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The Virgin-Birth.

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'But Mary kept all these sayings, pondering them in her heart.'—Luke ii. 19.[1]

It is a rather nice question whether we are to say 'kept all these sayings,' with R.V. text, or 'all these things,' with R.V. margin. In the one case it would mean the sayings spoken by the angels and repeated by the shepherds; in the other case it would mean the whole incident, or group of incidents. And the same question arises when the phrase is repeated a little lower down in v.[51] —after the visit of the Child Jesus to the Temple —'and His mother kept all these sayings (or things) in her heart.' It is a nice question, and one that I need not, perhaps, stay to discuss. Another small point, as it might seem, is more important for our purpose: 'kept' means 'continued to keep'; it is not the momentary wonder of which the evangelist had just been speaking when he says, 'All that heard it wondered at the things which were spoken unto them by the shepherds'; the tense used implies a sustained attitude of mind. And this helps us to understand how the phrase comes to be repeated in connexion with an incident that occurred twelve years later. All through that time—indeed, we may be sure, all through her life—the mother pondered deeply over the events described in the first two chapters of the Gospel.

I.

But what I desire more especially to ask you to notice is this—Who is it who is thus able to tell us what was passing in the mother's mind? I think we may say one of two things—either the narrative was derived ultimately from the Virgin herself, or it was just an invention, a picturesque touch, we might say, added by St. Luke.

You will observe that in the first alternative I say 'ultimately derived' from the Virgin. It need not be quite at first hand; it might be at second or third hand. But the point is that, if the statement has an historical ground at all, if it is not a mere bit of imagination, it cannot have travelled very far from its source. A little personal touch like this is just what the Virgin herself would retain, and what might be retained by the first one or two narrators; but as the story passed from mouth to mouth it would be almost sure to drop out. Only the Virgin herself, or some one specially interested in the Virgin, would think of repeating the innermost thoughts of her heart. Either this—and it is at least the simplest explanation—or else we must suppose that the historian, by an act of what we might call dramatic imagination, has so thrown himself back into the point of view of the Virgin as to reproduce what he conceives would have been the attitude of her mind.

We will treat the two alternatives for the moment as though they were equally probable. At the same time, I will just pause to point out that this kind of dramatic imagination is rather modern than ancient. It is rather a product of the historical and critical spirit than characteristic of the simple, naïve, objective story-telling of the ancients. We shall meet with other examples of the same sort of thing; and I will only ask you to bear the point in mind, as it is one, perhaps, of cumulative probability. For the present, as I have said, I will treat the two alternatives before us as equal.

Something, I think, will turn upon the extent to which this standpoint, the standpoint of the Virgin herself, is kept up throughout the narrative. I will not lay much stress on such minor points as, 'And His father and His mother were marvelling at the things which were spoken concerning Him' (2^{33}); 'and . . . as they were returning, the boy Jesus tarried behind in Jerusalem; and His parents knew it not; but supposing Him to be in the company (*i.e.* the caravan returning together from the feast), they went a day's journey; and they sought for Him among their kinsfolk and acquaintance' ($2^{43.44}$); 'and His mother said unto Him, Son, why hast Thou thus dealt with us? Behold, Thy father and I sought Thee sorrowing' (2^{48}); 'and they understood not the

[1] Preached at St. Mark's Church, Marylebone Rd., London.

saying which He spake unto them' (2[50]). I will not insist much on such points as these, though they are all very consistent; because I think that the imagination might work in this consistent way. But there are other points that seem to me of more importance.

Let me, for instance, ask you to notice the remarkable mode of dating events in the following: 'And after these days Elisabeth his wife conceived; and she hid herself five months. . . . Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee,' etc. (1[24. 26]); 'And Mary abode with her about three months, and returned unto her house' (1[56]): this is before the birth of the elder child. We note that this particular manner of dating events would be far more natural to the two mothers than it would to anyone else, including the historian.

