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ART. IV.—THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF CHRIST.

WHY IS IT AFFIRMED IN SCRIPTURE? AND IS IT "A TEST CASE" OF THE TRUTH OF CHRISTIANITY?

THE subject of the Virgin Birth of Christ has recently become, to an unusual degree, a matter of public controversy. It seems, therefore, well to raise the question, Why and in what character is the subject stated in Scripture?

In the *Nineteenth Century and After* for September, 1904, Mr. Mallock, in controversy with the Bishop of Worcester and Dr. Sanday, states that "there are four great miracles" which the Bishop declares to be essential and refuses to abandon—viz., Christ's Virgin Birth, His Godhead, His Resurrection, and His Ascension. From these four he selects one, the Virgin Birth, and says: "The reality of this miracle we may take as a test case."

But in attempting to make this the special test of the truth of the Christian religion is he not making a very serious blunder? Is the subject set before us in Scripture in that character? and is it reasonable to regard such an event as if it were, or could be, suited to be "a test case," and be sustainable by evidence acceptable to an opponent or a doubter of the Christian religion?

An essential element in the religion of the Gospel it may be without being therefore adapted to be "a test case" of the truth of that religion. And Christians who accept the Virgin Birth as a historical fact and as an essential because it is affirmed in the Gospels (whether or not it seems to them to be an essential on grounds of speculative theology) may reasonably deny that it can be argued as "a test case," without implying thereby any doubt on their part of the historical accuracy of the Gospel statements.

The point at issue in this paper is simply the suitability or otherwise of this particular miracle to be argued between believers and unbelievers as "a test-case" of the truth of Christianity. And, further, if it be not offered in Scripture as an evidence of Christianity, nor suited to be discussed as "a test case" of its truth, why is it affirmed in Scripture?

Mr. Mallock would doubtless not object to be classed among unbelievers. Yet as such he has no proper status in the consideration of this subject.

Not once in the whole New Testament is the subject urged upon unbelievers to convince them of the truth of Christianity, or as one of the bases of the religion.

The Resurrection of Christ was so urged continually. The Apostles were distinctively "witnesses of His Resurrection."

They had repeatedly seen the risen Christ. On that matter they were willing to face the world at all hazards. But on the subject of the Virgin Birth they maintained, so far as we know, a reverent silence in controversy with unbelief.

Why, then, and in what character, is the subject stated in Scripture?

As a partial *explanation* of God's method in providing a sinless Saviour for a sinful race—an *explanation granted to faith*, not a subject offered to unbelief as a "test" of the truth of the religion.

As it was in the early days of Christianity so it is still. The wondrous personality of the Lord Jesus claims reverence, His words of holiness and mercy to sinners touch consciences and win love. Then the question may arise in the hearts and on the lips of His true disciples as of old: "What manner of man is this?"

That winds and waves should obey Him was a light thing in comparison with this, that He spoke, and though now unseen, still speaks to the consciences and hearts of all kinds of people, and they "obey Him," confessing their sins and loving Him as their Saviour. And yet this Preacher of repentance, with unique power over the consciences of others, stands Himself apart from others, with a calm conscience, knowing no repentance and claiming to be free from sin walking upon the waves of this troublesome world! A wondrous Man truly! so tender in His sympathy even with the vilest, and yet "separate from sinners"; not in outward show like the Pharisees, but evidently separate in character and life, as both friends and foes could see—ay, and can see still. But more: He not only stirs the conscience to repentance; He also says: "Thy sins be forgiven thee." And while objectors ask, "Who is this that forgiveth sins also?" to humble penitents in some mysterious way His word comes as a word of power, calming the troubled conscience; and the gentle, sympathetic Jesus becomes, as it were, transfigured, until He who is more truly than any other "the Son of Man" is seen to be also "the Son of God."

To some of those who have received Him on evidence and by experience as the sinless Saviour, God incarnate, the revelation of His Virgin Birth is not an isolated wonder, not the figment of a credulous imagination, not a legend of the past; but it is a part, and perhaps comparatively a small part, in the great revelation of God's infinite love to man—a detail in a vast plan of superhuman wisdom and grace, yet a detail that is far more suggestive to reverent faith than would have been an entirely new creation of a Man (or, rather, a manlike Being) *not* of our flesh and blood to be our Saviour—if, indeed, such

a Being could have been our Saviour according to the Divine method and purpose, which seem to require a *Redeemer with a right to redeem His brethren.*

And, further, this detail of His Incarnation is not an isolated miracle, because it is wonderfully in harmony with very much else past and present in God's dealings with humanity from the days of Eden until now. For from the Divine purpose recorded in Gen. i. 26-28 to the end of the Bible, and onward to the present time, God's dealings with man have been one consistent whole of gracious love, transcending human thought, including forbearance with sinners, tender mercy to the penitent, however vile, the use of man's moral evil for man's probation and education, the use of manhood to effect salvation, and of forgiven sinners to preach the Gospel of salvation; the agency of His Holy Spirit in the heart of sinners to lead them to repentance and to sanctify them, making them fit to be His instruments of blessing to others, and culminating in "those good things that pass man's understanding that God has prepared for them that love Him."

