

What's in a name?

Matthew is quoting from the Jewish Prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 7:14). The Jewish Scriptures were written in Hebrew. In Hebrew, the word 'almah', translated as 'virgin', can mean 'maiden'/'young woman'.

Matthew wrote in Greek, and translated 'almah' as the word 'parthenos' which often but not always, (see Genesis 34:3 where a woman who has been raped is called 'parthenos') means 'virgin'.

Translating words is notoriously difficult because words have slightly different meanings in different languages.

Using a Welsh online dictionary, (not Google translate!) try and translate the following quote into English:

Pan ddywedodd y Tri Gŵr Doeth wrth Herod am enedigaeth yr Iesu, roedd mor flin nes iddo orchymyn lladd pob baban iau na dwy flwydd oed.

Compare your translation with others. Is it exactly the same? If not, why?

We must simply admit that it is NOT clear whether Matthew wanted his audience to believe that Jesus' conception was 'virginal'. A creative storyteller enjoys a level of ambiguity!

'By/through the Holy Spirit' is no clearer, because there are places in the New Testament where this phrase is used symbolically to make a distinction between the physical and the spiritual (see John's Gospel, 3:5,6,8).

Is Matthew simply saying that Jesus' birth will have a spiritual element to it; that it will be part of God's plan?

Scandal and Disgrace

Imagine being 14 years old, devoutly Jewish, engaged but unmarried, female, living in a small, close-knit community about 2,000 years ago and pregnant. And just to seal the deal, the father of the child is NOT your fiancé.

This is the reality that Matthew presents to his audience. If Joseph had chosen to do so, he could have called off his engagement to Mary (he very nearly does so), **what might have happened?**

Mary's father and brothers would have been ridiculed for not controlling her, Joseph himself would have been shamed, Mary would be a whore, and the baby labelled a 'bastard'. The whole community would have been shocked and outraged.

Joseph avoids this scandal by taking a humane and compassionate decision – making Mary his wife.

But along with Joseph (and Matthew's audience), we still want to know the BIG secret: Who was Jesus' father?

Does Matthew give us any hints?