And here is another point that would be very remarkable in anyone else than the mother: 'And it came to pass, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost; and she lifted up her voice with a loud cry, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, . . . for behold, when the voice of thy salutation came into mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy' (1[41. 43]).

If I am not mistaken, such points as these go decidedly and strongly to confirm the first of the two alternatives that we have before us, the hypothesis that the narrative as a whole came, as I said, ultimately from the holy Mother herself.

The indications of which I have been speaking are far from standing alone. They are only a few of the salient features that help to give a character to the narrative. Of this Professor W. M. Ramsay, of Aberdeen, has well remarked that 'there is a womanly spirit in the whole narrative which seems inconsistent with the transmission from man to man' (*Was Christ Born at Bethlehem?* p. 88). I believe that to be most true, and I should like to stop and illustrate it further. But I must pass on to a second question which the quotation raises. The source from which the narrative was ultimately drawn is one thing, the channel by which it reached St. Luke is another. Professor Ramsay's words imply not only that it came *from* a woman, but that it came *through* women. That also I believe to be most true. But before I come to ask how it did so, there is yet a third question which should be stated—the question, namely, in what relation St. Luke himself stands to it. Is it probable that the narrative came to him orally, and that he was the first to commit it to writing; or did it come into his hands in a written form? I will say a few words about this first.

II.

I had been in the habit of thinking it very possible that St. Luke was the first to set down the contents of these first two chapters in writing. It has, indeed, often been urged that there is a marked contrast in style between the four verses which form the preface to the Gospel and what follows. The first four verses are in quite elegant classical Greek; the main body of the narrative, on the other hand, is strongly Hebraistic, modelled upon the Greek version of the Old Testament. I was prepared to think that this might be a deliberate change of style on the part of St. Luke, adapting his manner of writing to the subject-matter and, consciously or unconsciously, allowing himself to be influenced by parallel narratives in the Old Testament. In support of this view was the fact that characteristic expressions of St. Luke's—and his style is perhaps more clearly marked and more easily distinguishable than any other in the New Testament—that characteristic expressions of his are scattered rather freely over the whole two chapters. This does not mean so very much, because he is in the habit of introducing these favourite words and phrases even where he had a written source before him, as, for instance, where he is using St. Mark.

The question whether or not St. Luke was using a written document becomes of special importance in connexion with the Canticles, those well-known hymns of praise or prophecy which are so conspicuous a feature in those two chapters. I never could believe, as some do, that they are simply free compositions on the part of St Luke. It seemed to me that some of them have too much character of their own to admit of this. At the same time it would make a considerable difference whether St Luke had a written document before him or not.

To illustrate the kind of question that arises in this connexion I may refer to the familiar words of the *Nunc Dimittis*: 'To be a light to

lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of Thy people Israel.' The phrase, 'a light to lighten the Gentiles,' is rather remarkable in the mouth of the aged Simeon. At the time when he spoke, the prospect of any extensive preaching to the Gentiles, and still more of the admission of Gentiles on the same footing with Jews, might well seem remote. But for St. Luke writing—let us say in the year 75–80, with the destruction of Jerusalem and the whole missionary work of St. Paul behind him—nothing would be more natural. We might easily suspect that the wording of the prophetic utterance had taken its colour from the event. It was, however, quite possible that Simeon, foreseeing that event, after the manner of the prophets, dimly, and not in detail, had in his mind that striking passage of Isaiah, 'Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee . . .; and the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.' I am now inclined to think that this interpretation is to be preferred. Simeon had in mind this ancient prophecy; he had studied and thought over it long, and his words mean very much what the prophecy meant—not less, but also not more.

My reason for leaning to this explanation of his language is based upon other phenomena in the chapters we are considering, but more particularly upon the *Benedictus*, in which those phenomena appear to culminate.

When we look at the *Benedictus* at all closely, how intensely Jewish it is! And not only is it Jewish, but Jewish of the period to which it is ascribed. It is, of course, Messianic; but the Messianic idea expressed in it is not the new specially Christian conception, as it was recast and purified by our Lord; it has much more in common with the old popular expectation in its current form.

