

COMMENT:

When I bring up the possibility that the original Luke did not have the first two chapters which include the virgin birth narrative, Christians say to me: “How could such a new twist to the story of Jesus have developed so soon in the first century if some of Jesus’ family, disciples, and friends were still alive to verify its accuracy? If Jesus had truly been Joseph’s son, wouldn’t SOMEONE have said, “Hey. Wait a minute. Jesus nor his mother ever claimed that he was the virgin-born son of Yahweh. This virgin birth story is bogus nonsense.”

RESPONSE:

This is an interesting point and one that we should reflect on. As it turns out, it’s one I’ve reflected on it for some thirty years now! (And it is related to what I discuss in my next book on how memory affected the oral traditions circulating about Jesus before the Gospels were written.) It is one of those points that on the surface sounds really convincing: of *course* that’s the case! No one could make up stories about Jesus’ family if his family was there to correct them, right???

Well, I think the answer is actually just the opposite: wrong! Here let me make several points that I do not think are easily refuted.

First, how many people in the first century (since I date the Gospels to the first century) are telling ...

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First, how many people in the first century (since I date the Gospels to the first century) are telling stories about the virgin birth? We don’t actually know how many Christians there were in, say, the year 90. I wish we did, but we don’t. We do have some ballpark ideas. There are more than 10 and fewer than 10,000, almost certainly. So, let’s pick a number. My guess is that the answer is probably 3000 or 4000. Let’s just be conservative and say 3000.

OK, of those 3000, how many do we know for certain are telling a story about Jesus being born of a virgin. Here there is a clear and certain answer. We know of two. (And that’s assuming that Luke originally had chapters 1-2). What were the other 2998 people saying about Jesus’ birth? We have no way of knowing. I would *assume* that the readers of Matthew and Luke would have agreed with what they read: but when it comes to knowing who was actually telling the stories, we know of only two. How many were telling contrary stories? We have absolutely NO way of knowing.

We often forget how utterly limited our access to early Christians is, and how woefully ignorant we are about what they were saying to each other. All we have are the surviving documents. And the only first century documents we have are the 27 books of the New Testament and probably one book from outside of the NT (the book of 1 Clement). So, of those 28 books, how many are talking about Jesus’ family life? Again, two So that’s 2 out of 28 that we know of.

Why didn’t someone correct the authors of Matthew and Luke and say that it didn’t happen that way? Well, here’s a big question: How do we know that someone WASN’T correcting

them??? We simply have no evidence.

But let's assume, again just to be on the conservative side, that no one bothered to correct them. How could that be, if there were living members of Jesus' family who could do so? Well, let's think further. Was Jesus' mother alive still when Matthew and Luke were written? Almost certainly not - she would have had to have been a hundred years old. She had almost certainly been dead for decades at the time of their writing. Who besides his mother could have confidently corrected the story? Well, presumably his father, but he wasn't living then either. And his brothers would not have known anything about their parents' sex lives. But even so, they probably weren't still alive either.

But suppose somehow they *were* very (very!) old men and they *did* know about how Jesus was conceived? Would they have corrected Matthew and Luke? Remember: Jesus and his family came from a remote rural area of Aramaic speaking Palestine. We have no record of them traveling outside their homeland. And they did not speak Greek. What about Matthew and Luke? There is no evidence that they had ever been to Palestine and they did not speak Aramaic. They were highly educated Greek-speaking Christians living 80-90 years after the event (Jesus' birth) that they are narrating. Jesus' immediate family was almost certainly dead by this time, and there was no one from that family going around Greek-speaking circles of the Roman empire correcting what others were saying about their grandmother's sex life.

And even if they were (see how implausible this whole thing is starting to be?), how could they correct what everyone said about their grandmother? I deal with a related issue in my forthcoming book Jesus Before the Gospels. The question is: can eyewitnesses correct what others want to say about someone? Or maybe I should say: is there any way that eyewitnesses can make sure that others tell their stories correctly? (Remember: none of these grandchildren of Joseph and Mary would even be eyewitnesses to how they conceived Jesus.) Here's how I put it in the book:

One obvious point to stress, which has not occurred to everybody, is this: stories about Jesus were circulating even during his lifetime [*NOTE: That's not the case for the stories of Jesus' virgin birth*]. Moreover, even then they were not being told only by eyewitnesses. When someone who saw Jesus do or say something then and told someone else who wasn't there, it is impossible to believe that this other person was forbidden from sharing the news with someone else. Life just doesn't work that way. Think about any public person you know: the President of the United States, a movie star, a famous author, or even just a popular university professor. People tell stories about them. And other people repeat the stories. Then other people repeat the stories. And the stories obviously are told in different words, every time. Thus, the stories change. Moreover, stories get made up. You don't have to take my word for it. Ask any public figure. It is true that the people about whom the stories are told might hear a wild version and correct it. But there is no guarantee that everyone will hear the correction so that from then on they tell the story correctly. On the contrary, non-eyewitnesses continue to tell the story. And yet other stories.

This happens even when people are alive and there are plenty of eyewitnesses who can correct things. If the President has a meeting with his cabinet and word leaks out about what was said there, and it gets reported in the news, and someone in Kansas tells his next

door neighbor about it, then that person tells her husband - is there an eyewitness in her living room (someone from the President's cabinet) to make sure that she tells the story correctly?

Let's say someone in the year 75 (after Mark's Gospel was written) told someone else that he heard that Jesus' mother was a virgin. The person he told tells his wife, who tells her neighbor, who tells her husband, who tells his business associate who tells his cousin who tells his wife, who tells their children. Now, in the year 76, when all this telling and re-telling is finished, are we supposed to believe that the descendants of Joseph and Mary are going around and checking with everyone who tells the stories in order to make sure they get it right? It seems unlikely.

So again, as attractive (and common!) as this view is, I think it is completely implausible and is not an argument against the standard critical view, that the stories of Jesus' virgin birth appeared relatively late in the oral traditions (sometime after both Paul and Mark were writing).



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