

# Is the Virgin Birth Essential?

DECEMBER 8, 2016 | [Kevin DeYoung](#)

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The accounts of Jesus's birth in Matthew (chapter 1) and Luke (chapters 1-2) are clear and unequivocal: Jesus's birth was not ordinary. He was not an ordinary child, and his conception did not come about in the ordinary way. His mother Mary was a virgin, having had no intercourse prior to conception and birth. By the Holy Spirit, Mary's womb became the cradle of the Son's incarnation ([Matt. 1:20](#); [Luke 1:35](#)).

## With God, All Things Are Possible, or Not?

It's no secret that in recent history, the doctrine of the virgin birth (or more precisely, the virginal conception) has been ridiculed as fairy-tale make-believe by many outside the church, and by not a few voices inside the church. Two arguments are usually mentioned.

First, the prophecy about a virgin birth in [Isaiah 7:14](#), it is argued, actually speaks of a young woman and not a virgin.

Many have pointed out that the Hebrew word in Isaiah is *almah* and not the technical term for virgin, *bethula*. It is true that *almah* has a wider semantic range than *bethula*, but there are no clear references in the Old Testament where *almah* does not mean virgin. The word *almah* occurs nine times in the Old Testament, and wherever the context makes its meaning clear, the word refers to a virgin. More importantly, the Septuagint translates *almah* with the Greek word *parthenos* (the same word used in [Matthew 1:23](#) where [Isaiah 7:14](#) is

quoted), and everyone agrees that *parthenos* means “virgin.” The Jewish translators of the Septuagint would not have used a clear Greek word for virgin if they understood [Isaiah 7:14](#) to refer to nothing more than a young woman.

Second, many have objected to the virgin birth because they see it as a fairly typical bit of pagan mythologizing. “*Star Wars* has a virgin birth. Mithraism had a virgin birth. Christianity has a virgin birth. Big deal. They are all just fables.” This is a popular argument, and it sounds quite plausible as first glance, but there are a number of problems with it.

1. The assumption that there was a prototypical God-Man who had certain titles, did certain miracles, was born of a virgin, saved his people, and then got resurrected is not well-founded. In fact, no such prototypical “hero” existed before the rise of Christianity.
2. It would have been unthinkable for a Jewish sect (which is what Christianity was initially) to try to win new converts by adding pagan elements to their gospel story. I suppose a good Jew might make up a story to fit the Old Testament, but to mix in bits of paganism would have been anathema to most Jews.
3. The virgin birth parallels are not as strong as we might think. Consider some of the usual suspects.

Alexander the Great: his most reliable ancient biographer (several centuries after his death) makes no mention of a virgin birth. Besides, the story that began to circulate (after the rise of Christianity it’s worth mentioning) is about an unusual conception, but not a virgin birth (Alexander’s parents were already married).

Dionysus: like so many of the pagan “parallels,” he was born when a god (in this case Zeus) disguised himself as a human and impregnated a human princess. This is not a virgin birth and not like the Holy Spirit’s role we read about in the Gospels.

Mithra: he’s a popular parallel. But he was born of a rock, not a virgin. Moreover, the cult of Mithra in the Roman Empire dates to after the time of Christ so any dependence is Mithraism on Christianity and not the other way around.

Buddha: his mother dreamed that Buddha entered her in the form of a white elephant. But this story doesn’t appear until five centuries after his death and she was already married.

You get the drift. The so-called parallels always occur well after the life in question, well into the Christian era, and are not really stories of virginal conceptions anyway.

### **Does It Really Matter?**

But even for those who believe in the virgin birth, some question whether the doctrine is really that important. For example, Rob Bell famously argued more than a decade ago that it wouldn’t be such a big deal if we found out Jesus had

an earthly father named Larry. So what if the virgin birth was thrown in to appeal to the followers of Mithra and Dionysian religious cults? What if the word for virgin referred to a child whose mother became pregnant the first time she had intercourse? According to Bell, none of this would be catastrophic to the Christian faith. “What if that spring [the virgin birth] was seriously questioned? Could a person keep jumping? Could a person still love God? Could you still be a Christian? Is the way of Jesus still the best possible way to live?”

There are a lot of questions here, but the underlying one seems to be this: is the virgin birth really that essential to Christianity? The answer is a resounding “Yes!”

**First, the virgin birth is essential to Christianity because it has been essential to Christianity.**

That may sound like weak reasoning, but only if we care nothing about the history and catholicity of the church. Granted, the church can get things wrong, sometimes even for a long time. But if Christians, of all stripes in all places, have professed belief in the virgin birth for two millennia, maybe we should be slow to discount it as inconsequential. In his definitive study of the virgin birth, J. Gresham Machen concluded that “there can be no doubt that at the close of the second century the virgin birth of Christ was regarded as an absolutely essential part of the Christian belief by the Christian church in all parts of the known world.” Perhaps, then, we should not be so hasty in dismissing the doctrine as a take-it-or-leave-it element of the Christian faith.

