

I've been devoting the blog to some autobiography recently, so in this Readers Mailbag I'll make a shift to a couple of academic questions, one about Mythicist claims on the virgin birth and the other about the usefulness of ancient translations of the New Testament for establishing the original text.

QUESTION:

I often read mythicists argue that Jesus was a mythological figure because he (allegedly) has many parallels in pagan gods. One of the parallels, of course, is him being born to a virgin. My question is: do mythicists realize that the concept of the virgin birth is a much later development?

RESPONSE:

I have spent time with Mythicist groups, and have always enjoyed myself, finding the people friendly, eager to talk, cordial, and interesting. But the general lack of basic knowledge about the Bible is shocking, even among the most outspoken among them. What is shocking is not that they don't know much about, say, the New Testament - that's true of most people on the planet - but that they have so many firmly held misconceptions that are just factually wrong. (I'm not talking about wrong interpretations that can pretty easily be shown to be wrong - I'm talking about simply wrong factual information).

Let me say two things about the question. The first is that there is not in fact a precise parallel anywhere in Greek and Roman religions to the idea of a "virgin birth." There are, of course, numerous instances in which a woman is made pregnant by a divine being. But never in those cases is the woman a virgin. Most of the time she is a sexually active woman, and even in the cases in which she is not, she has sex with the god who has come to her in bodily form and becomes pregnant that way. The point of these stories is precisely that the woman has had sex. In fact, I suppose you could say, she's had divine sex.

That's not what you get in the birth stories of Matthew and Luke (the only two books of the New Testament that mention a virgin birth). The whole point of those stories is that Mary never has had sex. And God does not assume human (or animal) form in order to have sex with her. He makes her conceive without having sex. I don't know of any parallel to that idea in any other ancient source.

The second point is the one made by the questioner. This view of a virgin birth is not an early....

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