

Chapter 3: Matthew 1 and 2 - Are They Authentic?

This is the bottom line: if the first two chapters of Matthew are authentic, this issue comes to a screeching halt for non-virgin birth proponents. In my opinion, it would not be of consequence towards the virgin birth doctrine *if* Matthew 1 and 2 was not originally in Scripture. Luke's account of the virgin birth is sufficient.¹ Nevertheless, for most non-virgin birth proponents, Luke is not enough, but Matthew most assuredly is. This is why they go to great lengths to discredit the first two chapters of Matthew. They realize that it presents an insurmountable obstacle to their doctrine. If they didn't, they wouldn't even try making the case that it is interpolated text. Therefore it is a must to examine the validity for those two chapters in Scripture. In doing this we must familiarize our selves with a term used in New Testament criticism called *textual variants*. An opening description of textual variants can be found below.

You may hear someone speaking of the thousands of variants in the manuscripts of the Bible, and in one sense, they are speaking the truth, as there are thousands of variants. One number that appears often in this context is 200,000 variants in the New Testament alone! But just as it is wise to listen closely to what a politician is saying, it is wise to look closely at this claim as well. If you put ten people in a room and asked them all to copy the first five chapters of the Gospel of John, you would end up with ten "different" copies of John. In other words, no two handwritten copies would be absolutely identical to each other. Someone would skip a word that everyone else has. One person would misspell that one word that they can never get right. Someone would probably skip a line, or even a verse, especially if there were similar words at the beginning or end of the verse before and the verse after. So you would end up with a lot of variants. But would you have ten copies of the same book? Yes, you would, and by comparing all the copies you could rather easily reproduce the text of the original, because when one person makes a mistake, the other nine are not likely to do so at the very same spot.²

There are roughly close to 6,000 manuscripts of the New Covenant Scriptures (in Greek) alone. Within these manuscripts there are several variants. Most are of no serious significance at all, few do call out to our attention. For the person interested in studying this issue in its detailed entirety, you should consult a more scholarly person than I. There are several good books out there which deal with the subject.

My concern in this chapter is the following: are there any textual variants in the Greek manuscripts of the New Covenant Scriptures available, in the first two chapters of Matthew? Or more precisely are these two chapters missing from any genuine

¹ At this point, some may say we need at least two Scriptures to prove a doctrine because Scripture itself says that we establish points out of the mouth of at least two witnesses (Deuteronomy 17:6). However, if you examine the texts in Scripture that speak of two witnesses, these passages are in reference to putting a person to death or making an accusation against a person. When it comes to Scripture, a single passage is sufficient for evidence. We live by every word that proceeds from Yahweh's mouth (Deuteronomy 8:3). There are even certain laws that are only mentioned one time in all of Torah. Such is the case with taking care not to kill the mother bird who is laying on her eggs (Deuteronomy 22:6-7). That's in Torah one time, and that is all we need.

² *The King James Only Controversy: Can You Trust the Modern Translations?* By Dr. James R. White, p39. Bethany House Publishers, 1995.

manuscript? The answer to this question is a very emphatic NO. Even the very oldest Greek New Covenant manuscripts contain the first two chapters of the book of Matthew. Believe me, if two chapters of Matthew were missing in a manuscript, it would cause quite a stir amongst biblical scholars.

For instance, Mark 16:9-20 is not found in the two oldest manuscripts available, Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus. The issue of the missing text is spoken of in every scholarly book I have seen that deals with the subject of textual variants. This variant is usually referred to as the *king* of all variants, in that it is the longest textual variant known in the New Covenant Scriptures.. However, one scholarly author had this to say on the questionable passage:

Whatever the correct view, it is important to note that the truthfulness of this passage is not in dispute. The main events of Mark 16:9-20 are recorded elsewhere, so at any rate we are not in danger of forfeiting heavenly treasure.³

We see here that the author, even when discussing the most lengthy and controversial textual variant, says that it is not as big of a deal as some would have us to believe. It would, however, be *quite* an issue if two entire chapters were missing from certain manuscripts of the book of Matthew, but the fact remains that not one single Greek New Covenant manuscript⁴ is missing the first two chapters of Matthew's evangel. Therefore for someone to just make a claim that two entire chapters are not original, without a shred of evidence to prove it, should let us know someone, somewhere has an agenda.

