

Was Mary Really A Virgin When Christ Was Born?

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All evangelical, Bible believing Christians believe in the virgin birth of Jesus. I mean, that's what the Bible teaches, right? Or does it? Was Mary really a virgin when Christ was born or is this just a mistranslation that the church has misinterpreted for centuries? If so, does that affect his ability to be a perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world? The answer can be found when we look at the original languages of the Bible and determine what the writers really meant when they used the term translated, "virgin."

The meaning of "virgin" in Isaiah 7:14

To begin we must first consider what the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah meant when we prophesied that a "VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL" (Isaiah 7:14). Many prophecies made regarding the coming Messiah had two components. To give the prophet credibility, there was a local and immediate fulfillment of the prophecy that the original hearers could verify. A second component of the prophecy was a future, distant fulfillment. If the first came true, then it was concluded that the prophet was from God and the future, distant component of the prophecy (being fulfilled long after the prophet's death) would also come true. This is the case with Isaiah 7:14.

In the context of Isaiah 7, Judah is being threatened by two invading nations. Ahaz, the king of Judah, reveals his unbelief when he rejects the Lord's offer of a sign to ensure that God will protect Judah. Isaiah, speaking on behalf of the Lord, gives Ahaz a sign anyway:

"Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel. ¹⁵ "He will eat curds and honey at the time He knows *enough* to refuse evil and choose good. ¹⁶ "For before the boy will know *enough* to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken." (Is. 7:14-16).

This sign, in its Biblical context, was to be fulfilled locally in a short period of time. So, does that mean that there was a young woman in Isaiah's day that had never been with a man who would miraculously give birth to a son? Not necessarily. To understand the meaning of the word, "virgin" in Isaiah 7:14 we must look at this word's use in OT scripture.

The word translated "virgin" in Isaiah 7:14 is the Hebrew word, *almah* (עַלְמָה). What does this word really mean? Does it refer to a woman who is sexually chaste (what we consider a virgin) or does it simply refer to a "young woman who is of the age to bear children". Can it include a young woman who is "newly married" as BDB (Brown Driver Briggs Hebrew Lexicon) implies and not a virgin at all? A careful analysis of texts using this term will enable a better understanding.

The word *almah* appears seven times in OT scripture. It varies in translation from virgin (4 occurrences), to maiden (2 occurrences) to even a damsel (1 occurrence). In Genesis 24:43, *almah* is used to describe a prospective wife for Isaac which would point to the definition of "a

unmarried virgin.”¹ In Song of Solomon (6:8) *almah* (translated “maidens”) appears in contrast to Solomon’s wives (*malkah*) and to his concubines (*pilegesh*) which also contributes to the idea that *almah* applies to a young woman who is a virgin.²

In contrast, however, the contexts of Exodus 2:8, Psalm 68:25, and Proverbs 30:19 present the use of *almah* in such an ambiguous way that it is impossible to conclude that it exclusively refers to a virgin and may simply mean “a young woman” and may even include one who is newly married (as BDB implies). The latter, however, is impossible to prove from these limited occurrences.³

What about the immediate context of Isaiah 7:14? Is the sign of the virgin fulfilled? If so, was that woman “sexually chaste” or was she simply a “young woman”? Many believe that the son who was born in fulfillment of this prophecy was “Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (Isaiah 8:3). This would mean that the mother is actually Isaiah’s wife.⁴ Therefore, the term “virgin” (*almah*) in Isaiah 7:14 (according to this interpretation) is referring to the broader use of the word which simply means, “a young woman of child bearing age.”

The meaning of “virgin” in Matthew 1:23

So how does this affect our understanding of the virginity of Mary, the mother of Jesus? Should we really believe that Mary was a virgin or should we allow for the broader use of this term? How does the gospel writer, Matthew, use the term “virgin”? I believe that these questions can easily be answered through a simple inductive approach to interpretation. What does this word mean in the original language? Does the immediate context contribute to the understanding of the term “virgin”?

