

A Comparison of the Gospels The Virgin Birth

[The New King James Version of the Scriptures is used unless otherwise stated.]

Four different Gospels

Today we start a new series which is a comparison of the Gospels. For this first talk we'll be looking specifically at the virgin birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our New Testament in the Bible starts with four accounts of the life of the Lord Jesus, which are the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Some questions we might ask are, Why do we have four different accounts? How do they resemble each other, and how do they differ? We'll be thinking about these questions in this series, as we compare how the different Gospels describe some of the key moments in the life of the Lord Jesus on earth – His virgin birth, His baptism, temptation, transfiguration, His death, resurrection, and ascension. Like I said, today we'll be considering His virgin birth.

But first, why do we have four Gospels? Back in the Old Testament, in the book of the prophet Ezekiel, Ezekiel tells us about an amazing vision that he had of the God of Israel. Below God's throne he saw some living creatures, which Ezekiel describes in the first chapter of his book, that is, chapter 1 and verse 10:

“As for the likeness of their faces, each had the face of a man; each of the four had the face of a lion on the right side, each of the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and each of the four had the face of an eagle.”

I was reading from the New King James version, which is the version that I will be quoting from for this talk.

Interestingly, if you look up 'traditional symbols of the Gospels' on the internet, you will see that historically the man, the lion, the ox, and the eagle became symbols of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John respectively. You will find various reasons given for these symbols, but the point I am making is this: just as the living creatures that Ezekiel saw were characterised by not one, but four creatures, suggesting that they possessed the attributes of all four, so the four gospels each give us a different focus on the Lord Jesus, so that we can get a better understanding of Him.

This makes sense. If we wanted to study a famous historical person, say for example Queen Elizabeth the First, or Napoleon, we probably wouldn't just read one biography, or just one person's take on their lives. We would want to consider different angles and different people's viewpoints to get a full and well-rounded picture of our subject. Or you could think about yourself – if someone wanted to write your biography, whom would they need to talk to? There would be many aspects of your life that they would need know about if they were to write something true to life, so they would need to find out different perspectives from a whole range of people: your parents, your siblings, your school, your work, your spouse, your children, your friends, and so on.

And so, in the Bible, God has provided us with four accounts of the Lord Jesus's life on earth. They each have a different emphasis. Matthew's Gospel emphasises the position of the Lord Jesus as the King, and specifically, the King of the Jews. Mark, on the other hand, considers the Lord Jesus as the perfect Servant of God. Luke's Gospel presents the humanity of the Lord Jesus – the Man Christ Jesus – whereas John's Gospel emphasises His deity as the Son of God. And so, where the Gospels relate the same incident, we can expect to find differences in emphasis and in detail between them. Today we will compare how the virgin birth is explained in the Gospels. After that, we will also think about why the virgin birth matters, and what it means for us.

Matthew's and Luke's accounts

The virgin birth is in fact only recorded in two of the four Gospels, that is, in Matthew and in Luke. You can read about it in Matthew chapters 1 and 2, and in Luke chapters 1 and 2, with a genealogy at the end of Luke chapter 3.

Let's start by outlining the key parts of Matthew's and of Luke's accounts. Matthew begins, in chapter 1 verses 1 – 17, with an ancestral lineage starting from Abraham and going down to Joseph. Then we hear about Joseph, and how he was perplexed. Matthew chapter 1 verses 18 – 19 read,

“Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.”

But Joseph was not left in a quandary. Matthew records how an angel appeared to him in a dream, explaining what was happening. In Matthew chapter 2, we read about the wise men who came to worship the Baby Jesus, bringing their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We also read about the murderous rage of King Herod, and how Joseph took his family to Egypt for refuge and safety.

In Luke's account, we start in chapter 1 with the angel Gabriel announcing to Elizabeth and Zacharias that, despite their old age, they would have a son, who was John the Baptist. Then the angel Gabriel comes again, this time to Mary, to tell her about the wonderful Son that she would bear, Jesus, the Son of the Highest. We read about Mary's visit to Elizabeth, and Mary's wonderful song of praise, often referred to as the Magnificat. Luke chapter 2 tells us about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, the appearance of the angels to the shepherds, and then, when the Baby Jesus was eight days old, His presentation in the Temple, and His blessing by Simeon and Anna.

The differences between Matthew's and Luke's accounts

So, we see that we have two different, but complementary accounts of the virgin birth of the Lord Jesus, which give us a full picture of what we need to know. What can we understand about the differences between the two accounts?

Matthew, with his emphasis on Jesus being the King of the Jews, the promised Messiah, highlights certain aspects of the story that fit in with his theme. As I said, Matthew begins with an ancestral lineage starting from Abraham and going down to Joseph. His opening words in chapter 1 and verse 1 are,

“The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham.”

Thus, Matthew emphasises both Jesus's Jewish pedigree, as a Son of Abraham, and His royal pedigree, as a Son of David.

