

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF OUR LORD.

BY THE VERY REV. LE B. E. FRENCH, M.A., Dean of Clonfert and Examining Chaplain to the Bishop of Killaloe and Clonfert.

THE Virgin birth of our blessed Lord is a stumbling-block to many, not only among unbelievers, but even to not a few who would claim (in St. James's words) to "hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ." There is an influential and increasing body of both clergy and laity in the Church of England who are far from giving an "ex animo" assent to the tenet of the Creed, "conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary." A writer in the *Guardian* within the past few months says: "Our faith, like other faiths, has been set in a mythological framework." As he is writing on "the deity of Christ" it will not be questioned that the Virgin birth story is included in the "myths" which he thinks have been incorporated in the Christian faith.

We have become accustomed to such statements of late years. It will not, again, be doubted that the traditional belief concerning our Lord's birth is reckoned among the "impossible dogmas and the evident myths on which they are based," which we have been told are "inconsistent with a plain statement of the essentials of Christianity," or that the scriptural story is among the "inaccurate" and "questionable" history to which other writers have referred in published articles; or that there is an allusion to it in the sentence, "the Jesus of popular religion is largely a mythological figure." Some will notice with relief that it is not impossible to combine acceptance of a mythological element in the Christian religion, as it is generally understood, with belief in the supernatural birth of our Lord. This seems to be the position of Bishop Barnes. In his celebrated sermon preached before the University of Cambridge last October he says: "Let us grant that in the Gospels we have the results of popular preaching and popular myth-making: that the records are not history in the modern sense, but in part results of imaginative meditation and religious enthusiasm"; but it does not appear that he is prepared positively to deny the Virgin birth story or to apply the adjective "mythological" to it as expressing his own belief. A little later in the same sermon he says: "We believe Jesus to have been divine not because of His Virgin birth—such births are common enough in the insect world—but because in Himself and in His teaching He seems to us to reveal God." One gathers from his restrained language that he has not receded from the position he occupied in 1921 when he said in Manchester Cathedral: "I accept the authority of St. Luke, and hold that I can justify my belief in the miraculous birth by sound arguments."

There are however not wanting among recognised leaders in

theological circles those who plainly reject this "belief." Some years ago Dr. Bethune-Baker, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, at the annual Conference of Modern Churchmen, speaking of "Jesus: human and divine," referred to belief in "His miraculous birth" as a "docetic theory," and said: "I can only regard this idea of miraculous birth as ætiological and honorific; —in those days as natural and reasonable a way of accounting for a great personality and the experience of which Jesus was the cause and the centre, as it would be unnatural and irrational to-day." And Dr. Major, the Editor of *The Modern Churchman*, in his book *The Church's Creeds and the Modern Man*, published about a year and a half ago, says: "Most modern historians will agree that neither the Virgin birth nor the Panther story is historical." (It must, by the way, be painful to many readers to see "the Panther story" and that of the Virgin birth thus classed together.) Later in the same book we read, "many orthodox Christians to-day regard it (i.e. the Virgin birth) as unhistorical."

In this paper a humble attempt is made to follow the line suggested by Bishop Barnes's words in 1921, an attempt to "justify" a belief in the Virgin birth, or rather, to express the matter in strictly Scriptural language, the Virgin Conception of our Lord.

We may accept the claim which has been made that "Certain things must be left to the judgment of the individual Christian, principally the Virgin birth and the bodily Resurrection," but it may perhaps be found upon examination by some that there is considerably more of "sound argument" than they have supposed which may lead to the conclusion that the doctrine of the Virgin birth is at least probably true. More than this we can scarcely hope for. We cannot prove this article of our Creed, but neither can we prove the existence of God. As the New Testament reminds us, By faith we "believe that He is." But in each case the belief which cannot be proved may be "justified." We may admit that the supernatural birth, even if proved, would not in itself prove the Incarnation; that is to say, the doctrine of the Incarnation is independent of the Virgin birth. Bishop Barnes has well said, "Had Nero been born of a virgin, he would not have been God's only Son." We must distinguish between *the fact* of the Incarnation and *the mode* in which it was accomplished. To assert that the Virgin birth "is a cardinal doctrine of the Christian faith" would be, as the late Dean Armitage Robinson pointed out, "to confuse the Incarnation with its special mode, in a way for which Christian theology offers no precedent."

But we may appeal to evidence of a threefold nature in support of the doctrine.

