

Does Science offer any objection to belief in the Virgin Birth of Jesus?

“The important thing is not to stop questioning”— so said Albert Einstein. I consider it is relevant to ask: How much of what we have been told about Christmas is based on historic fact that is consistent with the present state of scientific knowledge? A major claim of Christian faith about Christmas is that it has to do with the Virgin Birth of Jesus and it is appropriate that this startling event should be examined in the light of what scientific knowledge we have.

The scientific term for virgin birth is *parthenogenesis*. The term was coined in 1849 by Richard Owen to signify procreation without the immediate influence of a male. The phenomenon is not uncommon in animal species and it should not be confused with asexual reproduction which is quite different and irrelevant to our enquiry. Mammalian eggs may begin by parthenogenetic processes to undergo cell division towards becoming ‘embryos’ but so far there is no experimental evidence of any going full term.

In the Bible, Matthew 1 v 18 reads: “Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.” And in Luke 1 we read how an angel appeared to Mary with the news that she would conceive and give birth to a son. Mary asked, v 34, “How can this be? I am a virgin.” The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.”

All this has been questioned because of the lack of evidence for virgin birth of human offspring in recent times and because there appears to be an additional difficulty in production of a male child, namely that such require the Y chromosome for which there is no evidence that it could come from a mother. So some have jumped to the conclusion that it must be scientifically impossible for a male child to be born without the union of male and female. R J Berry, who was until recently the professor of Genetics at University College London and is still active in genetic research, published a paper (*Science & Christian Belief*, Vol 8,

pp101-110, 1996.) in which he outlined no less than three possible parthenogenetic processes by which a virgin could possibly give birth to a male child, on the basis of known biological processes. Prof Berry certainly would not claim that God used any of the suggested mechanisms, but merely that there are ways in which a male child might be the result of a parthenogenetic birth.

Science is a developing understanding and does not allow us to claim finality of conclusions, so it is to be expected that there could be further findings in this area, but at present we can say that *we have no adequate scientific grounds for disbelieving that what the Bible records* in the above quotations is precisely what happened. Some Jews of Jesus’ day who were openly hostile to Jesus implied that Jesus was ‘born of fornication.’ Their attitude was certainly non-scientific, being unwilling to examine evidence they found inconvenient.

But we do not need to know a natural process for us to believe in the Virgin conception and Birth of Jesus. There is a great volume of evidence for believing the Scriptures to be reliable and surely the God who was able to create all that is, to part the waters of the Red Sea to save the Israelite nation and do many other unexpected acts was well able to cause a virgin to conceive as the Gospels tell it. If we reject the Virgin Birth of Jesus we should be clear that we are not doing so for reasons that science requires. As a Christian who has been active in science all his working life, I have no reservation about accepting the Biblical account of Jesus’ birth. Santa Claus, reindeer and all that may be fun* but they are not truths on which to live life and look way beyond. The baby Jesus was God-become-Human, Emmanuel. Look at the full story of Jesus’ life on Earth, ask questions of Him, believe and rejoice at Christmas in what God has done for us all.

David M HUM, Nov ‘07

* Roger Highfield’s “Can Reindeer Fly” (Metro Books, 1998) is a fun book on what he sees as “the Science of Christmas”.