

Views from the Pews: Faith and the Y chromosome

In his own time, at least during his public ministry, Jesus was immediately recognised as entirely different from other men. In the ancient, non-Jewish world, stories of virgins giving birth after an encounter with a divine father-figure were a common explanation of the origins of exceptional characteristics. According to the ancient Greeks, Dionysos was the son of either the virgin Semele or the virgin Persephone. Persephone was also the virgin mother of Jason. And Plato's mother, Perictione, was a virgin. But faithful Jews would not have seen the gospel story as a mere legend conveying a complimentary truth about Jesus but without being factual, and neither need we.

Or we can remember that the text we have is a translation, and linguists now tell us that the Hebrew word in Isa 7:14, quoted by Matt 1:22-23, was *almah*, "young woman." But in the Septuagint, an early translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, *almah* was rendered as *parthenos*, which means "virgin." Matthew knew that *almah* did not imply virginity, but he saw Isaiah's words as evidence that Christ's life was foretold by the prophets.

Or we can consult the genetics of vertebrate reproduction. Sons need a Y chromosome from their father, so virgins can bear only daughters. But science works by conducting repeated, controlled, reversible experiments, so has nothing to say about one-off events.

More importantly, if Jesus was truly fully human, as the patristic Church insisted and as Anglicans believe, he must have been not only bone of our bone but also (in modern terms) DNA of our DNA. He must have had a Y chromosome complete with all the genes that define masculinity and which connected him to our earliest human ancestors and to the male part of the human condition. As Gregory of Nazianus (329-89 CE) put it, "what he has not assumed he has not healed". Gregory himself knew nothing of DNA, but he would have agreed that Jesus healed the *whole* human DNA because he carried it all to the cross. We could postulate that God was able to endow

Mary with a physical Y chromosome, but since we can never know, we need not ask. The only important thing to know is that “It is love, not reason, that is stronger than death” (Thomas Mann).

Or we can simply rejoice in the doctrine of the incarnation, the empowering, liberating foundation of Christian belief.

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