The 1966 Jerusalem Bible

There are a few non-virgin birth writings I have come across which use a preface out of the 1966 edition of the Jerusalem Bible to state their claim concerning the un-authenticity of Matthew 1 & 2. After quoting a portion of this 1966 edition's Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels, one non-virgin birth author had this to say:

To summarize, the Catholics admitted in their own Bible that a person other than the original writer of the Book of Matthew inserted the first two Chapters and that the Catholics have deemed this addition as "inspired" and worthy of admission into the canon of the Bible. I, for one, have a serious problem with their actions. It is important to note that in subsequent versions of the Jerusalem Bible, the Catholics omitted this information. It is only present in versions prior to 1968.⁵

First, are we going to believe a Catholic preface over a total agreement of all New Covenant Scripture manuscripts? Even if the Catholics did make this admission, where is their proof? They've yet to produce the manuscript which omits these first two chapters, and until they do we have no reason to believe the chapters to be unauthentic.

Secondly, ***this is not what the Catholic preface claims at all.*** A cursory examination of the preface will cause one to glean this meaning, but examining its entirety allows one to see the true intent of placing the Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels, before the

³ *How We Got the Bible*, by Neil R. Lightfoot, p102-103. Published by Baker Books, 2003.

⁴ I should also mention the *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*, translated by Professor George Howard. This gospel is held to be "top notch" among the Hebrew translations of Matthew by many Messianic groups. This gospel also contains the virgin birth account.

⁵ *The Virgin Birth – 21 Points*, by Jon Francis, Feb. 2001, p11.

Gospels. The preface concerns itself with an attempt to theorize the origin of the Gospels, seeing they are parallel in numerous places. Did one writer pen an account, and the others just borrow from him? This is the assumption many have made in the past, and this is the issue in the Jerusalem Bible's preface. They state on page five of the New Testament section of the Bible that:

It is necessary to say something about the problem of the literary relations between these gospels, i.e. 'The Synoptic Problem'. All the many solutions offered so far prove inadequate if taken separately, though each contributes an element of truth to the complete solution. In the first place it is highly probable, even certain, that a common oral tradition was committed to writing by each of the three Synoptics independently, and consequently with variations.⁶

They begin here by stating that they are perplexed as to why there are so many similarities with the evangels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These evangels are termed synoptic, meaning "with one eye." Notice that they do give as one answer the probability of a common oral tradition. This would mean that each author simply recorded what they saw or heard took place. Many of the events were seen by multiple authors, thus causing many similarities in each respective evangel. I personally believe that this is the case with the three authors at hand. I believe it is the best understanding for the similarities between the Gospels.

If you and I attend a church gathering, and the next day you and I independently write a journal about that gathering, we are bound to mention some of the same things in our journals. However, because we are different people, with different perceptions, different styles, and different favorites, there will be some things I write that you do not and vice versa.

For many, however, this just does not cut it. Many have theorized over how these similarities in the Gospels came to be. It is this theorizing that brings on the statement in the Jerusalem Bible preface, which is mentioned by many non-virgin proponents as "proof" that the first two chapters of Matthew are not Scripture.

In stating their theory they claim the first Gospel to be written was Matthew Aramaic. Mark then took this gospel and made a Greek translation. They claim that Mark shortened or omitted certain things in this Gospel of which he wasn't aware. Then along comes an author known as Matthew Greek. This is what they say about him.

An anonymous editor, Matthew Greek, decided to rewrite the first Aramaic gospel, which was known to him in one of its Greek translations. This he filled out and made more detailed, using for his narrative parts of the word of Mark his predecessor, to which he added one thing only of importance, i.e. the two chapters of the infancy narrative. In general Matthew Greek corrected and followed Marks text, but at times he went back to the earlier gospel and on these occasions his style, unlike anything in Mark, becomes both original and archaic. For the Sayings, he referred to the earlier gospel in order to record many that Mark omitted.⁷

⁶ *The 1966 Jerusalem Bible*: Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels, p5.

⁷ *Ibid*, p8

Hopefully you caught the true intent of the preface. The issue is that the author of this Catholic preface is attempting to concoct a story of how the Gospels were originally written. In doing so he *assumes* that “Matthew Greek” used Mark’s Gospel as his guide, but found that Mark chose not to mention the infancy narrative. Matthew decided to include it in his Gospel seeing that he not only borrowed from Mark’s writings, but also the earlier Gospel of “Matthew Aramaic.” I personally believe in the common yet independent oral tradition myself, but hopefully you can see that this preface is not at all claiming and interpolation of Matthew 1 and 2 into Scripture.

Non-virgin birth proponents grabbed a hold to something they saw in this Catholic Bible preface and ran with it, before slowing down and seriously researching what was being stated or theorized about.

