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The virgin birth--its historical credibility and its current value for Christian thought

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SENIOR THESIS

THE VIRGIN BIRTH,--- ITS HISTORICAL CREDIBILITY
AND ITS VALUE FOR CHRISTIAN THOUGHT.

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THE VIRGIN BIRTH,-- ITS HISTORICAL CREDIBILITY
AND ITS VALUE TO PRESENT-DAY CHRISTIAN THOUGHT.

The evidences for the Virgin Birth in the New Testament are limited to the two narratives of Matt. and Luke. Both these narratives come from the Apostolic age; they are quite independent of each other and although they have discrepancies yet on the whole they are not contradictory, and so they really complement and corroborate one another. We shall have occasion a little later on to look more closely at the discrepancies of the two narratives.

From both the New Testament and from contemporary history we are led to believe that the Virgin Birth was universally accepted by the early church, except by the Ebionites and some Gnostics. There is not a word in the New Testament which goes to deny the fact of the virgin birth, and this certainly goes to show that the doctrine found no opposition among the New Testament writers. Allen says that the early Catholic Church faced a problem that demanded reality, and by asserting that the Son of God had actually been born

as a human man, gave reality to their deity. Then too, the church was protesting against Docetism,-- the belief that Christ's humanity was only an appearance. This will help to account for the adoption of the virgin birth into the creeds of the church. Ignatius and Origen both used the clause to show the actual human birth of Christ rather than to show his virgin birth.

The Ebionites denied the virgin birth because they denied the essential divinity of Christ. They claimed Jesus was the son of Joseph and Mary and that He became the Messiah by union with the divine Spirit at His baptism. The Gnostics denied the virgin birth because they believed in the necessary corruption of all matter and it was not possible for the Son of God to be born by a woman and live as a real man in the flesh for this would be a degradation of the Son. The Gnostic position was a strong antithesis to that of the Ebionites and resulted in a denial of the humanity of Christ.

Because of the opposition of these two sources, it became the task of the Infancy stories thru ages

of dogmas to keep alive faith in a human Christ. It also did much to keep alive for us that faith which holds equally and firmly to the divine and the human in Christ. This is one good reason why the doctrine of the virgin birth ought not to be lightly surrendered. It is also important to note that the doctrine became prominent not in trying to assert the divinity or sinlessness of Christ, but in an effort to prove His humanity.

When we come to consider the possible origin of the Infancy stories, the only satisfactory explanation is that it had a factual basis. It has been claimed that the narrative in Matthew is written from the point of view of Joseph, while the one in Luke is written from the point of view of Mary. This view is no longer very generally held and it is agreed that both were written from the Joseph point of view.

As to the source of Matthew we know but little. It may not have formed a part of the original Matthew and may have been attached by a later editor. The story in Luke no doubt had its origin in Mary herself and perhaps reached Luke thru one of the women mentioned in Luke 8:3 and 24:10. Because of the very nature of the incident it was natural that it should

be kept quite a family secret and this may be the reason the disciples did not know of the miraculous birth. It was prudence and propriety for the fact to be kept a secret at least as long as Christ was alive.

One of the hardest problems for those to solve who deny the virgin birth is to account for the rise, publication and acceptance of the story. This is an enigma, except as we base it on actual fact. It is true that a great variety of theories have been advanced by those who deny the Virgin Birth but none of them are adequate. To explain how a story of heathen origin found its way into the accepted doctrines of a hostile Jewish people requires more than mere assumption or supposition. The Jews were prejudiced against all heathen advances. And to account for the heathen story finding acceptance without even arousing opposition on the part of the apostolic or orthodox group of Christians is next to inconceivable.

The story of a miraculous conception fits into the general Christian conception of the supernatural character of the person of Christ; from what we think of His mission, that His advent should be a miracle is exactly what is to be expected. We are proud of

the fact that we have a Christ who was able to work miracles, and if He was the Godman, the mediator between God and sinful man, it seems quite within even rational grounds to accept the virgin birth. Then too, we must remember that faith pushes back both logic and reason, and surely faith has no trouble in looking upon the story of the virgin birth as having a factual basis. There is nothing in the narratives that causes Christian faith to falter in accepting them, but on the other hand it is the kind of an advent that Christ needed to be commensurate with His exaltation and ascension.

