

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 10

Volume 10 • Number 1 • January 1986

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership, interpreting the Christian faith for
contemporary living.*

GENERAL EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



Published by
THE PATERNOSTER PRESS

Conceived by the Holy Spirit, Born of the Virgin Mary

N. A. D. Scotland

For sixteen hundred years or more¹ Christian people have professed the faith of the Apostles' Creed which includes the statement that Jesus was 'conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary'. In making this affirmation Christians have made two assertions. First, their belief that in some way not fully enunciated in the Biblical narrative the Holy Spirit supplied the male element in Jesus' conception (the Virgin conception). Second, when Mary gave birth to Jesus she had not known any human sexual relations ([Matthew 1:25](#), the Virgin birth).

Not until the advent of German Liberal theology in the mid-nineteenth century was there any serious doubting that this article of creedal faith might not be literally true.² The nineteenth century doubters of the Virgin birth were for the most part a small circle of University professors and theological dilettantes. Now suddenly a century later a new populariser of these liberal views has arisen in the shape of the Bishop of Durham. What are we to make of Bishop Jenkins' forthright statements that the Virgin birth has no substance in history and cannot be regarded as a necessary article of Christian belief?

DOUBTS AND DIFFICULTIES

In the first place perhaps we ought to try and understand the issue from the standpoint of a liberal theologian who finds himself unable to make the basic affirmation that the New Testament is reliable in what it tells us about God and in particular of his self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. For many scholars perhaps the most fundamental objection to the Virgin Birth lies in a conviction that the birth and infancy narratives are not historical in 'genre' but rather 'midrashic'³ and that therefore to treat them as history is a category mistake. 'Mid-rash' was the name given to a later Jewish literary genre which was essentially a commentary on a passage of scripture but which frequently extended **P. 28** beyond the meaning and intention of the original text. For example, Philo wrote a midrash on [Genesis 4:1](#) about Isaac and Moses in terms of a virgin conception. However, it needs to be recognised in that particular instance that he was writing allegory in which the women represented virtues. Hence his statements were not to be taken as indicating that these two persons were literally virgin born.³

¹ It is not known at precisely what date the Apostles' Creed reached its final form but Rufinus gives the complete text in one of his writings in AD 385.

² The Virgin Birth of Jesus was under early challenge but from those outside the Christian Church such as the Jews (Trypho for example) and from the Ebionites. See for example, Gresham Machen J., *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (James Clarke, 2nd edition, 1932).

³ See Spensley B. E., 'Christological Motifs in Luke's Gospel' (Unpublished M. Phil thesis, Leeds University, 1978) p.81.

³ See Spensley B. E., 'Christological Motifs in Luke's Gospel' (Unpublished M. Phil thesis, Leeds University, 1978) p.81.

Some scholars, notably Daube⁴ have propounded the view that Luke was writing a midrash based on the story of Ruth. He grounded his contention on an examination of Rabbinic exegesis of the Ruth text 'Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord ...'⁵ However even if Daube's suggestion is acknowledged to have some force, there are plainly other elements of the Lucan narrative which are not rooted in the traditions about Ruth. Other scholars have suggested similarly that the Matthean narrative is midrashic⁶ but it seems clear, as R. T. France has asserted,⁷ that [Matthew 1-2](#) is not strictly speaking midrashic in genre.⁸ It has echoes of the technique and mentality of midrash but it 'is not ... commentary on any part of the Old Testament.'⁹ R. E. Brown in his comprehensive study, *The Birth of the Messiah* takes the view that the style of exegesis (not the form) in both the Lucan and Matthean infancy narratives is midrashic.¹⁰

In his essay France goes on to make the point that later Christianity gave 'pious elaboration' to the Matthean narrative. The story of the Magi, for example, gradually developed in form to include descriptions of the Kings and to specify their number as three.¹¹ Nevertheless France stressed 'the fact that later Christians felt free to elaborate earlier tradition does not prove that Matthew or his predecessors also did.'¹² It is apparent that Matthew has woven Old Testament texts into the fabric of his account but it doesn't make sense of the situation then to assert that he constructed fictional fulfilments of them. The only apt conclusion of the matter would seem to be to assert with France: 'The description ... 'Midrashic' ... does not entitle us to import into our understanding ... a whole passage labelled midrash which includes [p. 29](#) the imaginative creation of ostensibly historical details.'¹³ France sums up forcefully: 'Indeed I would go further and affirm that in the absence of any other probable starting point for these traditions, it is *prima facie* likely that they are what they purport to be, records of actual events.'¹⁴

One difficulty which is sometimes set against the Virgin Birth is that Matthew's account quotes [Isaiah 7:14](#) 'Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and his name shall be called Emmanuel'. In the Hebrew text of the Old Testament however the word is actually 'young woman'. Some have argued from this fact that therefore the Virgin Birth is manufactured out of an unfortunate mistranslation of Isaiah. However, if this argument

⁴ [Ruth 3:9](#). See Daube D., *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, London 1956 pp.28f.