I. There is, in the first place, the testimony of early Christian writers that this was part of the traditional faith of the Church. This is surely a reasonable way of approaching the subject even in days when many are impatient of tradition, and are, we are told, more concerned with "the orthodoxy of the future" than of the

past. There is, at all events, good precedent for it. It is the method adopted by the great protagonist of the Faith, Athanasius. The little red-haired Patriarch (though, to be sure, he was only a deacon at Nicæa) always asked first, What has been the teaching of the Church? And afterwards, What say the Scriptures? We hold different views in these days on the subject of Holy Scripture from those commonly held in the Nicene period and long after, but the Anglican Church has always regarded the Scriptures as the final Court of Appeal in matters of doctrine, and claims to be "a witness and a keeper of Holy Writ." Nor has she ever been unmindful of the "regula fidei," the "κανὼν τῆς ἀληθείας" handed down to her from her spiritual fathers. And this we may take to be the sound attitude, "The Church to teach, the Bible to prove."

Well; the Church in all her branches has undoubtedly taught the supernatural birth of her Lord from very early times. In the year A.D. 114, or thereabouts, Ignatius was thrown to the lions at Rome. At the beginning of his epistle to the Church at Smyrna, which was presided over by Polycarp, the disciple of St. John, he expresses his joy that the members of that Church are "fully persuaded as touching our Lord that He is truly born of a Virgin." In his epistle to the Ephesians he speaks of "the virginity of Mary and her child-bearing, and likewise also the death of the Lord," as being "three mysteries to be cried aloud." Forty years after Ignatius, Justin Martyr, a native of Palestine, asserts and defends the doctrine. Another early witness to it is the Christian philosopher Aristides. Irenæus and Tertullian (*circa* A.D. 200) both believed in the Virgin Conception. An interesting "varia lectio" of St. John i. 13,—"*Who were born, not of blood,*" etc.,—meets us in their writings. Professor Godet states: "Irenæus quotes this passage three times in the singular form, '*Qui natus est,*' etc., thus applying the words to Christ Himself; and Tertullian believes so strongly in the authenticity of this reading that he ascribes the opposite reading (the plural) to a falsification of Gnostic (Valentinian) origin. . . ." We cannot indeed venture to accept this interesting and attractive reading as correct, since, as Dr. Godet also says, "The received reading, '*Who were born,*' is found in all our critical documents," but it does indicate that "the Virgin birth was strongly held in the early days of the Church."

As Bishop Gore observes in his Bampton Lectures, It "holds a firm place in the earliest traditions of East and West." Dr. Swete said: "The story of the Virgin birth was certainly widely spread in the Church before the end of the first century." With this agrees the statement of Dr. Rendel Harris: "Everything we know of the dogmatics of the early part of the second century agrees with the belief that at that period the virginity of Mary was a part of the formulated Christian belief."

Surely such teaching is not lightly to be dismissed as a relic of credulous ages. We may receive it with respect, not only as illustrating the antiquity of the doctrine, but for a deeper reason. If we believe that the doctrine of the Incarnation is the central teach-

ing of Christianity, upon which all else in the Church's "deposit" of truth depends, and that the Holy Spirit has been given to "testify of Christ" and to guide His disciples "into all the truth,"—"How then," Dean Armitage Robinson has pertinently asked, "can I explain the witness of the Church to the Virgin birth, proclaimed by all her great theologians, reverently cherished by her simplest saints, if after all it is a figment of superstitious imagination? Has she unconsciously repeated a lie at every baptism since her baptismal Creed took shape . . .? She, with her mission of truth which dispersed the black night of the heathen religions, driving them off the face of the earth because they were false? I have no answer to such questions as these. I can conceive of no adequate reason why the Church should have been permitted to include this miracle among the sacred mysteries of the Creed, if it never took place—if the Virgin Mary were not the Virgin at all." Obviously this is an argument which will not appeal to all. Some would apply to it Dean Inge's words in his book, *Vale*, "Christianity has at least as much reason as Palestinian Judaism to beware of the traditions of the elders. Error does not become more respectable by being petrified." But it surely must be allowed some weight by those who "believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints." We may bear in mind that the doctrine we are considering is one concerning which, at all events since the early part of the second century, there appears to have been no doubt till a few years ago in the Church in either East or West, and the witness of the Holy Orthodox Church may not lightly be disregarded in a question of this kind.