We now come to some of the more common objections and perhaps the main objections that have been urged against a belief in the virgin birth. As we take up each one of these various objections we shall make whatever criticism we think necessary, trying always to be fair and unprejudiced, because this paper has been undertaken without any a priori conclusions whatever.

The so called philosophical objection to the narratives of the nativity grows out of the antipathy to all the miraculous elements in the life of Christ.

Since this group can admit of no miraculous elements at all, why of course they object to the virgin birth. We can see that this objection is quite arbitrary and scarcely warrants any reply.

Then objections of a religious nature have been made such as: the doctrine of the virgin birth lowers the notion of the Saviour's divinity to the material sphere making it a mystery affecting the bodily organism. It does away with Jesus' full and real humanity by putting a barrier between Jesus and the race. This last objection suspects a fictitious notion of humanity. Then again it tends to exclude the intervention of providence from the normal and regular play of the forces of the physical world. This would apply to all miracles just as well as to the miraculous birth. Again it is said to unduly exalt virginity and conflicts with the Christian conception of marriage. But this is entirely negated by Mary's own example.

It has also been argued that Joseph and Mary are referred to as the parents of Jesus. "And the parents brought in the child Jesus". Luke 2:27. "And his father and his mother were marvelling at the

things which were spoken concerning him." Luke 2:33.

"And His parents went every year to Jerusalem." Luke

2:41 "And the boy Jesus tarried behind, and his

parents knew it not." Luke 2:43. "Behold, thy father

and I (Mary) sought thee sorrowing." Luke 2:48. True

enough these are references to Joseph and Mary as if

they were his parents, but still this is just what we

would expect; it is the natural thing to speak of them

in that way. People outside of the immediate family

may not know of the miraculous birth and at any rate

it could not receive any prominence while Jesus was

still a small boy. If the fact had been announced at

this time it would have been looked upon as preposter-

ous. Even if Jesus had been an adopted son, people

would speak of his foster parents as "his parents".

The fact that people generally looked upon Jesus as

the son of Joseph and Mary caused it to become the

current idea of contemporary writers, so that little

account of the miraculous birth is to be expected in

the writings of the early centuries.

It is also urged against the belief that Joseph

and Mary were much surprised at the words of Jesus in

the temple at the age of twelve; that had they been

aware of a miraculous conception they would not have been so surprised. But it is surely not necessary to suppose that for the minds of the parents the miraculous conception furnished any basis whatever for a complete induction as to the future life of the child.

Another objection is that the genealogies, although generally admitted that both Matthew and Luke respect the line of Joseph, are neither self-consistent nor mutually consistent, and that hence they cancel each other. Also that since both genealogies are of Joseph, the authors must have looked upon him as the father of Jesus. Matthew evidently looked upon Jesus as having the legal rights of a son of Joseph, and hence to be called a son of David. Matthew may have only accounted for a throne succession.

In viewing these discrepancies it must be remembered that the Oriental mind did not feel them as we do. How far the two accounts can be harmonized is a question. In statements of fact, they converge upon six points.--- The birth from a virgin, the name Jesus, the birth at Bethlehem, the Davidic descent, the reign of Herod and the residence at Nazareth. Of these the Davidic descent, the residence at Nazareth and the

general date are scarcely questioned.

Perhaps the biggest question is that of the genealogies. However they are of no vital importance to the general subject of Christ's descent from David. We must acknowledge that there are discrepancies in the genealogies which cannot be harmonized but this, I say, does not affect the fact that Christ descended from David. Lord Hervey says that since there are only two names that are the same in both accounts, we must conclude that the purpose of the two authors was not the same, so he claims that Matthew intended to trace the theocratic birthright of Jesus thru Joseph to David. He makes it a legal descent. Then as Luke's account centers around Mary, he holds that Luke's genealogy is that of Mary. But this position is not generally held by scholars today.

Neither account claims to be complete, so that there is nothing in either chronology to shut out events recorded by one and omitted by the other. It seems that Luke gives the main sequel of events while Matthew's events are more in the nature of episodes. Apart from the genealogies the differences of the two accounts are such as would naturally occur

in most any two documents which looked at events from varying points of view.

It is pointed out that later statements in the New Testament are inconsistent with the narratives of the virgin birth in Matthew and Luke. According to Briggs the facts concerning the Infancy in both Gospels were taken from written sources belonging to the primitive groundwork of the gospel stories and that they were added to the present Gospels and connected with prophecy by the literary authors of the completed editions. This he thinks will account for any later accounts that are inconsistent.