I must not stay to quote at length the well-known words; but I would ask you just to go over in your minds the first five or six verses, and observe their essentially pre-Christian character.

There is quite a piling up of expressions that are characteristic of the older view: 'The God of Israel'; 'wrought redemption for His people'—it is the technical term for the *chosen* people, as distinct from all others; 'in the house of His servant David'; 'salvation from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us'—it is the political deliverance that Israel hoped for from powers like Syria or Rome; 'to show mercy towards our fathers'—the patriarchs and kings and people of Old Testament times. 'And to remember His holy covenant,' for which another name is 'the oath which He sware unto Abraham our father'; and again the promise of deliverance 'out of the hand of our enemies,' *i.e.* the political enemies mentioned just before. This is all the old idea of the Messianic reign, not His who said, 'My kingdom is not of this world.' We may apply it to this spiritual kingdom and to deliverance from our spiritual enemies, but that is not the original meaning. And just because it is not the original meaning the words are all the more appropriate to the speaker Zacharias. They are appropriate to Zacharias, but not in the least appropriate to St. Luke. The whole canticle is far removed from the spirit of St. Luke, and I think we may say *cannot* be his composition. We may credit him with some dramatic imagination, but it does not seem possible that it can have gone so far as that.

I conclude then that by far the more probable hypothesis is that in these chapters St. Luke was using an older writing; a writing curiously uninfluenced by later developments, and curiously suited to the situation which it describes. It still breathes the old narrow Jewish Particularism, as it existed at the beginning of our era. It is prophetic of Christianity, but not yet in the strict sense Christian.

Just one other point—that strangely minute appeal to the Mosaic law in connexion with the ritual of the Presentation in the Temple, 'And when the days of their purification according to the law of Moses were fulfilled, they brought Him up to Jerusalem, to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord), and to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtle-doves, or two young pigeons' (2^{22-24}). That, again, is very unlike St. Luke, the disciple of St. Paul, the great opponent of everything legal, and very unlike the date, 75–80 A.D., when the Christian Church had long given up these Jewish usages. By that time the interest in such things would be entirely gone.

I should much like to pursue the subject, and to discuss at length the historical value of these two chapters. I should like to point out the

light which they throw on the surroundings of the Holy Family; in other words, on the character of the circle in the midst of which our Lord was born, and by which His coming was first greeted. It is a circle with distinct marks of its own, and with a history that carries us far back into Old Testament times, and perhaps also to some extent points forward beyond the New Testament. The most significant name for this circle is 'the poor' or 'the meek,' as we have them described for us in the Psalms. There is much that is deeply interesting on this line of inquiry; but its bearing on our present subject is indirect rather than direct. I refer to it on this occasion chiefly in order to show that St. Luke was probably making use of a document, and that a document which from a Christian point of view might be called 'archaic' in its character.

III.

The next question, then, that we have to ask is, where such a document as this is likely to have come from. We have seen that it has two distinguishing marks besides its archaism: (1) there is about it a certain womanliness of tone; and (2) it appears to stand in some special relation to the Virgin Mary. Is there anywhere among the special channels of information which St. Luke appears to have possessed one that seems naturally to satisfy these conditions?

There are a number of indications not confined to the Gospel but present also in the Acts, and, indeed, not collected in any one place, but dispersed throughout the two treatises, which seem to show—and I think we may say certainly show—that St. Luke had a special source of information connected with the court of the Herods. It is a source that covers a wide range of time, going back to the reign of Herod the Great and the childhood of one of his sons; but it is concerned mainly with Herod Antipas and Herod Agrippa I. It was from this source that St. Luke obtained such minute and recondite facts as that on the day of our Lord's trial Herod and Pilate 'were made friends together, for before they were at enmity between themselves' (Lk 23^{12}); and again that Herod Agrippa I. 'was highly displeased with them of Tyre and Sidon; and they came with one accord to him, and, having made Blastus, the king's chamberlain, their friend, they asked for peace because their country was fed from the king's country' (Ac 12^{20}).