¹ **Genesis 24:43**...Behold, I stand by the well of water; and it shall come to pass, that when the **virgin** cometh forth to draw water, and I ... (KJV);
Other translations: “maiden” (NASB); “maiden” (NIV);
Contextual analysis: Abraham has sent his chief servant to seek a wife for his son, Isaac. The servant prays to the Lord that he would find a woman suitable to marry Isaac. It would seem that **עַלְמָה** here designates a young woman of marriageable age and that she is a literal virgin is implied by the context.

² **Song of Solomon 6:8**...There are threescore queens, and fourscore concubines, **and virgins** without number. My dove, my undefiled ... (KJV)
Other translations: “virgins” (NASB); “virgins” (NIV)
Contextual analysis: The context seems to make a differentiation between queens (**מַלְכָּה**), concubines (**פִּלְגֶשֶׁת**), and virgins (**עַלְמָה**). This would likely define **עַלְמָה** as a young woman of marrying age who is also a virgin.

³ Theological Word Dictionary of the Old Testament (p.672)

⁴ In Isaiah 8:3, Isaiah has sexual relations with his wife and they will bear a son in the same timeframe as the prophecy of 7:14. Is Isaiah’s wife the “virgin” of 7:14? If so, the word **עַלְמָה** would include a young woman who is already married. There are difficulties, however, in this interpretation because the text does not explicitly state that the “virgin” of 7:14 and Isaiah’s wife are the same woman. Because all the other texts studied seem to indicate a young woman that is unmarried, there should be reluctance to assign any other definition in this context.

The term translated “virgin” in Matthew 1:23 is the Greek word *parthenos* (παρθένης) and is used 15 times in the New Testament.⁵ *Parthenos* is a technical term in the Greek language that always refers to a virgin in the sense that she is “sexually chaste.”⁶

What about the context? Is there any other information that would lead us to conclude that Mary was, indeed, a virgin? In fact, Matthew goes to great lengths to communicate that Mary had never been with a man until she gave birth to Jesus.

- Matthew 1:18 – Mary was found to be with child *before* she and Joseph came together.
- Matthew 1:18, 20 – The child in Mary’s womb was not conceived by a man but by the Holy Spirit.
- Matthew 1:25 – Joseph had no sexual union with Mary until she gave birth to Jesus

Furthermore, Matthew uses verb tense in his genealogy of Christ to preclude Joseph as the biological father of Jesus. Every verb translated “beget” in the genealogy of Matthew 1:2-15 (Abraham begat Isaac, Isaac begat Jacob, etc.) is in the active voice. However, there is a conscious change in wording in verse 16 when the genealogy comes to Joseph: “Joseph the husband of Mary, *by whom* Jesus was born” (italics added). By using the passive voice for the verb, Matthew is careful to state that Mary was the mother “by whom” Jesus was born but that Joseph is not the biological father. This evidence further supports Matthew’s statements (noted above) that Mary was indeed a virgin.

In conclusion, while it is difficult to accurately interpret the word “virgin” as it applies to the immediate context of Isaiah 7:14, it is abundantly clear that the word “virgin” in Matthew 1:23 refers to a woman who is sexually chaste as in the case of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

So what’s the big deal?

Why is it so important for us to believe that Mary was a virgin when she conceived and gave birth to Jesus? Simply because if Christ was born of a natural union between man and woman, he would have a sin nature and therefore could not offer himself as a sinless sacrifice on the cross for the world’s transgressions. If Jesus was not born of a virgin, then his death was impotent to pay the penalty of our sin. Paul writes, “He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). Praise God that Jesus was without sin, that we, having placed our faith in him might be forgiven and have eternal life!

⁵ Matt. 1:23; 25:1, 7, 11; Lk. 1:27; Acts 21:9; 1Cor. 7:25, 28, 34, 36-38; 2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 14:4

⁶ Arndt & Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, p. 627.