

THE OVERSHADOWING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

During the conception of Jesus, the Bible tells us that Mary was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35 – see also Matthew 1:18, 20). Unfortunately, much of the Western world has not understood that for a woman to be overshadowed by God's Spirit during conception was not a unique idea applicable to only Mary. Most of Christendom view the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit in a totally different way than that of the Middle Eastern perspective. This study will attempt to provide a better understanding of the Jewish concepts of God's Spirit resting upon a woman during pregnancy.

Before we delve into our writing, we must always remember that when we are read historical documents, the people's ideologies and cultures that wrote them will influence how they should be interpreted. Thus, when we read the books of the Bible, we should ask ourselves what was the background of the authors and what beliefs did they have which often has an impact on the ideas they were trying to convey. If we read documents written in the Middle East centuries ago, we need to view it through their eyes if we are to understand the meaning they were trying to make known to us.

To begin our review, let us start with Matthew 1:18 and 20: ***"Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: when as his mother was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost ... But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost."*** Note that the matter of the conception of Jesus during the espousal state of his parents before they came together by way of the marriage ceremony is discussed in our other writings. Our focus for this study will be on the receiving of the Holy Spirit by Mary. Most members of Christian churches believe that the previous verses from Matthew suggest that God impregnated Mary. But we need to ask ourselves why would God place a seed into a man's wife's womb? Did the scriptures not say in Genesis 1:31 that ***"God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good"***? God had created the world and all within it in a state of perfection. If it was created as such, should not the man that he created also be able to redeem himself if he had fallen from grace due to sin? ***"For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive."*** I Corinthians 15:21, 22. If God had impregnated Mary, Jesus was God's son, yet Jesus preached ***"Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder."*** Matthew 19:4 to 6. So if Joseph and Mary lived together but never came together as so many churches preach, is this not against God's intent that couples should come together and be one flesh? God instructed man not to come between couples but it was okay if He did? ***"But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, Behold, thou art but a dead man, for the woman which thou hast taken; for she is a man's wife."*** Genesis 20:3. God is angry for Abimelech coming between a man and his wife, but He prevents Joseph and Mary from coming together for the duration of their entire marriage? We believe in God's holiness and don't believe He would do such a thing, nor would He have to because he created mankind with freewill and the ability to redeem himself. Also, be aware that there are many places in the Old Testament where God promises King David that one of his descendants would produce the man that would become the Messiah. ***"The LORD hath sworn in truth unto David; he will not turn from it; Of the fruit of thy body will I set upon thy throne."*** Psalm 132:11; ***"And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever."*** II Samuel 7:12. God was explicit in stating that from David's blood descendants, the Promised One would come whose kingdom would last forever.

The Bible tells us that Mary was the espoused wife of Joseph. To be espoused according to Jewish

law is different than being espoused according to Western standards. According to Western standards, to be espoused to another person is simply to be engaged but the couple are not considered man and wife. For that reason, if the man or woman wishes to break off the engagement, it can be done without much fuss and there are no legal concerns to deal with. However, when a Jewish couple became betrothed to one another, they were considered husband and wife. ***"If a damsel that is a virgin be betrothed unto an husband, and a man find her in the city, and he lie with her, then ye shall bring them both out unto the gate of that city, and ye shall stone with stones that they die; the damsel because she cried not, being in the city; and the man because he hath humbled his neighbour's wife so thou shalt put away evil from among you."*** Deuteronomy 22:23, 24. According to Middle Eastern culture, the espousal was binding so much so that if the man wanted to separate, he would have to write his espoused wife a bill of divorcement and make a public announcement before witnesses. From *The Mishnah, Seder Nashim Vol. III* on the subject of "kiddushin", we read the following from its General Introduction: ***"According to Biblical law, there are two stages to marriage. The first – known as erusin, or kiddushin - is the initial acquisition of the wife by the husband ... the couple is considered legally married. The wife may not be wed to anyone else; intimate relations with any other man is considered adultery and incurs the death penalty. In addition, erusin [kiddushin, betrothal] can be dissolved only by divorce ... Following the kiddushin, the bride returned to her father's home and remained there until the nisuin [marriage ceremony] ... Therefore, just as the divorce process is valid only if it includes the participation of two witnesses, so too must kiddushin be performed in the presence of two witnesses."*** To God, marriage is a very sacred institution. It was established by God and taught by our Messiah and his saints as sacred. Given that Joseph and Mary were espoused to one another at the time Joseph was visited by the angel, they were considered husband and wife so for God to impregnate Mary at this stage in their relationship, God in effect had come between a man and his wife. That does not make sense for a loving, just and merciful God to do such a thing.

