

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 Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

The Two Greatest Miracles of the Gospel History.¹

BY THE REV. HENRY BARCLAY SWETE, D.D., LITT.D., REGIUS PROFESSOR OF DIVINITY, CAMBRIDGE.

It is a significant fact that the ancient creeds pass without notice the miracles of our Lord's ministry and the ministry itself, as if they had no place among the necessary *credenda* of Christianity. From the Birth of Jesus Christ the creeds proceed at once to His Passion, and it is rare to find in them the slightest reference to His marvellous life. The Church seems to have recognized that the events of the ministry were recorded for her instruction rather than as matters essential to her faith. On the other hand, there are two miracles which are confessed in every form of the Creed—the miracle of the Conception, by which the Incarnation was effected, and the miracle of the Resurrection, by which the victory of the Cross was consummated. These may be regarded as the fundamental miracles of the gospel, the ground upon which the ultimate battle between the assailants and defenders of miracles must be fought; and while I fully recognize that the whole of the gospel history is permeated by the supernatural, it is to these supreme instances that I shall limit my remarks.

i. The circumstances of the miraculous Conception are related in two of the three Synoptic Gospels. It is important to observe that the two accounts are essentially independent of one another, and belong to distinct stages in the history. The facts which appear in the Third Gospel are clearly prior to those reported in the First; the annunciation, Mary's visit to Judæa, her return to Nazareth, precede Joseph's discovery and dream, which follow appropriately upon the Virgin's return. In both these stories there is a reference to Is 7¹⁴, but they have no incident in common; they refer to different sets of circumstances, and appear to have arisen in different circles. Thus the miracle of the Conception is attested by two separate but not inconsistent traditions which come to us from primitive times, and these may quite reasonably be regarded as preserving in substance the recollections of Joseph and Mary respectively. The alternative is to regard both stories as legends, independently based on the prophecy of Isaiah, and already credited in the

¹ Read at the Northampton Church Congress.

Palestinian Church when St. Luke and St. Matthew wrote. So artificial an explanation would probably have found little favour with scholars if there had been no miracle to suggest it. It is too commonly assumed that evidence which would be good under ordinary circumstances is bad where the supernatural is involved.

If we ask what there is, apart from their miraculous character, to set against the independent statements of St. Luke and St. Matthew, the usual answer is that their witness is counterbalanced by the silence of St. Mark, St. Paul, and St. John. The objection would have more weight if St. Mark had not deliberately begun with the baptism of John, and if it had belonged to St. Paul's province to deal with the personal history of the Lord. As the case stands, the argument proves too much, for the silence of St. Mark extends to the Lord's thirtieth year, and St. Paul's one list of *credenda* (1 Co 15^{3ff.}) begins with the Passion. St. John stands in a different position; a reference to the Conception might certainly have found a place in his prologue, *e.g.*, to the phrase 'the Word was made flesh,' he might conceivably have added 'of the Holy Spirit.' But apart from the question whether this would have been in harmony with the general purpose of the prologue, can St. John's silence have been due to ignorance? Is it possible that the author of the Fourth Gospel can have been ignorant of a tradition which had already been published in the Third and First—a tradition which, scarcely a generation later, is urged by Ignatius in letters to the Johannine Churches with an assurance which leaves no doubt that they shared his belief in it? Under these circumstances it is more than precarious to build on the silence of St. John. Whatever may have been his reason for not referring to the Conception, it can scarcely have been either that he did not know the story or that he disbelieved it.

It is not surprising that the miracle of the Conception should be felt to be both unnecessary and embarrassing by those who have lost faith in the Incarnation. But where the mystery of the Incarnation is heartily accepted, the miracle of the

Conception is seen to be a fitting corollary to it. We do not dare to say that the Incarnation could not have been effected by other means. Yet if Jesus Christ is the Eternal Word made Flesh, if He came to create a new order, to restore fallen humanity to sinlessness, a sufficient cause has been shown for a supernatural beginning to His human life. It is idle to point to examples of legendary heroes or of great religious teachers to whom the piety of followers has ascribed a supernatural birth. Legends of this kind merely testify to the craving of the human consciousness for the intervention of the supernatural in the origin of lives marked by what has seemed to be more than human greatness or goodness. This craving finds its realization in the unique life of the sinless Son of Man, who is also the only Son of God. Thus belief in the Incarnation and belief in the miraculous Conception will be found in the great majority of cases to stand or fall together. The Creeds pass immediately from confessing Jesus Christ to be 'the only Son of God' to the fact that He was 'born of the Holy Ghost,' and neither of these articles of the Catholic faith can be abandoned without disturbing the foundations of the other.

ii. The history of the Christ ends, as it began, with miracle. With one voice the Creeds of the Universal Church confess that the Person who was born of the Virgin Mary rose from the dead on the third day. The phrase is St. Paul's (1 Co 15⁴), and, if the Gospels may be trusted, it came originally from the lips of Christ (Mt 17²³, Lk 18³³).

