

A COMPLICATED PREGNANCY: WHETHER MARY WAS A VIRGIN AND WHY IT MATTERS

The Study Guide

The virgin birth is a much-loved story in the Christian tradition. Christians all over the globe believe that Jesus was “born of the virgin Mary.” The claim is inscribed in Christian creeds and confessions, from postbiblical times to the present day. Many believers read the two Gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus with the assumption that these stories—while differing in key details—tell us what really happened in the conception and birth of Jesus of Nazareth. But can we be so sure?

This book, *A Complicated Pregnancy*, is the quest to unpack that story, to examine it anew, and to consider what the story is about, what it really means for us today. Along the way, you’ll discover so much more to the story than you ever thought possible.

This basic guide will assist study groups who want to read the book and discuss its contents together. It includes a brief summary of each chapter (following the book’s introduction), along with probing, open-ended questions meant to stimulate reflection and discussion.

The book represents the author’s personal journey into the question, Was Mary really a virgin when she conceived Jesus? *A Complicated Pregnancy* unpacks why this question really matters—for Christian faith, for our understanding of the person of Jesus Christ, and for the vibrancy of Christianity today. If you are using this study guide—and reading the book!—then you are also embarking on a journey into this question. Your faith will be challenged and your life impacted by reading this book and studying it with others.

Get ready for a wild ride—one that includes blood, sex, birth, Madonna videos, a “holy hymen,” sharks and lizards, Star Wars characters, and a colorful trip to a Guatemalan town. And of course, the birth of Jesus—the divine Son of God.

INTRODUCTION: “DON’T MESS WITH MY MANGER SCENE!”

In the introduction, the author (Roberts) tells some of his life story as background to writing the book. He describes the occasion for this “journey” into the birth of Jesus and the virginity of Mary. He also points out that what we believe to be *sacred* matters for our willingness (or lack of it!) to reconsider our core beliefs.

1. Take a few moments to share some of your own personal story as it intersects with or shapes your theological and religious beliefs. Consider questions like: Do you lean toward the conservative side of Christian beliefs? Toward a liberal or progressive end of the spectrum? Are you shaped by other religious frameworks—or perhaps even “secular” or atheist leanings? Do you tend to believe in the supernatural and in miracles or are you more skeptical?

2. Share a little bit of what inspired your interest in reading this book and exploring the question of the birth of Jesus.

3. When you read about the coffee shop conversation between the atheist and the Christian evangelist, what thoughts did you have? Did you find yourself siding with one or the other of the conversation partners? Why?

4. What questions do you have now in your mind as you consider embarking on this journey? What do you hope to find out?

CHAPTER ONE: BEAUTIFUL BLOOD

Roberts begins this chapter—and the “quest” to answer his big question—with a story of his own child’s birth and all the “beautiful blood” involved in human birth. He digs deep into what early Christian theologians said about birth and considers why they seemed so averse to the notion that Jesus—and Mary—experienced a biologically “normal” (painful and bloody) human birth. This chapter also unpacks the theology called *Docetism*, the ancient belief that Jesus Christ wasn’t truly a human being but a spirit who appeared to be a man (a “phantom” or mirage).

1. Roberts begins this chapter with a reflection on his wife’s first pregnancy and his memory of the bloody nature of human birth. Why were some of the early theologians so insistent that Jesus’s birth was biologically abnormal? Do you agree with those *other* theologians (Helvidius, Tertullian, etc.) who countered that notion and argued for a “normal” delivery of Jesus?

2. This chapter includes some explanation of the apocrypha text the *Gospel of James*. What did you find especially interesting about this story?

3. Describe why the *Gospel of James* was so formative on early beliefs about Mary and about Jesus’s birth. What are the implications for us when we consider the influence of extracanonical (apocryphal) texts on early Christian beliefs?

4. Do you agree with the author that the newborn Jesus could (hypothetically) have had Meconium Aspiration Syndrome? What is the significance of this point for your understanding of Jesus’s person and life?

5. The author refers to the “sticky, icky, stinky body of the divine Son of God.” What does he mean by this? Does it challenge you to think about the incarnation differently?