Now that we have discussed the issues of the virgin birth concept and the Jewish betrothal at some length, let us return to discuss the verses from Matthew 1:18, 20. These verses state that Mary ***"was found with child of the Holy Ghost"*** and Joseph was told ***"that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost."*** Do these verses state that God impregnated Mary? No, they do not; they simply state that the child was of the Holy Spirit but that does not mean God impregnated her – we shall see that this simply referred to the fact that Jesus of Nazareth would be filled with Word of God and the Spirit of Truth in the course of time. The prophets of old had prophesied about the coming Messiah who would speak the words of God and follow His Will. God is omnipotent and all-knowing so he knows what direction each of us will take in our lives – it does not take away from our free-will just because he knows what we will do; the choices we make are still ours. As it pertained to Jesus, he received the Word and the gift of the power of the Holy Spirit at his baptism and God knew of Jesus from the time he created our world but it doesn't mean Jesus existed with God at the time of creation nor does it mean he was God.

"And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God." Luke 1:35. When most read this verse, they automatically think that it is saying God impregnated Mary because of how we have been taught throughout our lives. But was the "overshadowing of the Holy Spirit" unique to Mary? ***"But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John ... For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink, and he shall be filled with Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb."*** Luke 1:13, 15. Now analyse these verses which are speaking about the conception of John the Baptist. The verses don't just say the Holy Spirit 'overshadowed' Elisabeth but actually says John shall be 'filled with the Holy Spirit' while in the womb of Elisabeth. So if we say that God impregnated Mary based on the fact that she was 'overshadowed' by the Holy Spirit, why can't we

make the same claim pertaining to Elisabeth? Let us read more. *"There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years."* Luke 1:5 to 7. Study the verses we have read carefully – Elisabeth was a much older woman than Mary AND was barren. This makes Elisabeth's conception MORE miraculous than Mary because Mary was young and there is nothing in scripture to suggest that she was barren or otherwise had issues with conceiving children. Now when we read of the conception of John the Baptist, could it not be said that Elisabeth was more likely impregnated by God given her barren state?

The key to understanding what is meant by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit is understanding the Jewish view of conception. When we start paying attention while reading various parts of the Bible, we begin to understand that Mary's and Elisabeth's experiences with visions of angels and the involvement of the Holy Spirit was COMMON to Jewish woman who became pregnant. Let's review some of the pregnancies of famous Jewish woman from the Old Testament:

- Sarah, wife of Abraham – *"And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations: kings of people shall be of her."* Genesis 17:15, 16; *"Now Abraham and Sarah were old and well stricken in age; and it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also? And the LORD said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old? Is any thing too hard for the LORD? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son."* Genesis 18:11 to 14. The language used for the conception of Isaac is just as explicit as that for Jesus – God gave Abraham and Sarah their son. Notice it says God would visit Sarah and she was beyond child-bearing years. Like Elisabeth, for Sarah to conceive would be more miraculous than the young, fertile Mary.
- Rachel and Leah, Jacob's wives – *"And when the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb: but Rachel was barren ... And she conceived again, and bare a son; and said, Because the LORD hath heard that I was hated, he hath therefore given me this son also: and she called his name Simeon."* Genesis 29: 31, 33; *"And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel: and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? ... And Rachel said, God hath judged me, and hath also heard my voice, and hath given me a son: therefore called she his name Dan."* Genesis 30:2, 6. These verses suggest that God opened Leah's womb and in the case of both Leah and Rachel, God had given them their sons.
- Hannah, wife of Elkanah – *"But unto Hannah, he gave a worthy portion; for he [Elkanah] loved Hannah: but the LORD had shut up her womb. And her adversary also provoked her sore, for to make her fret, because the LORD had shut up her womb ... And she vowed a vow, and said, O LORD of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the LORD all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head."* I Samuel 1:5, 6, 11; *"And Eli blessed Elkanah and his wife, and said, The LORD give thee seed of this woman for the loan which is lent to the LORD. And they went unto their own home. And the LORD visited Hannah, so that she conceived, and bare three sons and two daughters. And the child Samuel grew before the LORD."* I Samuel 2:20, 21. From these verses, we can start seeing that God was considered involved whether a woman became pregnant or not. Hannah is said to have been given children by God despite the fact that she had difficulty conceiving children.