II. We will readily allow that the Scriptural evidence is not overwhelmingly strong, but this is not to admit that it is as weak as is sometimes implied. It is a common-place in certain quarters to observe that St. Paul appears not to have known of the Virgin Conception, that St. Mark in our earliest Gospel says nothing of it (Dr. Major says "St. Mark and St. Paul know nothing of the Virgin birth story"); and that to the author of the fourth Gospel it appears to be equally unknown. Each of these statements may be met to some extent. It appears to me too much to assert, as my friend Dr. Hitchcock has done, that the Epistles of St. Paul "indirectly establish the doctrine," or to say with another writer in the *Guardian*, "the Virgin Conception is not indistinctly referred to by St. Paul"; but at least a passing reference may be made to Galatians iv. 4. "*Born of a woman*" is consistent with belief in birth from a Virgin, and there is nothing in the whole range of the Pauline writings which is inconsistent with it. The Apostle never alludes to any human paternity of Jesus, though he lays stress on the fact that He was "born of the seed of David according to the flesh."

As regards St. Mark's Gospel, we know that he wrote from information supplied by St. Peter. Our earliest Gospel may almost be taken as coming from the great Apostle; and we know from St. Peter's own words in two passages, as recorded by St. Luke,

the Evangelist *par excellence* of the Virgin birth, what St. Peter's conception was of the "witness" the Apostolic band had to bear. It had reference to "all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, *beginning from the baptism of John*, unto the day that He was received up from us," and its greatest emphasis was upon His Resurrection. "Of these must one become a witness with us of His Resurrection." It *began*, to quote St. Peter in the house of Cornelius, "from Galilee *after the baptism which John preached*." This is the line naturally followed by St. Peter's "son" in the faith. The Nativity of Jesus does not come within his scope.

Allowance may also be made for a natural reserve in the language of the Apostles and others in the earliest days on account of "Jewish slanders" concerning the birth of Jesus which, Dr. Major thinks, "it is clear were current when Matthew's Gospel was composed." "One purpose of Matthew's Gospel" (he says) "is to disprove these charges." Canon MacColl and others have thought it probable that there is a reference to these slanders in the words of the Jews to our Lord in St. John viii. 41, "We were not born of fornication."

In considering the fourth Gospel, we cannot altogether pass over the verse already referred to, viz. i. 13. Is it not suggestive to find the great statement to which as to a climax the Introduction leads up, "The Word became *flesh*, and dwelt among us," preceded immediately by a reference to "the *children of God*, who were born (or "*begotten*," R.V. Margin), not of blood, nor of the will of the *flesh*, nor of the will of man, *but of God*"? This verse may not (as has already been admitted) be pressed as proof of the Virgin birth or Conception, but those who bear in mind the writer's allusive style as illustrated by the "Ironical" passages in this Gospel (among which the discussion of the people in vii. 41, 42, has been too confidently pointed to as "sealing" the Virgin Conception), will not hastily deny the possibility of seeing here an allusion to our Lord's supernatural birth. "It is also interesting to note," Dr. Hitchcock has observed, "that the plural 'bloods,' not 'blood,' refers to the *woman*, rather than to the element out of which the body is framed," which was Bishop Westcott's explanation. The reference he gives to Leviticus xii. 7, where the Hebrew has "*her bloods*," seems to make this clear.

But, of course, it is to St. Matthew's and St. Luke's Gospels that we turn in our search for direct evidence. It is now generally assumed that the third Gospel originally began, like St. Mark's, with an account of the mission of St. John the Baptist, and that the first two chapters were added subsequently. But it is not denied that they come from the same hand as the rest of the Gospel, and most critics admit that St. Luke was a true historian and an exceptionally careful and accurate writer. In the "Acts" he has been proved to be "astonishingly exact in minute details"; and he has been described as "the one writer in the New Testament who most clearly displays the historical instinct." This, no doubt, has helped Bishop Barnes to "accept the authority of St. Luke." St.

Matthew, or whoever wrote the Gospel which bears his name, had less of the historical spirit, as we understand it, but his account confirms the other. And the most interesting point which emerges from a study of the two narratives is, as has been pointed out by various scholars, that the more closely they are read, the more they appear to be "independent narratives" which "represent respectively the story as told from the standpoint of St. Joseph and the story as told from the standpoint of the blessed Virgin herself." "One shows us Joseph's anxiety and the Divine admonition by which it was relieved. The other tells of Mary's simple faith, which accepts the angelic announcement when it is enforced by the reminder that nothing is too hard for the Lord."