Now, a peculiar feature about this source is its very personal character. There are three persons mentioned in it, otherwise, I believe, entirely unknown to history—names that do not occur in Josephus or in any other historian of the time—and all three intimately connected with the Herodian court. The first is Blastus, the king's chamberlain, who has just been referred to. The second occurs in the next chapter of the Acts (Ac 13^{1}), 'Manaen (or Menahem) the foster-brother of Herod the tetrach,' who was among the prophets and teachers at Antioch. And, lastly, there is 'Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward,' who is mentioned twice in the Gospel.

It is to this Joanna, the wife of Chuza, that I desire specially to invite your attention. She appears upon the stage four times, twice by name and twice unnamed. We hear of her, first, as one of the women who accompanied our Lord in Galilee and ministered unto Him (or, rather, unto them, *i.e.* the whole party—that is the right reading) with their substance (Lk 8^{3}). We are next told expressly that she was one of the group of women who went to the tomb on the morning of the Resurrection (24^{10}), and who had also been witnesses of the Crucifixion (23^{49}). And we may safely infer that she was one of the women collected together with the apostles in the upper room after the Ascension (Ac 1^{14}). On these last two occasions we also know that the mother of Jesus was in the company; and we cannot doubt at all that at this period the two women were much thrown together.

Does not this give us exactly the link of connexion that we are in search of? Is it not in a high degree probable that some time during this intimacy, in a moment of quiet confidence, the mother of the Lord imparted to her companion the things which she had kept in her mind and pondered so long—not only the smaller incidents which attended the wondrous event, but the wondrous event itself, the great secret of all?

I must not profess to know too much. It may not have been to Joanna herself that these things were told. I do not say that it was Joanna herself who set them down in writing. It is, perhaps, not quite necessary that they should have been set down in writing at all. Of course several of the details relating to the Herodian court might just as well—and if they had stood alone we might have thought more probably—have been

imparted to St. Luke directly by word of mouth. But we have seen reason to think that the material contained in his first two chapters came to St. Luke in writing. They bear the marks of a state of things so much earlier than, and so very different from, any of which he had experience; and these marks are so fugitive in their nature that one is inclined to think that only a written document would have preserved them. On these grounds it appears that the hypothesis that St. Luke had before him such a document is preferable. I do not say how it came to him, or when it came—whether during his two years' residence at Cæsarea, when he appears to have been with St. Paul (Ac 24^{27}), or at some other time. All these details must be matter of speculation, and I cannot lay stress upon them. I only hold fast to the central fact, which seems to be satisfactorily proved, that in some such way as this particulars known only to the Virgin Mother herself might easily and naturally and without any forcing of the evidence have come into the hands of St. Luke, and come into them through a woman.

It is well that I should be quite candid about the course of reasoning which I have been putting before you. That part of it which relates to Joanna, the wife of Chuza, struck me about thirty years ago, and has been expressed in public and in print, but has never to my knowledge been directly criticized. That part of the argument which points to the narrative as coming through a woman, and ultimately from the Virgin Mary herself, is in full agreement with Professor Ramsay in the book to which I have referred, *Was Christ Born at Bethlehem?* The rest, and in particular so much as goes to show that St. Luke was using a document, and a document of a very early character, only occurred to me quite recently, and has not yet undergone the ordeal of criticism. Still, I have considerable confidence that the argument is sound. At least the facts on which it rests are for the most part hard facts, and not mere impressions; and there are more which I have not mentioned. At anyrate, I hope that the process of reasoning is strictly critical, and more deserving of that name than the rough and ready—I might say rough and rude—rejection of the whole narrative, simply because it contains marvels.

The right method surely is first to ascertain on what kind of attestation a statement rests, and so to infer the extent to which it may be trusted; not, because the *data* differ somewhat from those that come within our experience, without more ado to dismiss the whole, and refuse even to consider the nature of the evidence.