There are other examples within Scriptures that describe God's role in the conceiving of children. What we must admit is that Mary's conception was in reality what many other women from the Bible experienced and was common, thus, if we say that God impregnated Mary because the Holy Spirit overshadowed her, then we must also say the same for these other woman from the Bible because most of them were barren or had difficulty conceiving, making their conceptions more miraculous than Mary's. But is it reasonable to think that God impregnated all these various women? Of course not. The Bible is describing the Jewish view of conception, that is, God is involved in EVERY conception, especially with male children because of how the Jews were awaiting for their Messiah to come. To shed some light on Jewish thought about conception, read the following from *"The Syrian Christ"* by Abraham Mitrie Rihbany (chapter 2): ***"I do not know how many times I heard it stated in my native land and at my own fireside that heavenly messengers in the forms of patron saint or angel came to pious, childless wives, in dreams and visions, and cheered them with the promise of maternity ... In a most literal sense we always understood the saying of the psalmist, 'Children are a heritage of the LORD.' Above and beyond all natural agencies, it was He who turned barrenness to fecundity and worked the miracle of birth ... and beyond the free realism of the Syrian in the speaking of conception and birth, lies a deeper fact. To Eastern people especially the Semites, reproduction in all the world of life is profoundly sacred. It is God's life reproducing itself in the life of man..."*** It should be pointed out that the author was a Syrian raised in the Greek Orthodox faith and migrated to America. His insight is valuable because of having lived in the Middle East and understood their ways of thinking as it pertained to God's participation in conception of children. Another insight into Jewish thinking is explained by the Jewish author Hayyin Schneid who wrote the book *"Family"*; from chapter four on the topic of "Birth": ***"According to a talmudic homily, there are three partners in man: God, the father, and the mother. The father supplies the white substance of which the child's bones, sinews, nails, brain and the white of the eyes are formed. The mother supplies the red substance of which are formed the skin, flesh, hair, blood and the dark of the eyes. God supplies the spirit, the breath, beauty of features, eyesight, hearing, and the ability to speak and to walk, understanding and discernments. At death, God reclaims His part and leaves the father and the mother with their parts ... A man puts things in a closed skin bottle with the opening facing upwards and yet the contents may or may not be preserved. God, on the other hand, places the embryo in an open womb with the orifice facing downwards and yet it is preserved."*** While this excerpt is not without its folklore, what it does clarify is how Jews believe in God's intimate participation in every conception; notice it is God who is given credit for placing the embryo in the womb! The Jews understood that the Father was the originator of all life which is why they acknowledge God's involvement in every conception.

Once we understand the Jewish way of thinking in respect of conception and contemplate the conceptions of the many other women of the Bible, when we go back and read the passages relating to Mary being filled with or overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, this was a common perception of Jewish thought. We must not let our preconceived notions and the things we have been taught growing up to influence the truth that is in front of us. We should not make Mary's conception something other than what it was. Another writing that provides insight to Jewish thought is a book authored by T. Walker called *"Is Not This the Son of David?"*; from chapter one: ***"These people had come to regard themselves as the sacred offspring of the mighty spirit of the Holy. In the conception of children of their religious community there was recognized one of the chief manifestation of his glory in our midst. In their ritual of thanksgiving this was given a place of very significant prominence. This sublime idea of the creative providence of Jehovah in the life of the family was in their day native to the pious minds of the Synagogue. Among them it was reverently taken for granted that neither male nor female could or should be conceived without the presence of the "Shechinah" with the man and woman. The Holy One was piously thought by them to be an essential co-partner with the devout father and the devout mother in the production of the child."***

In closing this topic, let it be known that we are not saying that Mary and Elisabeth were not blessed because we believe they were. Elisabeth gave birth to the 'Elijah' who was prophesied to come before the Messiah and Mary had the honour of giving birth to the man who would bring salvation to those who sought God. The idea of God literally placing the seed in Mary comes from ancient paganism but we have shown that this propagated belief shows a lack of understanding by those churches teaching as such because the Bible itself has many examples of God's perceived direct involvement in the conception of children. Let us ask ourselves: if Jesus was born as a result of a virgin conceiving without the involvement of a man, why was that not the sign of his Messiahship? Most churches believe that Isaiah 7:14, which states, ***"Therefore the LORD himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel..."*** believe the 'sign' to God's people in this verse is the woman who shall bear the Messiah but then why doesn't Jesus refer to that prophecy when asked what was the proof of his Messiahship? Instead, Jesus gave as his sign of his Messiahship that he would be three days and three nights in the grave and then be resurrected (see Matthew 12:38 to 40). The truth is, the 'sign' in Isaiah was not about the woman who bore the Messiah but about the child who would know to refuse evil and choose good. The verse simply states that a pure woman would give birth to the Messiah but it does not say she remains a virgin after conception. The description of God's involvement in the conception of Jesus was similar to the other Jewish women mentioned in the Bible. Jesus had come into this world as every other human did. ***"Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh."*** Romans 1:3.