The Nazarenes Copy of Matthew’s Gospel

Did the early 1st century group known by the name of the Nazarenes use a copy of Matthew that did not contain the first two chapters? At least one non-virgin birth author would have us to believe just that.

If these two chapters are valid writings of Matthew, then I have no argument, I would be forced to accept the virgin birth teaching. However, it has been learned that early, first century believers known as “Nazarenes” (see Acts 24:5) had a copy of Matthew that was written in Hebrew, and it did NOT contain the first two chapters as we now know them, but rather began with chapter 3.⁸

Is this statement concerning the Nazarenes true? According to the studies I have done on this group, ***this statement has no basis in any way***. For instance the historian Epiphanius⁹ in his *Panarion 29*, states the following concerning the Nazarenes:

...they have the Good News according to Matthew in its entirety in Hebrew. For it is clear that they still preserve this, in the Hebrew alphabet, as it was originally written.

What exactly did Epiphanius mean when he penned the words “in its entirety”? Obviously this was a reference to an agreement between himself and the Nazarenes gospel of Matthew. Nothing differed, including the first two chapters, the infancy narrative. As a matter of fact Epiphanius does mention a sect known as the Ebionites

⁸ *Do You Believe Moses?* The Liberty Newsletter, No. 11, November 1981, By Richard H. Francis Jr.

⁹ EPIPHANIUS (c. 315–403) *Metropolitan bishop of Salamis* / Born near Eleutheropolis in Judea, Palestine, as a young man Epiphanius became a monk and about the year 335 founded a monastery near his home. He achieved such fame as a monkish ascetic that in 367 he was elected by the bishops of Cyprus to be the Metropolitan bishop of Salamis (Constantia)... His best known work, the *Panarion* (374–376), described and attacked virtually every heresy that had emerged in Christian history. In 382 he joined St. Jerome in Rome in opposing Origenism, and in 394 he visited Jerusalem in Jerusalem to promote this campaign; but in the course of his visit he became embroiled in a controversy with Bishop John of Jerusalem. In 402 Epiphanius went to Constantinople at the instigation of Bishop Theophilus of Alexandria to arrange for the expulsion of certain Origenist monks. When he realized that he was being used as a pawn in the power struggle between Theophilus and Bishop John Chrysostom of Constantinople, he embarked for home, but died at sea before he reached there. [Taken from Who’s Who in Christian History, Tyndale House Publisher, Inc. Wheaton, Illinois.]

which did possess a version of Matthew while at the same time rejecting the virgin birth. Epiphanius (*Panarion 30-13-2*) considered the Ebionites version as “not wholly complete but falsified and mutilated.”

One author I am aware of has done an excellent job in describing what Epiphanius meant in mentioning the Nazarenes possessing the entirety of Matthew’s gospel.

...certainly part of what he meant was that the Nazarenes were NOT like the Ebionites in that they used the entire NT including a Matthew which was complete and contained the first two chapters (and therefore the virgin birth account). Epiphanius’s book *Panarion* is a list of groups which Rome had labeled apostate. In this book Epiphanius seeks to discredit each of these groups. One issue that comes up frequently is that Epiphanius does not hesitate to attack groups for rejecting all or parts of the books he... regarded as canon, or for accepting the books that he... regarded as apostate or questionable. He even questions the Nazarenes for using the “Old Testament” right along side of the “New Testament”. If the Nazarenes rejected all or parts of what Epiphanius knew as the “New Testament” then Epiphanius would not have hesitated to make this clear in his attack on them... if we determine the NT canon Epiphanius understood as canonical, we would seem to also know what books the Nazarenes used as NT canon.¹⁰

This article goes on to show that Epiphanius basically used the same New Covenant Scriptures we are accustomed to today. Therefore, the Nazarenes also used the same New Covenant Scriptures we are accustomed to today. We can then conclude that they would have considered Matthew and Luke’s accounts of the virgin birth as canonical and authentic.

Even more interesting is the other doctrinal beliefs behind this group known as the Nazarenes. Apart from being mentioned in the book of Acts in Scripture,¹¹ they were described in quite an honorable fashion by Epiphanius at one point in his writings. I should note that it is I who considers this description to be honorable, while Epiphanius considered it heretical.

