

## From Heav'n Above to Earth I Come

*Martin Luther (1483–1546); tr. Catherine Winkworth (1827–1878)*

From heav'n above to earth I come,  
to bear good news to ev'ry home;  
glad tidings of great joy I bring,  
whereof I now will say and sing:

To you, this night, is born a Child  
of Mary, chosen mother mild;  
this tender Child of lowly birth,  
shall be the joy of all the earth.

'Tis Christ our God, who far on high  
had heard your sad and bitter cry;  
Himself will your Salvation be,  
Himself from sin will make you free.

Now let us all, with gladsome cheer,  
follow the shepherds, and draw near  
to see this wondrous Gift of God,  
who hath His own dear Son bestowed.

Glory to God in highest heav'n,  
who unto man His Son hath giv'n,  
while angels sing, with pious mirth,  
a glad New Year to all the earth.

## ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

### *In the Nick of Time*

#### Why the Virgin Birth?

*Kevin T. Bauder*

Old-line liberals used to argue against the virgin birth of Christ. They saw it as an unreasonable and unscientific theory that was, on their view, completely dispensable. Whatever was special about Jesus they held to lie in His unique but quite human God-consciousness, not in His actual deity. These old liberals and modernists became quite dismissive and even derisive toward those who insisted that the virgin birth was essential to the Christian faith.

The liberal view, now rusting away after more than a century's antiquity, was unfaithful to biblical revelation. Furthermore, it left gaping holes in the system of doctrine that the Bible teaches. To remove the virgin birth of Christ is to damage fatally the Bible's message of God's dealings with humanity.

One reason is because Jesus Christ claimed to be the rightful king of Israel, and the legitimacy of this claim rests upon matters of parentage. To rightly claim the throne and scepter of Israel, Jesus had to be able to trace His descent from certain individuals. Just as importantly, He had to be able to deny His descent from others.

Most obviously, only a descendent of David could occupy the throne of Israel. This qualification was not humanly imposed but rested upon God's own promise (2 Sam 7:11-16; 1 Chr 17:11-14; 22:9-10; 28:5-7). In the Davidic Covenant God promised David that his biological descendants (seed) would be the rulers of Israel. He further promised David a perpetual throne, dynasty (house), and kingdom. This complex of promises would only be fulfilled when a descendant of David permanently established David's dynasty by forever occupying the throne of the kingdom of Israel.

Part of the Davidic Covenant pertained to David's son, Solomon. God promised not to reject Solomon but to establish his kingdom and throne. Interestingly, however, God did not promise perpetuity for Solomon's descendants. The absence of this promise becomes important in view of later events.

We might ask why it matters. After all, how could Solomon have a perpetual kingdom and throne without having descendants who would rule it? The



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question seems trivial, but its importance is determined by the curse that God placed upon Solomon’s descendant, Coniah (Jehoiachin).

Coniah was the next-to-last king of Judah before the Babylonian Captivity. Grandson to the godly Josiah, he was a terribly evil king. Nevertheless, he was the king through whom the Solomonic line was to be perpetuated. God was so angered by Coniah’s wickedness that He sent Jeremiah to pronounce a curse upon him (Jer 22:24–30). Part of the curse was that none of Coniah’s descendants would ever occupy the throne of David.

This curse seemed to be terrible news for the Davidic Covenant. God had promised that a descendant of David would permanently occupy the throne of Israel. God had further specified that the throne and kingdom would belong to Solomon’s house. When Coniah brought himself under God’s curse, however, it became impossible for any of Solomon’s descendants to fulfill that promise. How could God ever keep His covenant with David?

This question is made even more interesting by the fact that Joseph, the husband of Mary, was a direct descendant of Solomon through Coniah (Matt 1:1–16). In other words, at the time Jesus was born, Joseph was the official representative of the royal house of David. He had the legal right to the throne—but he was also under the curse of Coniah. As the offspring of Coniah, neither he nor any of his descendants could ever actually rule the kingdom to which they had a right.

The virgin birth of Jesus introduces a new and important element into this problem. Joseph was the husband of Mary, to whom Jesus was born. Matthew 1:16 clearly states that Jesus was born only to Mary—the pronoun is feminine, disallowing Joseph as a biological parent of Jesus. Nevertheless, for all legal purposes Jesus was reckoned as the son of Joseph. Joseph is sometimes called the “adoptive father” of Jesus, but Jesus did not have to be adopted. By completing his marriage covenant with Mary, Joseph legally claimed Jesus as his own. As the eldest son, Jesus would inherit all the rights, honors, and privileges of the Solomonic line. Since he was not an actual biological descendant of Joseph, however, He did not come under the curse of Coniah. Jesus stood legally in Solomon’s dynasty and inherited the right to the throne and the kingdom, yet He was not barred from these privileges by the curse on Coniah.

So far so good—but did God not promise David that an actual, biological descendant would occupy the throne? Since He did, then how can Jesus fulfill the Davidic Covenant, even if He meets the provisions that pertain to Solomon? Joseph might give Him legal standing in the line of Solomon, but if Joseph is not the biological father of Jesus, then Jesus cannot trace descent from David through Joseph.

The answer to this problem lies in Mary’s family tree. While Matthew traces Jesus’ *legal* genealogy through Joseph, Luke traces His *biological* ancestry

through Mary (Luke 3:23–38). This genealogy discloses that Mary was also a descendant of King David, but not through Solomon. Mary’s ancestor was David’s son Nathan (Luke 3:31). While Nathan and his offspring were not the ruling line, they were nevertheless true children of David.

This means that Jesus can trace His family tree to David on both sides. Through Joseph His *legal* parentage includes David, Solomon, and Coniah. From them He receives the legal right to rule Israel. Through Mary His *biological* parentage includes David and Nathan, so Jesus is a true son of David. In other words, Jesus received both the legal and the biological right to the throne of Israel—but because of the virgin birth, He does not fall under the disqualification of Coniah’s curse.

God always keeps His word, and He never delivers less than He promises. Furthermore, He never offers a substitute fulfillment. Yet He may fulfill His promises in surprising ways. He may add elements in addition to the fulfillment that could not have been guessed from the original promise.

The curse on Coniah imposed an apparently impossible contradiction upon God. He had promised David that his descendant would occupy the throne. He had further promised that the right to the throne and the kingdom would be transmitted through Solomon’s house. How could God ever keep this promise in view of His curse on Coniah?

The answer is the virgin birth. Only the virgin birth allows Jesus to inherit from Joseph the legal right to rule and from Mary the biological qualification to rule. If Jesus were *not* legally the son of Joseph, He would have no claim to the throne. If Jesus *were* the biological son of Joseph, He would be disqualified from the throne. If Jesus were not a true son of David through Mary, He would lack true royal descent. The virgin birth is essential to Jesus’ right to govern Israel. Without the virgin birth, Jesus could not be the Christ, the Messiah who will bring in the promised kingdom.



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This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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