For the fact of the Resurrection there is certainly no lack of documentary evidence. Not to mention that it is assumed in almost every one of the New Testament writings, we have no fewer than five formal accounts—six, if we may regard the appendix to St. Mark as a separate authority. Four of these witnesses are to all appearances independent—St. Paul, St. Mark (16¹⁻⁸), with whom we may associate St. Matthew, St. Luke, and St. John. The evidence falls under two heads: the empty tomb and the appearances of the Risen Lord. Time allows me to deal with the latter only, and I can touch but a few points. As the appearances are summed up by St. Paul, they seem to compel belief. Take, for example, the manifestation to 'above five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain until now.' The Apostle could not have written thus in an

open letter to a great centre like Corinth if he had not been prepared to substantiate his statements. If the Epistle is genuine, as most of our critics hold it to be, within twenty-five years from the Crucifixion there were still living more than two hundred and fifty persons who had seen the Lord after His death at one and the same time. How is this fact to be explained on the hypothesis that He did not truly rise? Much has been said of St. Paul's use of the same verb *ᾤφθη* to describe both the pre-Ascension appearances, and the appearance which was the means of his own conversion. It is argued that since the latter was of the nature of a vision, the former must be held to belong to the same category. But the precise force of the verb must be determined in each case by the circumstances, and the circumstances of the pre-Ascension appearances, as reported in the Gospels, differ widely from those which attended the conversion of St. Paul. In the one case the Lord appeared from heaven; in the other He was seen in human form on earth, walking, sitting, giving Himself to be touched and handled, speaking as man to men, even eating in order to convince the eleven that He was not a mere spirit. It may be said, of course, that the Gospel narratives have suffered from accretion; that the incidents which suggest a bodily resurrection are no part of the original story, but represent the belief of the second generation. But in the case of St. Luke, at least, the probable date of the Gospel leaves no time for extensive accretions, even if St. Luke's candour and opportunities of information would have given them admission. Yet it is in St. Luke's Gospel that these indications of a bodily resurrection are most clearly marked.

Earlier efforts to minimize the force of the evidence have broken down, and one after another they have been abandoned by their authors or those who succeeded to them. The modified unbelief which now holds the field contents itself with the plea that the historical evidence is at least precarious, and that under the circumstances it is wiser and safer to be satisfied with the vital truth that the Lord has triumphed over death and is alive for evermore.

But the conviction that 'Jesus lives' is not the whole of the faith in our Lord's Resurrection which was committed to the Church. Whatever change may be thought to have passed over the Lord's Body, it is undoubtedly of faith that the

Resurrection was not merely a spiritual victory over death, but in some true sense a bodily resuscitation. The fact belongs not to the accidents, but to the very essence and heart of Apostolic Christianity, and a Christianity which ignores it must needs be immeasurably poorer by the loss. The Church will not listen to the voice of the charmer who bids her relinquish so important a part of the deposit, unless he can show that the old faith is untenable. On what grounds, then, are we invited to distrust the evidence of the Gospels in this matter of the Resurrection? In the first place, it is said that the accounts are incompatible; that in any case the facts cannot be fitted into a scheme. St. Matthew, with whom St. Mark must have been in substantial agreement, shifts the scene to Galilee; St. Luke detains the Apostles at Jerusalem; St. John adopts a middle course. Even the events of the Resurrection Day do not lend themselves easily to the art of the harmonizer. But in such a narrative difficulties of this kind will stagger no one who approaches it without prepossessions. They are such as might be expected in a collection of firsthand reminiscences. The excitement, the alternations of hope and fear, the hurried movements of the weeks that followed the Crucifixion are enough to account for even greater departures from historical consistency. Differences in detail suggest substantial truth; it is clear that no attempt has been made to harmonize. St. Luke, who is thought to have had St. Mark before him, goes his own way; and if the Fourth Gospel mediates to some extent, it does so in entire independence of both the earlier Gospels.

But admitting the fact of the appearances, it is said that they may be explained on psychological grounds. The apostles were so possessed with the belief that the dead Master was still amongst them in spirit, that it was natural for them to imagine that they saw His form in their midst. Such hallucinations are doubtless possible, but not under the circumstances described by all our authorities. The appearances began on the third day and ceased after the fortieth. Can psychology explain these limits of time? They were witnessed not only by individuals, such as Mary of Magdala and St. Peter, whose imagination might easily have got the better of their judgment, but by groups of people as variously constituted and circumstanced as the two on the way to

Emmaus, the ten, the eleven, the seven by the Sea of Galilee, the five hundred on the Galilean hills. They were seen at all hours—in the early morning, in the broad daylight, as well as in the evening after sunset. They convinced men who not only disbelieved, but ridiculed the first reports of the Resurrection. Can psychology produce any similar record of manifestations shown to be illusory? As a last resource, anthropology has been appealed to; no verdict, we are now told, can be passed upon the matter until it has been ascertained 'in what ways the human mind works under conditions like those of the first disciples.' But what if the conditions were absolutely unique? What if in the whole history of the race there has been but one Man who, after death, has shown Himself alive by proofs such as the Gospels produce?