Mary and Joseph are spoken of as the parents of Jesus, (outside of the nativity stories themselves which I considered under a former head in the paper.) "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary?" Mt. 13:55. "Is not this Joseph's son?" Luke 4:22. "Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." John 1:45. Then the story of Jesus in the temple as well as the attitude of the brethren in Mark 3:20-35, is said to be contrary to the virgin birth. These objections have all been answered in former statements, and need receive no further considerations here.

We now come to the cardinal objections, i.e. the silence of Mark, John and Paul. It is held that the silence of Mark is due to ignorance on his part. That is, that the story of the virgin birth originated after Mark's gospel had been written. But a better reason, is that such a story does not fit into Mark's plan for he began with the Baptism, but that is no evidence that the life of Jesus began then. The main source of Mark's account was Peter's public preaching and this of course took no account of the birth of Jesus, at least not to any great extent. Acts 1:22 tells us that the preaching of the apostles began with the Baptism and centered around the resurrection. Mark confines himself entirely to the public ministry of Jesus, so that his silence has very little bearing on the question at hand in this paper. At the very best Mark's silence only proves that the virgin birth did not form a part of the apostolic preaching, and it proves no more. It has been claimed that Mark 3:31-35 is inconsistent with the annunciation to Mary and the miraculous birth, but this is far from being decisive. Mark does not say that Jesus was the son of Joseph and Mary so that his silence militates as strong-

ly against the historical view as it does against the critical view.

The argument from the silence of John. John's silence does not imply ignorance on his part for he wrote after the two nativity stories had been written. Some claim that John intended to repudiate the virgin birth while others claimed that he implied it in his Logos theory. John 7:5 "for even his brethren did not believe on him" 6:42 "and they said, is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know", are cited as marks of denial, while Mary's consciousness of the greatness of her son is favorable to his acceptance of the miraculous birth. 2:5 "And Mary the mother said unto the servants, whatsoever he saith unto you, do it." Then 7:41-42 has been quoted as also favorable because it favors the birth in Bethlehem. Again it has been claimed that John's Logos doctrine is a substitute for the virgin birth, while 1:13 has been claimed to distinctly favor the virgin birth. "Born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

It seems to me very doubtful that John rejected the virgin birth, for if he did I think he

would have done so in more decisive terms. The primary interest of John was in the controversy of the reality of the Incarnation. The miraculous birth was of smaller consequence and no one would deny it if they accepted the Incarnation, so that John directs his attention to the latter. It might be said that the silence of both Mark and John is due to a lack of interest in that particular topic. Godet says for John to have divulged the secret of the virgin birth "would have been to lay the holiest family mystery upon to profane and useless discussion."

The interest of Paul centers in the preaching and resurrection of Jesus. Here again some claim that Romans 1:3 "who was born of the seed of David, according to the flesh," and Gal. 4:4 "God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law," show that Paul knew nothing of the virgin birth. Stevens in his Pauline Theology holds that Paul was ignorant of the miraculous birth. But Paul's close relation to Luke and his own exalted conception of Christ would seem to justify his knowing of and also his belief in the virgin birth. Romans 8:3 and Phil. 2:7 ("but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being

made in the likeness of men", are used to point to Paul's belief in the miraculous birth. No doubt it did hold a central place in his thought. However it is quite significant that Paul says nothing inconsistent with the virgin birth.

From the silence of Mark, John and Paul it could not be argued that the virgin birth was not a historic fact. The argument from silence is always at best a dubious thing and in forming final conclusions ought not to become a pillar argument of support. Any argument based on silence carries but little weight except with those persons who desire to use the argument for a priori reasons. The most that the silence of these New Testament writers can do is to show conclusively that the virgin birth was of no special significance to apostolic preaching.

We now come to the objection of those who say the virgin story is a myth and that as such it has a heathen origin. Because the double narrative is poetical it is claimed to be a myth, a beautiful legendary piece of poetry. This poet theory breaks down entirely at the Herod incident, for such a cruel incident would never be tolerated unless it was his-

toric. Then Luke tells us at the beginning of his gospel that what follows has a claim on historic accuracy.