Before leaving the Scriptural evidence, we ought perhaps to notice one or two suggestions which have been made to explain away the story. Those who would dismiss it as a mere myth or a legend which grew up in the early days of Christianity as a plausible way of accounting for the greatness of Jesus and the impression He made upon His disciples, point to such instances of "parthenogenesis" as are to be found in heathen mythology and in the story of Buddha. To this it may be sufficient to reply—as Bishop Gore has done—that we would have to allow a longer time for such a legend to arise and spread in the Church than the interval between our Lord's Ascension and the composition of St. Luke's Gospel affords, and that the idea of any Buddhist influence is "contrary to all the evidence." Dr. Harnack has said: "The conjecture that the idea of a birth from a virgin is a heathen myth which was received by Christians contradicts the entire earliest developments of Christian tradition." Nor should the point be overlooked that both our chief authorities are saturated with Jewish thought. The man who asks us to believe that in such an atmosphere, redolent of the strictest monotheism, an offshoot of Greek mythology would so quickly spring to maturity appears to ask too much.

The Hebraic character of these chapters may perhaps also dispose of any suggestion that the story arose from the wish, so widely prevalent among Christians of a later day, to exalt Celibacy at the expense of wedded love. Will anyone gravely maintain such a theory who remembers the Jewish ideal of happiness, which centred in a family whose head had the joy of possessing a wife like the fruitful vine and a family like a flock?

III. The Church teaches, the New Testament affords evidence, that our Lord was "truly born of a Virgin." To assent to the doctrine is, no doubt, to accept from the beginning the miraculous element in our faith. But this need not disturb us when we remember Professor Huxley's "dictum," "No one is entitled to say 'a priori' that any given miracle is impossible"; and again, "The mysteries of the Church are child's play compared with the mysteries of Nature." Another interesting admission, stated by Bishop Gore in his *Belief in God* to have been made by Huxley, was that "if he believed—which he did not—that Jesus was strictly sinless, he would suppose that involved as well a physical as a moral miracle."

Moreover faith is not irrational. As the Epistle to the Hebrews says, "By faith we understand."

I have been too long in coming to this point, and all that I can now attempt is to indicate one or two lines of thought which seem to some, at all events, to justify the contention that the traditional doctrine is a reasonable one. "Since natural generation invariably gives rise to a new person, it would appear unsuitable in the case of Jesus, at whose conception no new person came into existence, but the already existing Son of God entered upon a new experience," at least according to the faith of the Catholic Church. Further, Christ is the predestined End of Creation. As Canon Ottley used to argue in his lectures on the Incarnation, in Him is seen that for which the universe had been gradually prepared, viz. the perfect expression of the Divine life. "And just as Man is the Crown of Nature, and sums up and embodies all below him in the ascent of Nature, so in Christ the world arrives at a new individual, a new species—the Son of God takes to Himself the nature which from the first He intended to crown by His assumption of it." This, of course, is most readily admitted by those who believe "etiam si Adam non peccasset, Christus tamen venisset." And so in Him we have a new type, supernatural, but not unnatural, a new beginning for the race.

"That which Plato desired when he said there could be no real remedy for the evils of society unless you could make a fresh start, and demanded a blank tablet to draw the lineaments of human life afresh, is found in Christ." Is it too much to argue that the Virgin Conception is suitable to inaugurate this new beginning? The Catholic doctrine, of course, assumes the sinlessness of Christ, in which Huxley did not believe, and that He was "made very man without spot of sin." "A complete break with sinful heredity is of the very essence of the Incarnation." And it is difficult, as the late Mr. Illingworth pointed out, with our modern knowledge of hereditary influences and the mutual interdependence of body and soul, "to conceive that natural human generation should issue in anything else than a contaminated personality." "It may be urged," he admits, "that we have no reason to think otherwise, even in the case of a Virgin birth. But," he proceeds, "the cases are widely different. For of natural generation we have positive knowledge, based on universal experience, that it does as a fact issue in a sinful person. Whereas of virgin birth we have no positive knowledge." It does not, we may observe, necessarily follow from this argument that our Lord was wholly exempted from all hereditary influences. Indeed, when we think of the wonderful faith displayed by the blessed Virgin, which was maintained through so many months, it seems hardly too much to say with a thoughtful writer (in an article in the *Expositor*), "We only do full justice to all the narrative suggests and the whole problem demands, when we recognise that the mother of Jesus was in her maternal function, by God's Spirit dwelling and working in her, so isolated from the sin of the race, and so elevated by faith in, and surrender to God, that

Jesus, as true man as well as very God, did not need to be totally exempted from heredity, but inherited from His mother [His only human parent] not sin, but faith in, and surrender to God, as the dominant tendency of His life."