⁵ Spensley B. E., *op. cit.*, p.80.

⁶ France R. T., 'Tradition and History in the Infancy Narratives of Matthew' in France R. T., and Wenham D., *Gospel perspectives* (JSOT Press, 1981) pp.243f.

⁷ *ibid.*, p.245.

⁸ *loc. cit.*

⁹ *loc. cit.*

¹⁰ Brown R. E., *The Birth of the Messiah* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1977) p.561.

¹¹ France R. T., *op. cit.*, p.246.

¹² *ibid.*, p.247.

¹³ *loc. cit.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.255.

is felt to invalidate the Matthean narrative it certainly cannot impugn the integrity of the Lucan passage which makes no reference to Isaiah.¹⁵

Another problem arising from the biblical material are a number of passages in the New Testament which have been taken to suggest that Joseph was in fact Jesus' father. For example, both Matthew and Luke give genealogies which only trace Jesus' descent through Joseph. The point has been made that if Jesus was descended on the human side only from Mary then he was not of the household and lineage of David. In addition there are several passages in which Joseph is explicitly referred to as Jesus' father. For example, when Mary was looking for Jesus on the occasion when he lingered behind in the Temple she said: 'Your father and I have been searching for you.'¹⁶

Regarding the genealogical issue several things can be said. The Lucan genealogy¹⁷ carries the suggestion that Joseph was not Jesus' father *de facto*. In addition, it is quite likely that the word 'begat' in the genealogy implies legal succession rather than actual parentage. Furthermore, there is a real possibility that Mary herself was also a descendent of David. Some commentators have inferred this on the basis of Gabriel's words in [Luke 1:32](#). The fact that Joseph is referred to as Jesus' father is not as serious an objection as might at first be imagined, for when Joseph married Mary he would have been Jesus' legal father both in the eyes of the law and as far as public opinion was concerned. p. 30

Perhaps a more serious source of doubt regarding the doctrine is that of explaining precisely how it was that the Holy Spirit supplied the male element in Jesus' conception. The attempt by the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* in which he asserted that the Holy Spirit penetrated the hymen of Mary's womb as a ray of sun penetrates the atmosphere, illustrates the problem. However, the fact that biblical narrative is silent as to the precise manner of the conception cannot be taken as sufficient reason to deny the reality of the event.

A further non-biblical objection to the Virgin Birth is the problem which it poses regarding the passing down of inherited personality characteristics since it is known that a new born infant inherits two sets of chromosomes one from each parent. This being the case we have to explain how it was that Jesus didn't inherit sinful characteristics from Mary. Roman Catholic theologians have sought to grapple with this difficulty by the construction of a 'Mariology' which insists that Mary was herself 'sinless'. Such a doctrine however does not seem to find support in New Testament narrative.¹⁸ On the other hand Protestant theologians have, on occasion, suggested interesting devices to get round this same problem. Karl Barth for example, suggested that 'sininheritance' is only passed on by the male parent. This objection says in effect that the Virgin birth does not solve the problem of how Jesus was born perfect man. There is, it would seem, no easy counter to this objection. Nevertheless to assert that Joseph was the father would simply compound this particular problem rather than diminish it.

It has been argued that the doctrine of Jesus' virgin birth arose because it was common practice among the ancients to attribute a special birth to individuals whom society came to venerate. For example, Plato was said to have been virgin born. However this fact

¹⁵ This raises the question as to whether Matthew and Luke wrote independently of one another. Most scholars are of the opinion that they did write independently. See for example Brown, R. E., *op. cit.*, p.35 who asserts this to have been the case on the basis of marked differences.

¹⁶ [Luke 2:48](#).

¹⁷ [Luke 3:23](#).

¹⁸ [Luke 1:47](#).

cannot of itself be taken as sufficient evidence for denying the historical substance of the Virgin Birth.

GROUNDS FOR BELIEF

In view of these factors the question arises: on what grounds is it still possible to affirm the traditional understanding of the Virgin Birth? Emil Brunner rejected the doctrine of the miraculous birth of Jesus and asserted it to have been a purely natural event. Nevertheless he asserted: 'The doctrine of the Virgin birth would have been given up long ago were it not for the fact that it seemed as though dogmatic **p. 31** interests were concerned in its retention'.¹⁹ Whatever else the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is concerned to do it is certainly concerned to preserve the fact that Jesus is at the same time both God and Man.