Orr contends that the heathen had no proper doctrine of a virgin birth. Their legends were coarse, the god appearing in the form of some animal. There may be a sort of analogy between them, but that does not discredit the virgin birth of Christ. Harnack along with others holds that the oldest Christianity strictly refrained from everything polytheistic and heathen. That early Christianity was impervious to all heathen ideas. So that it would have been next to impossible for a story of heathen origin to pass the barriers of race, beat down the guard of national prejudice and become current in Jewish minds. We seem warranted therefore in claiming that the gospel story did not have as its source any heathen myths. Cheyne claims the idea was not of late borrowing from heathen sources, but that it came down from an early Babylonian time. Lobstein has worked out this theory more fully and we will give attention to his views.

Lobstein claims that faith in Jesus regarded Him as the Son of God in the sense that He was the

Messiah. That it did not imply His personal birth nor his preexistence. It meant His birth as the Messiah and perhaps took place at the Baptism. This is a theocratic view. Then dogmatic thought was compelled to explain the origin of his great personality. He says to do this Paul adopted the preexistence of Christ; that John accepted the Logos doctrine. These were both metaphysical origins of Christ. Then a physical origin was sought and this resulted in a product of the imagination. In forming this various forces came into play such as Old Testament prophecy, Isaiah 7:14 being especially used, and the final result was the story of the miraculous birth.

A criticism of this view. In the first place the bias in favor of religious and moral superiority of virginity is unknown to the Old Testament. In fact the Jewish Christians were the only ones to reject the virgin birth and this would not seem as though the story arose on Jewish soil. The transition from a child promised by God to the idea of a virgin birth is far from being as easy as Lobstein thinks it is. The idea of virgin birth is rather foreign to the Jewish mind. Then too the allotted time needed for the myth to develop as he outlines it is wholly

wanting. Isaiah 7:14 is not sufficient to account for the story. The sum of evidence is strong against the notion that the miraculous narrative had its origin on Jewish soil.

I am forced to conclude that after canvassing the whole field of objections and considering each one in an unbiased light, with no apriori considerations, I find no one of them sufficient to deny the conception that the virgin birth had a factual basis. In fact taking all the objections together they have failed to convince me. There still remains rational grounds for accepting the historical credibility of the miraculous birth of Jesus Christ.

II. The value of the Virgin Birth for Christian faith.

We now come to consider the value of the virgin birth to present day Christian thought. Here I shall discuss first its doctrinal value and then its practical value. What is the relation and value of the virgin birth to the doctrine of the Incarnation?

Tertullian was the first to connect the Incarnation in any dogmatic fashion with the miraculous conception of Christ. The church of the East, with the

exception of Asia Minor did not regard the virgin birth as essential to the Christian faith. Origen in "On First Principles" does not use the virgin birth in his argument for the Incarnation. The Eastern church gave more importance to the baptism of Christ than to his personal birth. The Council of Nicaea met for the purpose of considering the doctrine of the incarnation, yet the Creed of the Council does not contain the virgin birth. This does not prove that the Council did not accept the virgin birth, but it does show that they did not base the Incarnation upon it.

Coleridge said, in speaking of the relation of these two doctrines, "But were it asked me: do you then believe our Lord to have been the Son of Mary by Joseph? I reply, It is a point of religion with me to have no belief one way or the other. I am in this way like St. Paul, more than content not to know Christ himself *κατὰ σάρκα*. It is enough for me to know that the Son of God became flesh, *σὰρξ ἐγένετο γεγόμενος ἐκ γυναικός*." This clearly shows that Coleridge did not think of the virgin birth as essential to the doctrine of the Incarnation.

Paul and John did not base the idea of the Incarnation on the miraculous birth. In fact the virgin birth has no necessary connection with the Incarnation. It is quite compatible with it. However there is quite a noticeable tendency on the part of many of those who deny or reject the virgin birth to also reject the Incarnation. While logically and historically the Incarnation does not depend on the virgin birth, the conception of the miraculous birth does help the popular mind to grasp the meaning of the Incarnation in a better fashion.

What relation do we find between the virgin birth and the sinlessness and uniqueness of Christ? Many think that the virgin birth is a necessary condition of Christ's sinlessness. The ones who advance this argument have their ideas go back to the Augustinian theory of the fall of the human race, of a tainted hereditary handed down by natural generation. That Christ might be free from this sin imparted to the human race by Adam's sin, it was necessary that He be conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin.