I quite allow that there are parts of the narrative that are more consonant with the ideas and expectations of the time than they are with our own. And to translate them into our own way of thinking is difficult and perhaps in part impossible. We must always remember that they were meant for the men of the time, and far more remotely for us. But where the evidence is so good as in this instance I believe it is, we must needs think that something real and solid lies behind it; something as to which, if we cannot give it a better name, we must even be content with the description that we find. We may be very sure that there are more things in heaven and earth than our philosophy can measure and label.

I would earnestly ask for patience. These questions are not simple, but highly complex; and they are not to be disposed of by the summary processes of common sense. It is always easy to cut a knot that ought to be untied; but when we have done so we must not call it 'science.' Rather in a sensitive mind there will remain behind a sense of violence and unreason.

IV.

What seems to me greatly to commend the view that I have been expressing, is that if we assume it to be true, all the rest of the phenomena fall into their place as they do not on any other assumption. It has, for instance, often been pointed out that the Gospels, including St. John, frequently speak of the parents of our Lord in the plural number, and of Joseph as His father. Even these two chapters of St. Luke, notwithstanding the fact that they record the whole story of the Annunciation, three times over use the phrase, 'His parents' ($2^{27.\,41.\,43}$), and once with yet greater precision, 'His father and His mother' (2^{33}); even the Virgin Mary herself is represented as saying, when she finds her Son in the temple, 'Behold Thy father and I sought Thee sorrowing' (2^{48}).

This was, no doubt, the common way of speaking throughout our Lord's public ministry. The people of Nazareth and of Capernaum looked upon Joseph, who by that time was probably no longer living, as His human father. And He did

not go out of His way to correct them. It is highly probable that at this time the apostles themselves knew no better. They just shared the common mode of speech with their neighbours; and they continued to share it for some years after the Resurrection. Meanwhile the Virgin also kept her secret to herself. We might apply to her a saying in one of the apocryphal Gospels, *μυστήριον ἐμὸν ἐμοί*, 'my mystery, my secret, is my own, and not another's.' It was not until after the Ascension—and we know not how much after—that in some quiet hour of sympathetic confidence she breathed into the ear of one of those mothers in Israel who had so long been near her person, the strange and awe-inspiring story of the wondrous birth. So at last this delicate thread, so nearly lost, became twisted into the strand of the Gospel message. And once there, the Church has been very careful not to let it go.

Such appear to be the facts. And if anyone who still does not see his way to accept the story as it is told, falls back in self-defence upon that providential ordering by which this particular article of the Creed was, as it were, held in reserve, and not included in the public teaching either of our Lord Himself or (for some time, we may believe) of the apostles, I for one would acknowledge his right to do so. There is this difference between the Virgin-birth and (for example) the Resurrection, that, whereas the latter was fully divulged and believed in by the Church, and by every part of the Church, almost from the first moment of its occurrence, the former entered into the common faith slowly and by degrees, and by a channel that was apparently private rather than public—entered into it, we might say, by a side door (though, as we believe, by the express appointment of the Master of the house) rather than by the broad, public entrance. If anyone desires to claim the benefit of this difference, I think we ought to let him. Only, on the other side, where this is done, we ought, I think, in strictness to set against the partial silence of the Apostolic Age the very marked emphasis of the age that immediately succeeded that of the apostles.

I wish I had time to set before you in full the teaching on this subject of Ignatius of Antioch, who suffered martyrdom about the year 110. In his letters, the genuineness of which is now hardly disputed, we can see that the Virgin-birth was for him an article of faith of the first importance, and one that he earnestly impresses upon his readers. Not much later—if later at all—the clause which affirms it took its place in the oldest form of the Christian Creed. The two scholars who have made the closest and most elaborate study of the history of the Creed, one of the two a distinct Liberal, place this oldest form—the first draft, so to speak, of the Apostles' Creed—about the year 100, and Professsor Harnack only a few years later, about 140. Already, I think we may say, in the first quarter—or at the very latest in the first half—of the second century, the Virgin-birth had a place in the Christian Creed that it has never since lost.