We can see that Joseph, who was a descendant of King David and of King Solomon, is prominent in Matthew's account, whereas Mary is more prominent in Luke's account. Thus, Matthew records that it was to Joseph that an angel appeared, when Joseph was puzzling about what he should do regarding his fiancée Mary, who was expecting a Child that was not his. Matthew chapter 1 verses 20 – 21 tell us,

“But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.””

Then in Matthew chapter 2, an angel appears twice more to Joseph, once to tell him to go down to Egypt with Mary and Jesus to escape from the murderous King Herod, and once again, when Herod was dead, to bring them back to Israel. Notice how Joseph was called ‘son of David’ by the angel in the verse from Matthew chapter 1 that I quoted just earlier. Matthew's account is very much emphasising the Royal claims of the Lord Jesus, the Son of David through Joseph – “great David's greater Son”, as James Montgomery writes in his hymn, Hail to the Lord's Anointed.

The royal theme is also seen in Matthew chapter 2 verse 2 where we read about the wise men, who asked,

“Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.”

The usurping King Herod and his wicked actions are also described by Matthew.

Luke's account offers several contrasts. Mary, rather than Joseph, is prominent in Luke's account. Here we find out that the angel Gabriel came to Mary to announce to her that she would be the mother of Jesus. As I said earlier, Mary praises God in Luke chapter 1 verses 46 – 56 in the section that has become known as the Magnificat, because it starts in verses 46 – 47 with

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour.”

Mary continues to feature in chapter 2, which is a chapter that contains many of the passages that we love to hear about in the Christmas story. Interestingly, if you compare the genealogy of the Lord Jesus at the end of Luke chapter 3 to the one in Matthew chapter 1, you will see that they are different. It is generally assumed that the genealogy in Luke 3 is Mary's genealogy, rather than Joseph's as in Matthew. Whereas the genealogy in Matthew went back to Abraham, the genealogy in Luke goes right back to Adam, and to God.

Luke is emphasising the humanity of the Man Christ Jesus. Thus, Luke records the wonderful words of the angels to the shepherds,

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”
(Luke chapter 2 verse 14).

When the Baby Jesus was taken to the Temple in Jerusalem, Simeon took up the Child in his arms and blessed Him. Luke chapter 2 verses 29 – 32 read as follows:

“Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.”

Here we have the blessing extended to all men – God’s salvation prepared before the face of all peoples, and a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles.

By putting Matthew’s and Luke’s versions together, we get the full story. Both accounts complement each other to give us a better understanding of Who Jesus is.

The virgin birth itself

We’ve looked at some of the differences between Matthew’s and Luke’s accounts, but an important point to note is that both Matthew and Luke make it very clear that the birth of the Lord Jesus was no ordinary birth. It was a miraculous conception. Matthew’s introductory genealogy is all about fathers begetting sons, for example chapter 1 verse 2,

“Abraham begot Isaac, Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot Judah and his brothers.”

But the genealogy ends in verse 16 with,

“And Jacob begot Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus who is called Christ.”

The “of whom” in that verse is a feminine word in the original Greek text of the New Testament, making it clear that Jesus was Mary’s Son, rather than Joseph’s.

A little bit further down, verses 18 – 19 explain the virgin birth very plainly:

“Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.”

We have here both the fact that Mary “was found with child of the Holy Spirit” before Joseph and Mary came together, and that Joseph pondered what he should do about it, before the angel explained matters to him, as we read earlier. The angel explained it him as follows: “that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.” Then, we are told in verses 22 – 23,

“So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which is translated, ‘God with us.’”

Now Joseph was not the only one who was perplexed and wondered what to do! When the angel Gabriel gave his announcement to Mary, we read in Luke chapter 1 verse 34,

“Then Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?””

Once again, an angelic explanation was needed:

“And the angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God”” (Luke chapter 1 verse 35).

In the next chapter, Luke chapter 2, we read about how the old man Simeon blessed the Baby Jesus in the Temple at Jerusalem. Verse 33 tells us,

“And Joseph and His mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of Him.”

Notice how the Bible distinguishes between Joseph and His mother. It does not say, ‘His father and His mother.’ And again, in the genealogy recorded in Luke chapter 3, we read at the beginning, in verse 23,

“Now Jesus Himself began His ministry at about thirty years of age, being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph, the son of Heli.”

People assumed that Jesus was the biological son of Joseph, but the Bible shows us that this was not the case.

Why is the virgin birth important?

We have seen how Matthew and Luke affirm the virgin birth of the Lord Jesus, but it is something that has frequently been denied. Yet the Bible clearly teaches it. Why is it important?

It is an important matter for many reasons. J. Oswald Sanders, in his excellent book *The Incomparable Christ*¹, makes several very helpful points about this. One of his points is that, although the Lord Jesus had a beginning as a Man, as the Son of God He is eternal. He existed before His birth as a Baby in Bethlehem. He spoke Himself of His pre-existence – for example in John chapter 8 verse 58, we read,

“Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.””

In John chapter 17 verse 5, we read about His prayer to His Father, where He said,

“And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.”

