also undergirds Jesus' divine sonship. The virgin birth also helps explain Jesus' sinless humanity. Finally, the virgin birth underlies the mystery of Jesus' dual nature as both fully God and fully man.