One of the immediate problems confronting the person who denies the Virgin Birth is the question of when did Jesus assume God-status if indeed he ever laid it aside? If Jesus was not fully divine at the moment of his entry into the world (i.e. at birth) then it is necessary to suppose that divine status was achieved at some subsequent point. This necessitates what is technically termed an 'adoptionist' Christology. 'Adoptionism' asserts that Jesus began his earthly existence as a mere man but at some later moment in time (usually his baptism) the divine power descended upon him and God 'adopted' him as his Son. Such teaching which featured in some of the early Christian communities in the second and third centuries was rejected by Catholic theologians and the General Councils of the Church.

It is true that there is no account of the Virgin Birth in the Gospels of Mark and John nor is it found in the preaching of the early church as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. Nevertheless no alternative or contradictory explanation is given and there is very early evidence that the early Christians believed Jesus to have been Virgin born. Aristides was one of the earliest defenders of the Christian faith. In his *Apology* which he wrote about AD 140 he gave a summary of Christian belief which includes the following lines.

The Christians then reckon the beginning of their religion from Jesus Christ, who is named the Son of God most high; and it is said that God came down from heaven, and from a Hebrew Virgin took and clad himself with flesh, and in a daughter of man there dwelt the Son of God.²⁰

Justin Martyr, another early apologist, wrote his defence of the Christian faith about AD 170. He described Jesus as 'the first-born of every creature; who became man by the Virgin ...'²¹

Ultimately when all these issues have been considered the point has to be made that there are only four alternatives regarding the male element in the birth of Jesus. Either Joseph was the father, or some other man was the father, or some form of parthenogenesis occurred, or the Holy Spirit supplied the male element.

If Joseph is taken to be the real father then he and Mary must stand **p. 32** convicted of telling bare-faced lies which resulted in the creation of stories which have subsequently misled generations of Christians. It needs to be borne in mind that the writers of the New

¹⁹ Brunner E., *The Mediator* (Westminster, 1967) p.324.

²⁰ Aristides, *Apology* (c.AD 140) cited by Wolfson, H. A., *The Philosophy of the Early Church Fathers* (3rd edition revision, 1970) p. 186.

²¹ Martyr J., *First Apology*, Chapter 33 in *The Anti-Nicene Fathers* (Eerdmans, 1979) Volume 1, p.174.

Testament were Jews. They knew the ninth commandment and the seriousness of breaking it, an offence punishable by the death penalty. The view that Joseph was the father doesn't have probability on its side.

On the other hand some have supposed that some other man was Jesus' father as Joseph and probably the Jews had initially suspected. This means that Mary had been unfaithful to Joseph during the betrothal period. Such was a serious charge attracting the death penalty in the Old Testament and Joseph determined on a quick divorce until persuaded to do otherwise.

In recent times some theologians have put forward, albeit tentatively, the suggestion that the birth of Jesus was achieved by some form of parthenogenesis. One thing which can be said in response to this view is that parthenogenesis is a process which is only known to occur among invertebrates and lower plants. In reality parthenogenesis in human beings has no precedent. As Dr. David Whittingham of Carshalton stated: 'We know from our work in mice that an embryo doesn't develop after parthenogenesis unless it has the proper complement of male chromosomes.'²² If on the other hand we assert some form of divine parthenogenesis we might just as well opt for the New Testament and historic Christian belief that Jesus Christ was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.

In the final analysis the whole doctrine of the Virgin Birth probably boils down to a question of how we view the New Testament narratives. Do we regard them as containing large sections of fictional material in which poetic license has obscured historical fact or do we see them a reliable vehicle which communicates the plain truth about God in a manner that the ordinary man can understand without confusion? Presumably if God is God it is reasonable to assume that he would organise things in such a way that the record of his coming to men would not be misleading. One thing is plain: in asserting this doctrine we are not concerned with possibility or likelihood. If God is God, all things that are in keeping with his nature have to be possible. Indeed the Lucan narrative says as much: 'For with God nothing will be impossible.'²³

Dr. Scotland is in the Department of Religious Studies, College of St. Paul and St. Mary, Cheltenham, England. [p. 33](#)

Hope in a Hopeless World

Naim Ateek

Reprinted from Theological Review, No. VI/1, April 1985, with permission

These exegetical studies of two passages from Romans are extracted this time from a Middle-East context. There the hopelessness of the situation often leads one either to presumption

²² Turner G., 'Frankensteins or Saviours?' *The Sunday Telegraph* 26 May, 1985.

²³ [Luke 1:37](#).