As Oswald Sanders points out, these and several other Scriptures would be meaningless if Jesus Christ were in fact the biological child of two human parents, like every other human being (except Adam and Eve, of course!). How could He have had a pre-existence, and be conscious of the glory that He had with the Father before the world was, if that were the case?

Oswald Sanders makes another very powerful point: how are we to account for the presence of a sinless Man, he asks, if Jesus were born like everyone else? As the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Romans, chapter 3 verses 10 – 12,

“There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one.”

Based on that, we would not expect to find a sinless person born into this world. Jesus, however, was and is completely sinless. That would be the subject for another talk, but the point for us today is, how can we explain one completely righteous Person having come from a completely sinful

¹ J. Oswald Sanders, *The Incomparable Christ*. Revised and enlarged edition, 1971. Moody Press, Chicago. ISBN 0-8024-4081-9.

race? Matthew's Gospel started Christ's genealogy with "Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham", but David himself confessed in Psalm 51 verse 5,

"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me."

It's clear that the Lord Jesus could not have been born as a normal, sinful human being like any other.

All this comes to the fore when we think about why Jesus was born. Matthew tells us that it was so that we could be saved from our sins. In Matthew chapter 1 verse 21, the angel told Joseph,

"And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins."

We could not have had our sins forgiven by a sinner like us. The Lord Jesus was born as a Man via a normal birth so that He could share our humanity, but it was a virgin birth because He did not share in our sins – as Gabriel said to Mary,

"That Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke chapter 1 verse 35).

The best commentary on the matter is the Bible itself, in Matthew chapter 1 verses 22 – 23 which I quoted earlier:

"So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us.""

God with us. It is an astounding thought. If it is true – and it is – then the concept of the virgin birth is not difficult to understand.

What does it mean for us?

We've thought about how the virgin birth of the Lord Jesus is presented in the Bible, and why there are the differences between Matthew's and Luke's accounts. We've also thought about the fact that the Bible clearly asserts the fact of the virgin birth, and why it is important. So now we can turn our minds to practical matters and ask, "What does it mean for us? How does it affect my day-to-day life?"

Let's think about energy sources as an illustration. Where we get our energy from, and how we can generate enough energy to meet our demands in a sustainable way, are topical questions. If you do an internet search on the question, Where does all our energy ultimately come from?, you will see that the basic answer is, the sun. Now that is quite interesting from an illustrative point of view. It means that, ultimately, we depend for our energy on something that is totally outside of our control, 93 million miles away from us.

A key point of Christianity is that our salvation depends on Something outside of ourselves. Just as we depend on the sun for our energy, and we cannot make energy out of nothing, so we depend on God for our salvation – we cannot save ourselves. We need a Saviour. Praise God, He has provided One for us, our Lord Jesus Christ!

In that sense, then, the Lord Jesus is not so much our example as our Saviour. That is not to say that we should not follow His example, but it is not by following His example that we will be saved from our sins. We only can be saved from our sins because the sinless Lord Jesus entered this

world by the virgin birth, lived a perfect life that was pleasing to God the Father, died on the cross where He suffered for our sins, and rose again from the dead and ascended back to God the Father. All these things are quite outside of us and of our control. Our duty is to believe what God says about them and to put our faith and trust in the Lord Jesus and in what He has done for us.

If the Lord Jesus had been born just like you and me, but had been a particularly good person, though not sinless, having been born a normal member of the sinful human race, then perhaps such a person would have been a good example to follow, to a certain extent. There are plenty of people who have left us with good examples in one area or another. But it would not have been sufficient to save us from our sins. We would not have been able to elevate ourselves into a state of sinless perfection to make ourselves suitable for God's presence. However good an example we try to follow, we cannot save ourselves.

But the Lord Jesus was not born like you and me. He came into this world to be our Saviour. John's Gospel does not give us an account of the virgin birth, but it assumes it. Right at the start, in John chapter 1 verse 1, we read,

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” A bit further down that chapter, in verse 14, we read, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

The Word became flesh by means of the virgin birth. The Lord Jesus had always existed as the Word, the Son of God. By means of the virgin birth He took our humanity upon Himself and came as Jesus, the Saviour. Notice how carefully Paul explains things in Romans chapter 8 verse 3:

“For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh.”

Jesus came in the likeness of sinful flesh. He did not come in the actuality of sinful flesh. He was and is a real Man, and He looked like us when He was here on earth. But there was a difference – there was no sin in Him.

This will make a difference to our lives down here in this world. If I think of Jesus as the Great Example, whom I must follow if I am to be saved, it will be hard going, and I will simply discourage myself by my constant failures (or I will need to considerably lower my standards). But if I recognise Him as my Saviour, the One who entered this world by means of the virgin birth as a sinless Man, and who took upon Himself all my wrongdoing and shame when He died on the cross, I will gladly put my faith and trust in Him. Then I can seek to follow His example, not so that I can be saved, but because I am already saved thanks only to Him.

What a blessing that He came into this world for you and for me! Have you trusted in Him? You will not regret it.

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on the virgin birth, the first talk in the series on 'A comparison of the Gospels', talk number T1371. I hope it has helped and encouraged you!

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