V.

I have thought it best to give you as connected a view as I could of the probable course of things entirely on the basis of the Gospel of St. Luke, and without bringing in the corresponding chapters of St. Matthew. Those chapters are involved in so many questions, historical and critical, that I do not feel that I can use them with the same amount of freedom. I need not remind some who may hear me that there has been no lack of hypotheses to show how some of the leading features in these chapters—the Visit of the Wise Men, the Massacre of the Innocents, the Flight into Egypt, even the Virgin-birth itself—may have grown up either out of hints contained in the Old Testament or through parallels in the profane history of the time. To hypotheses of this latter kind additions have been made quite recently. I do not doubt that much of all this is untenable; but I am not prepared to say that there may not be in it a residuum of truth. In any case, these two chapters appear to belong to that portion of the First Gospel that is latest and least certain.

I ought, perhaps, also just to allude to the fact that there are problems connected with these chapters of the Lower Criticism as well as of the Higher—problems, I mean, as to the text of what was originally written. These would be too technical to discuss here and now. I may have the opportunity of going into them more fully elsewhere; and I have already written about them at some length in the article, 'Jesus Christ,' in Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*. I only mention this in order that you may not think that anything of importance is being neglected, though I do not

in the least believe that any of the textual points that have been raised make any difference at all to the main issue. I have no doubt that they leave it precisely where it stood without them.

There are only two remarks that I should like to make as to the positive evidence supplied by these two chapters.

1. It has often been observed that just as the first two chapters of St. Luke appear to be written from the point of view of the mother of the Lord, so these first two chapters of St. Matthew were written from the point of view of His reputed father. Just as in the one account we are told things that could be known only to the Virgin Mary, so also in the other we are told things that could be known only to Joseph—for instance, that he was minded to put away his wife, though quietly and without attracting attention; then that he was warned in a dream not to carry out his intention, because that which was conceived in her was of the Holy Ghost (Mt 1^{20}); then we are told that he was again warned in the same way after the visit of the Wise Men, and that 'he took the young Child and His mother' and departed into Egypt. Yet a third and fourth warning, also conveyed by dreams, determine the return to Palestine and the settlement at Nazareth.

It is the consistency with which this standpoint is maintained that is rather striking. It would be natural to infer that this narrative came in some way ultimately from Joseph as the other from Mary. At the same time I do not feel that I can lay as much stress on the point, because I cannot trace the channel through which the information is likely to have come any further.

2. The second point is that the whole tradition, as we find it in St. Matthew, is so utterly divergent from that in St. Luke that the few but rather significant points in which they agree acquire an enhanced importance. These are, of course, the central point of all, the special operation of the Holy Ghost—in both cases described in that way, which is the more remarkable when we think that before we come to the New Testament the very term itself, Holy Ghost, was not common, and when we think also that the same event might have been described quite differently; for instance, St. John speaks rather of an incarnation of the Divine Word. And then round this central point there are a number of minor ones; for instance, that Mary was at the time betrothed to Joseph, that her Child was to be called 'Jesus,' that the birth took place at Bethlehem of Judæa (not Bethlehem in Galilee), but that the Holy Family went to live at Nazareth. These coincidences between the two narratives are thrown into relief, and, I think we may say, specially corroborated because of their general unlikeness to each other.

VI.

I have spoken so far of the historical side of the Virgin-birth, of the kind of evidence on which it rests as an historical fact. But you will expect me before I close to say something about its theological side, its significance in relation to the eternal counsels of God and His providential ordering of the world.

From this point of view the key is supplied by the special 'Preface' in our prayer-books for Christmas-Day. In it we laud and magnify God's glorious Name because He gave Jesus Christ His only Son to be born as at that time for us; 'who, by the operation of the Holy Ghost, was made very man of the substance of the Virgin Mary His mother; and that without spot of sin, to make us clean from all sin.' In that two conditions are laid down. On the one hand, He was to be 'very man of the substance of' His mother; and, on the other hand, He was to be 'without spot of sin to make us clean' from sin. In the conjunction of those two things lies the paradox. That He should become man, and yet not sinful like man—that is the wonder that moves our adoration. And it is a wonder which we are led to associate with the manner in which He was born.