The Gospel story of the Resurrection is not without its perplexities. The evidence is, perhaps, not overwhelming, and it is certainly far from being complete; in some of the details it may be inexact. But the main fact that the Lord rose again on the third day has not been shaken by any argument hitherto adduced. The intellectual difficulty of believing the Resurrection of our Lord's body to be a baseless story will always be greater than the intellectual difficulty of believing it to be a substantial fact.

Difficulties of belief become infinitesimal when they are placed in the light of the Incarnation. It is not surprising that the miracle of the Resurrection, like that of the Conception, should be a stumbling-block to minds which have not grasped the mystery of the Word made Flesh. The ultimate decision has to be made, not between the acceptance and rejection of a particular miracle, however great, but between belief in a merely human Christ and belief in a Christ who is also truly Divine. If men are content to say that Christ has the value of God, they may be content to let both the miraculous Conception and the Resurrection in the stricter sense drop out of their Creed. For the moment it may seem that their hold upon the vital truths of Christianity has not been weakened by the abandonment of two of its earliest traditions. But the end of the present movement cannot be discerned as yet. It may result, as similar movements have resulted before, in a reaction in favour of the old faith. There is, however, an alternative

for which we must be prepared. A rejection of the fundamental miracles which the Church has from the first learned to connect with the Incarnate Life, if it takes a firm hold upon the thought of

our time, cannot fail to issue in a widespread loss of faith in the central mystery of Christianity, and a corresponding loss of the higher life which that mystery inspires.

The Latest Mythological Theory of the Patriarchs.

BY PROFESSOR ED. KÖNIG, PH.D., D.D., BONN.

IN recent years two attempts have been made to give the narratives concerning Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his sons a different meaning from that which they have in the first book of the Bible. In the first place, it has been maintained that the stories of the patriarchs had originally *tribes* in view, so that the experiences of bodies of people are recorded as if they had been those of individuals. This theory, which is held by a number of recent commentators on Genesis, is dealt with in my little work, *Neueste Prinzipien der alttest. Kritik* (1902), p. 34 ff. But, side by side with this main dogma, an attempt is being made at present by not a few scholars to show that the true meaning of the patriarchal history must be sought in the *mythology* of the peoples of Western Asia. This view has been of late maintained especially by H. Winckler, who recurs to it in his brochure, *Himmel und Weltenbild der Babylonier als Grundlage der Weltanschauung und Mythologie aller Völker* (1901).

Winckler starts with the principle that the Babylonians constructed their astronomical system while the spring equinox was still situated in the sign of Gemini, and he deduces the following conclusion: 'Hence it is the Dioscuri myth by preference which forms the starting-point in legends which introduce a new period of history or relate the primeval history of a people. It lies also at the root of the relation of Abraham to Lot, for Abraham said to the latter, "If thou wilt go to the right, then I will go to the left." Here we miss, first of all, any proof of the assertion that the Dioscuri myth emerges in this way outside Israel. But that by the way. Let us confine our attention to what Winckler says with reference to the Hebrew tradition. According to the above quotation, Abraham must be regarded as one of the Dioscuri. Thus Abraham and Lot come to

be the two latest pendants to Castor and Pollux. And why? Because the tradition concerning these two men contains such forms of expression as 'If thou wilt go to the right, I will go to the left' (Gn 13⁹). But are these words not perfectly natural upon a fitting occasion? Surely they are, and yet Winckler connects them with the mythological assumption that Castor and Pollux 'can never be found together; if the one is in the under world, the other is with Zeus' (p. 37). But this stroke at the O.T. tradition quite misses the mark. For Abraham and Lot *were* at first *together*, they migrated to Canaan in company. And, even after their territorial separation (Gn 13¹¹), were they not once more *together* when Abraham rescued his nephew from the Eastern foes (14¹⁶)? Besides, there is mention of two brothers of Abraham, namely, Nahor and Haran. What right then has any one to convert Abraham and Lot, the uncle and the nephew, into twins?

Another indication of the mythological character of Abraham is discovered by Winckler in Gn 20¹². Here he finds it asserted that the first patriarch was the husband of Ishtar or Astarte, since the latter, according to Babylonian notions, was married to her brother (p. 38). But in this passage Winckler has overlooked an important consideration. The words of Abraham to Abimelech run thus: 'And she is, indeed, truly my sister, the daughter of my father, *but not the daughter of my mother*, and she became—thus—my wife.' Accordingly, she whom Abraham had wedded was a half-sister or step-sister, and marriage with such a one was relatively natural. For, when a man had a plurality of wives, each wife along with her children constituted a separate family. This is brought before us very plainly in Gn 33^{6f.}, where Leah with her children and