And, turning to science, we may see that, as there is nothing too great in the universe for the infinitely great God who rules over all, so there is nothing too small for Him, and microscopic cells are as truly part of His universe as are gigantic suns illuminating space; and, moreover, microscopic cells may be the embryos of the most wonderful of His living creatures upon earth.

Thus, the Incarnation, although probably the greatest manifestation of Divine condescension and love, is not out of harmony with the universe of Nature, but is rather a crown of glory for Nature, and especially for man, preparing for that manifestation of the liberty of the glory of the children of God for which creation waits (see Rom. viii.), when glorified humanity shall inherit the fulness of the Spirit, and Christ shall be all and in all.

The Virgin Birth of Christ is one of the inner truths of Christianity. As such it rightly stands in the creeds of believers; but it is not a matter to be discussed with unbelievers as if it were, or in its nature could be, a "test" of the truth of the religion. Indeed, it seems strange and unreasonable that on such a point Christians should even for a moment consent to discuss the evidences with unbelievers.

If a believer were to offer to discuss the Virgin Birth with an unbeliever, he would do a foolish thing, *as he has not evidence to offer of a kind acceptable to an unbeliever.* Similarly, if an unbeliever proposes to make it "a test case" of the truth of Christianity, he is acting unfairly, for he

must surely be aware that he is unready to receive any evidence that can now be offered.

But this is a totally different thing from being able to disprove the reality of the event. There are many facts and realities, *even in our own experience*, of which we cannot offer demonstrative evidence to anyone, nor even probable evidence to an objector who is predisposed to doubt that particular in our own personal experience. Yet the fact remains a fact.

The case for the Resurrection of Christ is greatly different from that for the Virgin Birth. The Resurrection of Christ is definitely and emphatically set before us in Scripture, and was affirmed in Jerusalem shortly after the event, as a case in which the evidence of "witnesses" was offered, and that not hesitatingly, but vigorously and triumphantly. It is quite evident that the Apostles and their companions, when their own preliminary doubts were dispelled by overwhelming evidence, bore their own testimony to the fact, without the slightest fear that their testimony could be overthrown. The evidence is cumulative, and very much stronger than that required by the English courts of law to hang a man for murder.

The modern reasons for slighting that evidence and denying the fact are chiefly founded (directly or indirectly) on difficulties of thought in reference to body, soul, spirit, and "spiritual body," which are not for the present explicable by the theories or resources of science. But as we have been taught recently in the name of science, accepted hypotheses are not sufficient reasons for refusing evidence that is inconsistent with them. The evidence should be considered upon its own merits without prejudice.

Let the subject of the Resurrection of Christ be discussed in all its bearings fully and fairly without prejudice. It is the true "test case." But the Virgin Birth is not in Scripture "a test case," and it surely ought not to be so regarded now.

If the Resurrection of Christ be not true and real, the Virgin Birth needs no consideration. But if St. Paul's evidence and logic are correct, Christ is risen from the dead, the Gospel of Christ is true and, we may add, therefore the positive statements in Scripture of the Virgin Birth of Christ are believable, and throw some light on the profound mystery of the Incarnation of "the Word of God," by which He became a Member of our sinful race, "yet without sin."

The Creeds are not apologies for Christianity, but expressions of faith, and so they contain some statements not suited for discussion as "tests" of the truth of Christianity. *E.g.*, an unbeliever has no status for discussion of "the forgiveness of sins" as "a test case"; but to him who can honestly say,

"I believe in the forgiveness of sins," those words express a precious truth to be enjoyed, but not to be discussed with those who do not appreciate sin and forgiveness.

There are other "tests" on which Christians and unbelievers may discuss fairly, upon data acceptable by both sides, which is the essential of fair discussion. And Christians make a great mistake in undertaking a timid defence instead of a vigorous attack, after the example of the Apostles.

May God grant us more Apostolic Bishops!

Though the Virgin Birth of Christ is not a "test" to be discussed with unbelievers, believers may produce arguments to strengthen weak faith and to repel the attacks of unbelief.

Objection is raised on physiological grounds, and it is affirmed that Virgin Birth would not secure its supposed purpose, because heredity proves that a child derives its "imperfections" from the mother, as well as from the father.

This argument on the part of those who assert the impossibility of such a birth seems to be unsound, for the very assertion in the name of science of the impossibility of Virgin Birth establishes the great importance of the fact that they deny and yet seek to minimize. Neither physiology nor psychology are as yet competent to decide on some of the questions involved. But at present the unbelievers seem to agree that such a birth, if it took place, would be a miracle; and in this they are in agreement with both St. Mary and the angel.

But if God chooses to intervene by a miracle, can human science decide exactly what and how much will be the effect of the miracle?

According to the Scripture revelation, the result of the Incarnation, of which the Virgin Birth was a detail, was a real and complete Man, truly of Adam's race, inheriting human weaknesses, "touched with the feeling of our infirmities . . . in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. iv. 15). And while He was really and truly one of our race, He was also "the second man," "the last Adam," by the power of the life-giving Spirit of God.

E. SEELEY.