CHAPTER TWO: WHAT’S SO BAD ABOUT GOOD SEX?

This chapter explores the (Catholic, Eastern Orthodoxy) doctrine of the “perpetual virginity of Mary” and shows how the traditional assumption of Mary’s life-long virginity and “sexual purity” is linked to a particular view of the doctrine of original sin. He also shows how influential interpretations of the virgin birth story—and of the virginal conception—are motivated by a perspective that views female sexuality with ambivalence or suspicion and that sometimes views sex as inherently sinful. The chapter concludes by commending a different view of Mary and of the conception of Jesus.

1. What do you think about the doctrine of the “perpetual virginity of Mary”? What purpose did (or does) the notion serve?

2. When you read about “allegorical interpretations” of, for example, the Song of Solomon, what thoughts went through your mind? Do contemporary readers do some of the same sorts of imaginative or even convoluted interpretations of controversial biblical texts?

3. The author references the phenomenon of “Purity Balls.” What do you think of concerns for sexual purity within much of Christian culture? How have such concerns related to our view of Mary and of the virgin birth?

4. This chapter deals with Augustine's theology of original sin and "the Fall," and in particular, how it influenced assumptions about Mary's virginity. Explain the connection between these complicated concepts. Does it help you understand how the virgin birth took on a life of its own in Christian theology?

5. How does the Magnificat change or challenge your understanding of Mary and of the virgin birth? What inspires you about that section?

CHAPTER THREE: VIRGIN BIRTHS HAPPEN TO SHARKS, BUT NOT TO HUMANS

In this chapter, the author introduces us to some fascinating stories about "virgin births" (more technically, *asexual reproduction*) as documented by science. We explore whether this real-life, scientifically verified phenomenon serves to support belief in the virginal conception of Jesus.

1. Had you ever heard of *parthenogenesis* before reading this chapter? Pop quiz: Give a brief definition or summary of the phenomenon. Extra credit if you can give additional examples from science not included in the book.

2. Do you think that *parthenogenesis* in the natural world provides solid support for the traditional Christian belief in the virgin birth of Jesus? Why or why not?

3. What does the author mean by “divine artificial insemination”? What is the logical problem that he is conveying by that term? Do you see this as a serious logical and theological hurdle for believing in the virgin birth?

4. The author tells a story about Dan’s adoption and the discovery of his biological mother. Did that story make you think about Jesus’s connection to the human species (and to you personally) any differently?

5. Now consider the “Baby Zoey” story. If the virgin birth didn’t occur as a supernatural miracle (in the traditional sense of “miracle”), would that make the birth of Jesus any less remarkable? Why or why not?

CHAPTER FOUR: THE MOST POWERFUL WOMAN IN THE WORLD

Mary is something of an enigma when viewed from perspectives of women. On the one hand, she can be thought of as “the most powerful woman in the world” (*National Geographic*), but on the other hand, it’s easy to view the figure of Mary as one who has been subdued or subjected to the powers of patriarchy within the church and tradition. But it’s also possible to see Mary through the eyes of liberation and of the agency she expresses—as seen in the example of Luke’s Magnificat. This chapter explores those tensions and suggests that there’s a better way to understand the person of Mary in the context of the birth of Jesus.

A COMPLICATED PREGNANCY

1. What has been your understanding of Mary leading up to your reading of this book? Did you find yourself falling into one or the other of the perspectives articulated in this chapter (i.e., feminist readings versus traditional readings of Mary)?

2. Do you think that the traditional belief in the virgin birth leads to a vision of an empowered Mary or of an “objectified” and subjected Mary (i.e., a Mary seen as primarily useful for her sexuality or mothering capacity)?

3. Even the very idea of “divine rape” is troubling, for many reasons, and may be difficult to discuss—so in your sharing and group discussion, please be sensitive to the perspectives and experiences of others. If you feel comfortable, share your reflections on whether the Gospel infancy narratives suggest something like a “divine rape,” or at the least a coerced pregnancy?