"Oh, now we are coming," someone will perhaps say, "to the dream of the Immaculate Conception." This, I submit, would be a case of "non sequitur," but we cannot follow up this point, which is beyond the scope of this essay, which may close upon a note of warning.

In a paper read at Truro last June an American clergyman of high standing is reported to have said: "In America almost every Church, except the Roman Catholic and that relatively small body in communion with you which is called the Episcopal Church, has become enamoured of a modernistic and semi-Unitarian denial of the deity of our Lord, and in that same America, *the revolt against conventional codes of conduct has correspondingly become widespread and portentous.*"

Assuming this testimony to be correct, we may also safely assume that to those who deny, in a "semi-Unitarian" manner, the deity of Christ, the Virgin Conception appears, as to others to whom explicit reference was made in the beginning of this paper, a mere myth or legend, and that in many cases rejection of the doctrine concerning it has been a step towards a repudiation of the faith that Jesus was the eternal Word or Son of God made flesh, a faith of which even in New Testament times it could be claimed that it led to the victory which overcometh the world.

Too many ignore the truth that Christianity has been from the beginning a supernatural religion. It has never professed to be anything else. "Great is the mystery of godliness." It is, as the Archbishop of Dublin (Dr. Gregg) says, "a religion of Divine intervention and interpositions. It is a religion of a directing Providence and of a saving grace. It is not the religion of a God Who stands afar off, it is the religion of a God Who is very near. So many of us nowadays are obsessed with the idea of law—natural law and cast-iron uniformity—that we in our short-sightedness think of God the law-maker as imprisoned within His laws. We think of Him Who created man with free-will as incapable of initiating free action Himself. So tremendous has been the reaction from exaggerated views of God which were held in the past, that we have come, from thinking of God as One Who could do anything, to think of Him as One Who can do nothing. And against this trick of the mind such a belief as that of the Virgin Conception bears witness. It speaks of the Creative power of God." This practical lesson should not be missed by those who remember the exhortation, "Take heed to thyself and to thy teaching."

Though we have conceded the point that belief in the Incarnation is not dependent upon the doctrine of the Virgin Conception, still the stages of the "down-grade theology" which in many instances has led not only to the abandonment of the latter doctrine, but also, we are given to understand, to a revolt against formerly

accepted "codes of conduct," may be noted. Such considerations may at least give pause to some who, perhaps without carefully weighing all that can be said for it, are disposed to regard the ancient belief as an unnecessary burden, the jettisoning of which may help to steady the ship; or—to indulge an Irishman's propensity to mixed metaphors—an outpost which may be surrendered without danger to the citadel of the Faith.

Forward in Western China, by Deaconess E. L. Stewart (C.M.S., 1s.). Here is a gripping story of fortitude and perseverance. The Diocese of Western China is the most remote of the Chinese dioceses from the coast and from European influence, and was founded in 1895. Its chequered history is simply and soberly told by Deaconess Stewart. There is no attempt made to heighten the colours or to play upon the emotions, and for this very reason the story of the trials and persecutions of this infant Church is all the more impressive. How dangerous the work was, and still is, was borne out only a week or so ago, when several missionaries of the China Inland Mission (the Eastern neighbour of the Diocese of Western China) gave their lives for the Faith. Yet in spite of the blindest prejudice and bitterest opposition the work has gone forward. Each loss has been followed by fresh gains. The chief obstacle to the spread of Christianity to-day in this region appears to be the spirit of Nationalism which, after the Revolution, swept through China; and it is most interesting to see how the popular misapprehension that Christianity is a foreign cult is being removed. A native ministry is being built up, and the two assistant Bishops of the Diocese are Chinamen. The authoress suggests, however, that the policy of transferring power from the missionary body to the native Church may have gone too far, and that there is a real danger that we may pander to an exclusive national spirit. The concluding paragraph is full of hope and courage:

"There is no greater argument for the deity of Christ than the Church in Szechwan. If it had been a merely human organisation founded on the teaching of a dead man, it would have disappeared within a few years. If it had not a living Leader Who is more than man, Who knows no failure, and whose Spirit is its life, the Church would have been overwhelmed by the apparent hopelessness of its task. . . .

"But the apparent hopelessness of the quest only makes it more alluring. The powers of hell have been let loose against the Church, but still it advances. It has been shaken, wounded, almost trampled down by the onrushing foe, but it has never retreated. It never will retreat. Those who have eyes to see have caught a vision of the light in the darkness, and by its gleam are pressing on to a brighter future. They are not dismayed by the tumult and the strife, for they look beyond it and see the victorious Christ with China at His feet."