**Second, the Gospel writers clearly believed that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived.**

We don't know precisely how the Christ-child came to be in Mary's womb, except that the conception was “from the Holy Spirit” ([Matt. 1:20](#)). But we do know that Mary understood the miraculous nature of this conception, having asked the angel “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” ([Luke 1:34](#)). The Gospels do not present the virgin birth as some prehistoric myth or pagan copycat, but as “an orderly account” of actual history from eyewitnesses ([Luke 1:1-4](#)). If the virgin birth is false, the historical reliability of the Gospels is seriously undermined.

**Third, the virgin birth demonstrates that Jesus was truly human and truly divine.**

How can the virgin birth be an inconsequential spring for our jumping when it establishes the identity of our Lord and Savior? If Jesus had not been born of a human, we could not believe in his full humanity. But if his birth were like any other human birth—through the union of a human father and mother—we would question his full divinity. The virgin birth is necessary to secure both a real human nature and also a completely divine nature.

**Fourth, the virgin birth is essential because it means Jesus did not inherit the curse of depravity that clings to Adam's race.**

Jesus was made like us in every way except for sin ([Heb. 4:15; 7:26-27](#)). Every human father begets a son or daughter with his sin nature. We may not understand completely how this works, but this is the way of the world after the fall. Sinners beget sinners ([Psalm 51:5](#)). Always. So if Joseph was the real father of Jesus, or Mary had been sleeping around with Larry, Jesus is not spotless, not innocent, and not perfectly holy. And as result, we have no mediator, no imputation of Christ's righteousness (because he has no righteousness to impute to us), and no salvation.

So, yes, the virgin birth is essential.

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## How is St. Nicholas?

DECEMBER 6, 2016 | [Kevin DeYoung](#)

The unsatisfying answer to the title of this post is that nobody knows for sure. To quote one Nicholas scholar, "We can grant a bishop of that name who had a great impact on his homeland. We can also accept December 6 as the day of his death and burial. These are all the facts we can hold to. Further we cannot go." (Gustav Anrich, quoted by Charles S. Jones in *Saint Nicholas of Bari, Myra, and Manhattan*).

According to the best estimates, Nicholas, was born around AD 280 in Patara, in Asia Minor. He later became bishop of Myra in modern-day Turkey. Nicholas, it seems, died about 343 on or near December 6.

There is no record of his existence attested in any document until the 6th century. By that time Nicholas, whoever he had been, was already famous. The emperor Justinian dedicated a church to him in Constantinople. Initially, Nicholas was most well known in the East. But by 900, a Greek wrote, "The West as well as the East acclaims and glorifies him. Wherever there are people, his name is revered and churches are built in his honor. All Christians reverence his memory and call upon his protection." In 1087, Italian sailors stole his supposed relics and took them from Myra to Bari, Italy. This move greatly increased his popularity in Europe and made Bari one of the most crowded pilgrimage sites. It is said that Nicholas was represented by medieval artists more than any other saint except Mary.

### **Man and the Myth**

Why was Nicholas so famous? It's impossible to tell fact from fiction, but this is some of the legend of St. Nicholas:

He was reputed to be a wonder-worker who brought children back to life, destroyed pagan temples, saved sailors from death at sea, and as an infant nursed only two days a week and fasted the other five days.

Moving from probable legend to possible history, Nicholas was honored for enduring persecution. It is said that he was imprisoned during the Empire wide persecution under Diocletian and Maximian. Upon his release and return, the people flocked around him. "Nicholas! Confessor! Saint Nicholas has come home!"

Nicholas was also hailed as a defender of orthodoxy. Later sources claim he was in attendance at the council of Nicea. According to tradition, he was a staunch opponent of Arianism. Writing five centuries after his death, one biographer said, "Thanks to the teaching of St. Nicholas, the metropolis of Myra alone was untouched by the filth of the Arian heresy, which it firmly rejected as a death-dealing poison." Stories of his courage abound, one claiming that Nicholas traveled to Nicea and, upon arrival, promptly slapped Arius in the face. As the story goes, the rest of the council was shocked and appalled, so much so that they were going to remove Nicholas from his bishopric, until Jesus and Mary appeared to defend him. According to the same legend, this apparition changed the minds of the delegates, who quickly recanted of their outrage.