This view finds no support in the New Testament. The Holy Spirit spoken of both in Matthew 1:20 and in

Luke 1:35 is the divine virtue, the life-giving breath, the creative force, which is the attribute of the omnipotence of God. There is no passage in the New Testament which gives the slightest connection between the miraculous birth of Jesus and His sinlessness. Neither the gospels nor Paul even hint that the moral and religious purity of Jesus was accounted for by His immaculate conception in Mary's womb. Then too, this theory raised more difficulties than it can solve, such as, Does not the transmission of sin take place thru the mother as well as thru the father? Was not Mary's flesh stained by original sin?

This view will lead either to Docetism, according to which Christ was not born (ἐκ) of Mary, but thru (διὰ) her who was his reputed mother, or else to the Roman doctrine which extends the immaculate conception from Jesus to Mary and makes her sinless. But this latter only pushes the problem back another generation and does not solve it.

After carefully considering the relation of the virgin birth to the sinlessness of Christ we reach the following conclusions. (1) It is admitted that both Paul and John held to the sinlessness of Jesus

without basing it on the virgin birth. (2) It is very clear that the virgin birth cannot account for the sinlessness of Christ, for He could inherit sin from his mother as well as from His father. (3) The sinlessness of Jesus is bound up with our general conception of His person and work and this conception is logically and historically independent of the virgin birth. (4) Nevertheless, it must be admitted as true, in view of the doctrine of original sin and the modern doctrine of heredity, that the virgin birth does help the popular imagination to grasp the idea of the sinlessness of Jesus. (5) As in the case of the Incarnation, there is a tendency on the part of those who deny the virgin birth of Christ to also deny the virgin life of Jesus Christ.

The maintenance of the divinity of Christ is not at all dependent upon the virgin birth because divinity proper is no object for generation in time. At best the miraculous conception could effect only the human in Christ.

What practical value if any has the doctrine of the virgin birth to present-day Christian faith? It is necessary here to say a word about the phrase which

we find in the Apostles Creed. As we have already said the primary object in alluding to the birth of Christ, was to maintain the reality of his human birth. At first the Creed was chiefly concerned with the assertion of the full humanity of Christ and not his divinity.

In the earliest form of the creed, known as the Old Roman Creed, originating about 150 A. D. the clause "conceived by the Holy Spirit" had not been inserted. This part of the Creed then read, "Born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, and buried, rose again from the dead on the third day." This shows that the early Catholic Church added the virgin birth of Christ to the Apostolic preaching of His passion and resurrection. According to Paul only His passion and resurrection were of importance in the "rule of faith". No where in apostolic preaching do we find any mention of the virgin birth. Not until the decline and decay of the Eastern church, after the fourth century, did the doctrine come to receive special stress and then it was in close association with the worship of the virgin Mary herself.

The virgin birth has a great practical value for large numbers of people because it stands so closely related to the great Christmas festival. Around the incident of the virgin mother and child there has grown up a sacred set of traditional beliefs and mental pictures which for the popular imagination have a vital connection with the virgin birth and these carry with them real religious value.

Lastly what should be the attitude of the modern preacher toward the doctrine of the virgin birth? Here I will advance several conclusions and in these conclusions there will be found the general results of the whole paper. As before stated these results have been reached by keeping an open mind and an unprejudiced attitude toward all angles of the question.

(1) We should insist that the belief in the virgin birth is not at all essential to Christian faith.

(2) We should not dogmatically reject the doctrine. Such rejection implies a naturalistic bias and also shows ignorance of the really strong arguments in favor of the doctrine, and it also reveals a lack of sympathy with the historic past of the church. The

position of Dr. Bowne is quite commendable. He said, "so far as I know I believe....I certainly do not reject it."

(3) The story of a miraculous birth is in eminent accord with the unique personality and career of Christ. If one asks why the Son of man was to have this exceptional kind of birth, the answer is that He was an exceptional kind of man.

(4) In discussing the virgin birth the preacher should lay stress not on a historical or non-historical, but on the religious meaning. The virgin birth rightly interpreted is a protest against the view that Christ came forth out of a process of evolution from humanity or heredity. Its introduction into the Creed had for its purpose the affirmation of the true humanity of Christ as against the Gnostic view, and not his miraculous birth. Later stress was laid on the virgin herself. The virgin birth was a rejection of the old Jewish conception of the Messiah as a Davidic offspring. It freed Christianity from Judaism and from the house of Joseph.

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