I will say a word on the second point first—the sinlessness. I may be asked—one sees the question often asked—How could the Virgin-birth be a guarantee of sinlessness? After all, the human element in the birth is only halved, it is not removed. It is urged that the taint of sin, which attaches to all that is born of woman, might be conveyed—and, indeed, *must* be conveyed—through the mother alone.

That would hold good if the other factor in the process were purely negative—if it meant only the absence of something human and not the presence of something Divine. No doubt when we speak of that presence, we are speaking of a mystery; we are speaking of something beyond us, and to which our empirical tests cannot be applied. The

last thing that I would wish to do would be to intrude upon that mystery, or to seek to dogmatize about it. It is far better left as a mystery. Still, I think there is one thing that we should be justified in saying about it. If there was a divine agency at work, however mysterious, we may be sure that it would at least refine all it touched. 'He shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and He shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver . . . for He is like a refiner's fire' (Mal $3^{3.2}$). 'I will turn My hand upon thee, and thoroughly purge away thy dross, and will take away all thy tin' (Is 1^{25}). That is the way in which the operation of the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of God, is described. Can we think of evil as living in contact with it—in contact of which we are meant to think as the closest and most organic that the mind can conceive? I repeat that I do not try to penetrate the mystery; but of so much at least I think we may be sure.

It might, however, be urged by those who speculate more freely about these things—Why is it that the human element in the birth was only halved? Why was it not altogether removed? Why was there any necessity for a human mother if there was not for a human father?

That was just a question that speculative minds put to themselves in ancient times, as they might do now. And they took the step that the New Testament has not taken. Those who did so most consistently were the sects called Gnostics. Marcion, for instance, did away with the human birth altogether. The fact corresponding to it with him was that a Heavenly Being suddenly descended and became visible in human form at Capernaum in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Cæsar.

Another important school, the Valentinians, held that the Holy Child passed through His mother, as they expressed it, 'like water through a tube.'

The Gnostics, however, were not strictly Christians. With them philosophy or theosophy came first, and they sought to give it a Christian colour by adapting to it the text of the New Testament by means of allegory.

We run no great danger of that kind now. There is little fear of our losing sight of the full humanity of our Lord. It is rather His full Divinity that we are in danger of losing sight of; and it is this that the Christian Church has sought to safeguard by its insistence upon the Virgin-birth.

I am always very reluctant to use the word 'must' in connexion with any dispensation of God—to say that it 'must' have taken place in one particular way and in no other. God sees not as man sees, and His resources are infinite—beyond our power even to imagine. But when we are told, on what seems to be such good authority, that His way of bringing His first-begotten into the world was through birth from a Virgin, we can at least assent to its fitness for the end in view. If we try to throw ourselves back into the spirit of the time and ask what other method would be so intelligible to men of all classes and degrees of culture, we must answer, None. And when I say 'so intelligible,' I mean what other method would so invest the act of Incarnation with the associations of perfect sinlessness and purity. I do not think that we are able to conceive of any other method that should do this. That He should be 'born without spot of sin to make us clean from all sin' is a truth to which our hearts instinctively respond.

Nor can we forget, although this, no doubt, stands on another level, of what incalculable value this same truth has been in raising the whole idea of womanhood, and especially of motherhood. In times of rudeness and ignorance and violence this ideal has shone like a star in the heavens. And if, like so many of the best gifts to men, it has had its abuses, the abuses are such as we can avoid, and keep the good without the harm.

'We beseech Thee, O Lord, pour Thy grace into our hearts that, as we have known the incarnation of Thy Son Jesus Christ by the message of an angel, so by His cross and passion we may be brought unto the glory of His resurrection: and as He was presented in the temple in substance of our flesh, so we may be presented unto Thee with pure and clean hearts, by the same Thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'