As you might have guessed, Nicholas was also revered for being a generous gift giver. Born into a wealth family, he inherited the fortune when his parents died. Apparently he gave his vast fortune away. The most famous story involved three girls who were so destitute that they were going to be forced into a life of prostitution. But Nicholas threw three bags of gold through the window as dowries for the young woman.

Over time, Saint Nicholas became the patron saint of nations like Russia and Greece, cities like Fribourg and Moscow, and of children, sailors, unmarried girls, merchants, and pawnbrokers (the three gold balls hung outside pawn shops are symbolic of the three bags of gold).

## Christmas and St. Nicholas

In honor of St. Nicholas the gift giver, Christians began to celebrate December 6 (his feast day) by giving presents. The tradition developed over time. For good boys and girls, St. Nicholas would come in his red bishop's robe and fill boots with gifts on the night of December 5. For bad boys and girls St. Nicholas was to be feared. In highly Catholic parts of Europe, St. Nicholas became a deterrent to erring young children. In Germany, he was often accompanied by Knecht Ruprecht (farmhand Rupert) who threatened to eat misbehaving children. In Switzerland, St. Nicholas threatened to put wicked children in a sack and bring them back to the Black Forest. In the Netherlands, St. Nicholas's helper would tie them in a sack and bring them back to Spain. In parts of Austria, the priest, dressed up in Christmas garb, would visit the homes of naughty children and threaten them with rod-beatings. At least nowadays, he only checks his list!

Not surprisingly, the Reformers were less than friendly towards the traditions that had been built up around the saints. Luther rejected the saints' days, believing they were built upon legends and superstitions (and a virulent strain of moralism we might add). In Germany, Luther replaced Saint Nicholas' Day with a different holiday, Christ Child, or Christkindl. Ironically, Kriss Kringle which derived from Luther's Christ Child holiday, has become just another name for St. Nicholas. **From St. Nicholas to Santa Claus**

The cult of St. Nicholas virtually disappeared in Protestant Europe, with the exception of one country: the Netherlands. If you love Christmas with all the trappings of Santa Claus and stockings and presents, thank the Dutch. If you despise all that, try to ignore my last name for the time being. The Puritans had done away with St. Nicholas and banned Christmas altogether. But the Dutch held on to their tradition and brought it with them to the New World. In the Netherlands Sint Nicolaas was contracted to Sinterklaas. According to Dutch tradition, Sinterklaas rides a horse and is accompanied by his helper Zwarte Piet, or Black Pete. Many consider Black Pete a racist stereotype derived from slavery, although others claim he is black because he goes down the chimney and gets a face full of soot.

At any rate, it is easy to see how Sinterklaas evolved in America to Santa Claus. Santa Claus became the Santa we know in the United States only after the poem "[Twas the Night Before Christmas](https://www.carols.org.uk/twas_the_night_before_christmas.htm)" ([https://www.carols.org.uk/twas\\_the\\_night\\_before\\_christmas.htm](https://www.carols.org.uk/twas_the_night_before_christmas.htm)) was written in 1823. Possibly the best-known verses ever written by an American, the poem has greatly influenced the tradition of Santa in the English-speaking world and beyond. **Jolly Old St. Nick and Jesus**

How should Christians relate to the traditions of Santa Claus? C. S. Lewis embraced them and so included Father Christmas in *The Lion, the Unicorn, and the Ardobe*. Other Christians, fearing syncretism, stay clear of Santa, reindeer, and a tree full of presents. I'll leave it to you and your family to form your opinions on observing the Christmas holiday (see [Rom. 14:1, 5-6](#)).

But if Santa Claus is everywhere already, why not use him to your benefit and talk about the real St. Nicholas? We don't know a lot about him, but we know he was a real and much-revered person. According to legend—one of those stories that probably isn't true, but should be—when Nicholas was a little boy, he would get up early to go to church and pray. One morning, the aging priest had a vision that the first one to enter the church the next day should be the new bishop of Myra. When Nicholas was the first to enter, the old priest, obeying the vision, made the young boy bishop right on the spot. But before he consecrated Nicholas, the priest asked him a question. “Who are you, my son?” According to tradition, the child whose legend would one day become Santa Claus replied, “Nicholas the sinner.” Not bad for a little boy.

With what little we know about St. Nicholas, it is safe to say he would not be pleased to know he had eclipsed Christ in the hearts of many as the central figure of Christmas. For the bishop of Myra no doubt knew the angel's words to Joseph: “Mary will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” So this Christmas, give gifts if you like. We will in our family. Receive them all with thanksgiving. But do not forget what we need most—salvation through substitution. This is one gift the real St. Nicholas would not have overlooked.

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