4. Discuss the phrase (and song title), “A Woman Needs a Man Like a Fish Needs a Bicycle.” What does this have to do with the virgin birth story?

5. How can churches and other faith communities do a better job at presenting the “empowering Mary,” perhaps especially during the Christmas season?

CHAPTER FIVE: A CONTROVERSIAL AND TOO-SILENT NIGHT

This chapter undertakes an in-depth study of the biblical texts related to the virgin birth. The author explores in detail the relation between the two Gospels (Matthew and Luke) that include the stories about Jesus's birth (often called *infancy narratives*). The biblical accounts share features in common, but there are many discrepancies and contradictions, too. Other biblical texts are also explored, including Paul's letters—which are the earliest writings in the New Testament.

1. The author begins the chapter with an illustration: the “birther” rumors. How does the problem of rumors and the difficulty of untangling historical questions relate to the question of the virgin birth?

2. Have you ever looked in detail at the two Gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus? Did anything surprise you or unsettle you? What intrigued you to explore further?

3. What did you think about the fact that Paul's letters include no reference to a virgin birth of Jesus and no reference to Mary as the mother of Jesus?

4. In this chapter, the author tips his hand, suggesting at least a preliminary conclusion to the question of whether Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived. Do you agree with the author? Why or why not?

CHAPTER SIX: HOW NOT TO LOSE YOUR BABY JESUS

This chapter begins to reconstruct the virgin birth “from the ashes of deconstruction.” While the author notes there is no way to definitively recover “the real story” of what took place, there’s enough material to explore the various options seriously. This means no one has to “lose” Jesus or give up celebrating his birth during the Christmas season—even if it might require a rethinking of some basic assumptions about the beloved Christmas story.

1. Does the illustration about the church whose baby Jesus was stolen resonate with you at this point in the book? Is there a personal or spiritual price to pay for honestly facing tough questions like the one we’ve been exploring in this book?

2. The author suggests two broad hypothetical scenarios (option A: “Extraordinary People Have Miraculous Births” and option B: “A Scandalous Pregnancy”) for interpreting the virgin birth stories. Do you resonate more strongly with either of these two options? Why or why not?

3. What is meant by the “legend of the virgin birth”? What’s the difference between a “legend” and a “myth”? Does the claim that the virgin birth stories were “legend” make sense to you? What are the implications of that claim?

4. Are there other biblical stories you can think of that make more sense if understood through the lens of ancient literature?

CHAPTER SEVEN: GOD'S DEEP DIVE INTO CREATION

In this chapter, the author offers some constructive reflections on what it means that Jesus is the divine Son of God. He suggests that we can think of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth as the “kenotic,” or self-emptying, act of the eternal son of God, who “dives deep” into creation itself and becomes one of us. Rather than trying to fit the pieces of divinity and humanity together in Jesus, perhaps the incarnation suggests that we focus on the key point that God becomes *really human* in Jesus.

1. In the opening of this chapter, the author suggests that one can genuinely recite a creed in the context of Christian worship without believing every word of the creed literally. Do you agree with that? Why or why not?

2. Why do many fundamentalist Christians insist that belief in the virgin birth is required to be an orthodox Christian?

3. What does the author mean by the “LEGO Jesus”? What is a better approach to thinking about the divine and human natures of Jesus?

4. If Jesus was not really born of a virgin, can we still speak of Jesus as divine? Why?

5. The author describes the hope he has in the resurrection and suggests that the traditional account of the virgin birth is not necessary for that hope. Do you agree or disagree?

CONCLUSION: A MORE HUMAN GOD

In this final chapter, the author summarizes key insights that he takes to be implications of the conclusion to his journey. They all spring from and lead back into the idea that the incarnate God, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, is more human than we ever realized. This also means that Christianity should be a more human—and more humane—religion than it often appears to be.

1. Do you agree with the author's final conclusion to his question, Was Mary a virgin?
2. With which of the key insights or implications in this concluding chapter do you most resonate?
3. What would you add to the list of insights and implications that has not been considered?
4. How might this study impact your understanding of Christianity or your practice of Christian faith in a practical way?