

The Magnificat

Luke 1:46–55

And Mary said,
 “My soul magnifies the Lord,
 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
 for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
 For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
 for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
 And his mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
 He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
 and exalted those of humble estate;
 he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and the rich he has sent away empty.
 He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
 as he spoke to our fathers,
 to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΩ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Perpetual Virginity?

Kevin T. Bauder

According to Matthew’s gospel, Jesus’ mother remained a virgin until He was born (Matt 1:25). Christians treat the virgin birth as a fundamental for at least two reasons. First, it is essential to Jesus’ claim on the Davidic throne. Second, it is essential to His divine-human person, and consequently to His role as a sacrifice for sin.

No genuine Christian will deny the virgin conception and birth of Christ. What Christians mean by “virgin birth” varies, though. All agree that Mary remained a virgin until the birth of Jesus. Some professing Christians believe that Mary remained a virgin throughout her earthly life. This teaching is sometimes called the *perpetual virginity* of Mary.

Most evangelicals understand the virgin birth to imply that Joseph and Mary initiated normal marital relations after the birth of Jesus. But all Catholics and some Protestants recoil at the suggestion of Mary ever engaging in sexual relations. Catholics insist that sexual relations would be inconsistent with Mary’s utter consecration to God.

Does the Bible provide evidence one way or the other? The evidence is not absolutely conclusive. Still, two considerations tilt the balance against perpetual virginity.

One consideration is the preposition in Matthew 1:25. The verse says that Joseph did not know Mary (did not have sexual relations with her) *until* she gave birth to a son. The preposition *until* (Greek *heōs*) usually indicates that an activity began after a specified point. As Catholics regularly point out, however, that rule is not absolute. Sometimes *heōs* points to an activity that never began at all, even after the specified point.

A second consideration is the references to Jesus’ brothers (Matt 13:55–56; Mark 3:31–32). All other things being equal, these brothers would be understood as subsequent sons born to Joseph and Mary. That is what most evangelicals take them to be.

Because Catholics are already committed to perpetual virginity, they must find a different explanation. In fact, they offer two. One is that the “brothers” are sons from Joseph’s previous marriage. They are therefore stepbroth-



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ers of Jesus. The other explanation is that they are cousins, and that the word *brother* is being used in a loose sense.

Could Jesus' brothers really be His stepbrothers? Hardly. The Bible mentions nothing about a previous marriage of Joseph. Furthermore, if they were Joseph's sons by an earlier marriage, they would all be older than Jesus. That means that each of them would have a prior claim on the Davidic throne through Joseph. Jesus would have no right to offer Himself as king while they were alive.

Then could Jesus' brothers really be His cousins? Granted, the word *brother* is sometimes used in a more extended sense. Yet no contextual clues in Matthew 13 or Mark 3 indicate that this extended sense is in play. If either Matthew or Mark had wanted to say only that Jesus had male kinsmen, then the Greek word *suggenēs* would have been more specific. The most natural way of reading the text is that the men who are called Jesus' brothers really were His brothers—or, more specifically, His half-brothers from the same mother.

A normal reading of the text is that Joseph and Mary initiated marital relations after the birth of Jesus. A normal reading of the text is that Joseph and Mary had other children who were half-siblings of Jesus. Only some esthetic commitment to virginity or some theological *a priori* would lead one to read the text in any other way. Scripture itself does not indicate that Mary was "ever-virgin" as Catholics suggest.

To defend perpetual virginity, they also need to take a second step. They need to redefine what virgin birth means. For Protestants, the virgin birth means that Mary was a virgin *when she gave birth*. For Catholics, it means that Mary remained a virgin, *even in the process of birth*.

In the Catholic understanding, anything passing through the birth canal would disrupt Mary's virginity. For Jesus to be born in the normal way would mean that Mary was no longer a virgin. She had to remain a virgin, not only after the birth of Jesus, but *during* the birth of Jesus.

How could that work? Catholics believe that Jesus could not have been born in the normal way. There was none of the usual labor, dilation, and delivery. Rather, God did a miracle in which Jesus passed directly from Mary's uterus through her abdominal wall and into the world.

Catholic theologians point to later episodes in which Jesus was able to enter a room through a closed door (John 20:19, 26). They suggest that the miracle of His birth worked the same way, except that He was getting out instead of going in. The physical barrier of Mary's flesh did not hinder Him. Jesus' body passed through it as one spirit passes through another.

From a Catholic perspective, this is a significant miracle. They stand in awe of it. They celebrate it.

Yet nothing in Scripture indicates that such a miracle ever occurred. The word that is used for the birth of Jesus is the same word that is used for births in general. While Matthew and Luke lay great stress on the miraculous nature of Jesus' conception, they say nothing about a miraculous delivery.

The Bible teaches some doctrines directly. It teaches others by necessary implication. The perpetual virginity of Jesus fits into neither of these classes. It is a speculation, founded on flawed sensibilities and a mistaken commitment to the superiority of virginity over marriage. The suggestion that Mary remained a virgin during the birth process and that Jesus passed directly from her uterus into the outside world is worse than a speculation. It is an imposition upon the text and an unnecessary intrusion into the system of faith.

When we do theology, we must include all that the Bible teaches. We must also include all that the Bible strictly implies. Our suppositions, guesses, and prejudices, however, must never be permitted to rise to the level of doctrine. We believe in the virgin conception of Christ. We believe that Mary was a virgin when she gave birth. We cannot acknowledge the perpetual virginity of Mary as doctrine, though it is just possible that Joseph abstained from marital relations with his wife after the birth of Jesus. And we must reject the notion that Jesus was born through a miraculous process. That teaching is a purely human invention.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and 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.