The Nazarenes do not differ in any essential thing from them [Jews], since they practice the custom and doctrines prescribed by the Jewish law, except that they believe in Christ. They believe in the resurrection of the dead and that the universe was created by God. They preach that God is one and that Jesus Christ is his Son. They are very learned in the Hebrew language. They read the law... Therefore they differ both from the Jews and from the Christians; from the

¹⁰ *Isaiah 7:14 and the Virgin Birth of the Messiah*, by James Trimm, taken from www.hebrewroots.org/hebrewrootsarchive/0102/010218_d.html

¹¹ Acts 24:5 "For we have found this man [Apostle Paul] a real pest and a fellow who stirs up dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes." I might add that some references I’ve checked say that the Nazarenes did not regard Paul as an apostle, but this verse proves otherwise. I should also mention an Encyclopedia reference taken from <http://18.1911encyclopedia.org/N/NA/NAZARENES.htm> which states:

They [Nazarenes] used the Aramaic recension of the Gospel according to Matthew, which they called the Gospel to the Hebrews, but, while adhering as far as possible to the Mosaic economy as regarded circumcision, sabbaths, foods and the like, they did not refuse to recognize the apostolicity of Paul or the rights of heathen Christians (Jerome, *Comm. In Isa.*, ix. L)

former, because they believe in Christ; from the true Christians because they fulfill till now Jewish rites as Circumcision, the Sabbath and others.¹²

If you will recall your attention to chapter two of this work concerning the emphasis I wanted to bring upon the belief that Yeshua is the Son of Yahweh. Here, Epiphanius describes the Nazarenes as accepting Yeshua as just that, the Son of the Almighty. Without a doubt, Epiphanius held to the doctrine of the virgin birth, so for him to describe the Nazarenes as believing in the Son of Yahweh would also mean that they too acknowledged and accepted the doctrine of the virgin birth. Thus we have a very strict torah [law]-observant group of individuals who accepted what Matthew and Luke recorded concerning the virgin birth in each of their accounts of the infancy narrative.

On top of all this is the fact that although the group mentioned before, under the name Ebionites, did not hold to the virgin birth, there may have possibly been two sects of Ebionites; those who *accepted* the virgin birth and those who *rejected* the virgin birth. One reference work tells us the following:

Origen and Jerome both notify the fact that the Ebionites translated [almah] "young woman" (it is rendered "virgin" in the King James Version and the Revised Version (British and American)). This translation, so far as the mere word is concerned, is indubitably correct. There is another point in which both afford us information. The first says (Contra Celsum, v.61) that there are two classes of Ebionites, one of which denies the miraculous conception and birth of our Lord, the other of which affirms it. Jerome, in his letter to Augustine, not only asserts the same thing but calls the one class, those affirming the miraculous birth, Nazareans, and the other Ebionites.¹³

Here we see that Origen described two classes of Ebionites, however, one of those classes may have very well been the Nazarenes. This could be explained by realizing that both classes were torah-observant, that is, they believed in obedience to the law of Yahweh. Origen may have described the Nazarenes as Ebionites simply because of some similarities between the two. We do seem to find Jerome giving agreements to Origen's statement, but in Jerome's writings on this, he says something quite interesting.

What shall I say of the Ebionites who pretend to be Christians? To-day there still exists among the Jews in all the synagogues of the East a heresy which is called that of the Minaeans, and which is still condemned by the Pharisees; [its followers] are ordinarily called 'Nazarenes'; they believe that Christ, the son of God, was born of the Virgin Mary, and they hold him to be the one who suffered under Pontius Pilate and ascended to heaven, and in whom we also believe. But while they pretend to be both Jews and Christians, they are neither.¹⁴

Jerome here expresses that indeed the Nazarenes, who were a torah-observant group, held to the doctrine of the virgin birth of the Messiah.

¹² *From Sabbath to Sunday*, by Samuel Bacchiocchi, quoting EAH 29, 7, p41, 402

¹³ *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, under the heading Ebionites

¹⁴ *Jerome's Epistle 70 to Augustine*, taken from www.jewishencyclopedia.com, under Nazarenes.

Conclusion

The textual evidence for the first two chapters of Matthew is overwhelming. Only a *supposed* copy of Matthew, held by the Ebionites seems to oppose the infancy narrative. This copy, however, could not have been held by the Nazarenes as authoritative, seeing all evidence shows that they held a belief in the virgin birth of the Messiah.

The fact that the Nazarenes kept the Sabbath, festivals, circumcision, dietary laws, and such like, yet still believed in the doctrine of the virgin birth, is strong historical evidence that this doctrine was and is indeed true. For one to deny the first two chapters of Matthew as Scripture without any concrete evidence at all, is not only illogical, but is tantamount to blasphemy against the Word of Yahweh.