

## VI.

### THE NEW TESTAMENT ACCOUNT OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS.

#### FIRST ARTICLE.

**E**VERY narrative, of whatever kind, is itself a phenomenon of history, and as such in an age of science requires an explanation. In the case of a narrative which claims to be historical, either one of two general lines of explanation may be followed. In the first place, the narrative may be regarded as really based upon facts; so that the genesis of the narrative is to be explained chiefly through the facts. Or, in the second place, the narrative may be regarded as false; in which case the genesis of the false ideas must be explained. If the supposed facts are difficult of explanation, whereas it is easy to see how the false ideas could have been developed and embodied in the narrative, then we pronounce the narrative untrustworthy. But if, on the other hand, the facts are easy to explain, whereas it is difficult to see how the ideas, if false, ever could have been developed and embodied in the narrative, then we pronounce the narrative trustworthy. So in order to determine whether any particular historical narrative is trustworthy or untrustworthy, we must balance the difficulty of explaining the facts and their transmission against the difficulty of explaining the origin of the ideas if they were not determined by facts.

It is evident that the New Testament account of the birth of Jesus professes to be a narrative of fact. Nor is there, so far as means of transmission are concerned, any improbability in supposing that the claim is a just one. In the narrative of Luke, there are certain indications that point toward Mary as the channel of communication. She it is to whom special revelations are made, she it is whose inmost thoughts are described, and she it is who could have had the best possible knowledge of the events. She would also have had abundant opportunity to communicate the story to the early disciples, either directly or through the company of women described in the latter course of the Gospels. In the case of Matthew's account, Joseph seems rather to be indicated as the channel of communication—at any rate he could have been such a channel.

So if the facts are real, the explanation of the rise of the narratives is, in general, if not in detail, an easy task.

Therefore, we may examine, first, the hypothesis that the narrative is to be regarded as a copy of the facts, reserving the alternative hypothesis for subsequent discussion. Is the narrative near enough to the facts to be a copy of them, and if so, can the facts themselves be reasonably explained? If the facts are extremely unlikely, then only enormous difficulty in explaining the narrative without reference to the facts could force us to this explanation of the narrative through the facts.

### 1. The external attestation.

The New Testament account of the birth of Jesus and of related events is contained in Luke i. 5-ii (with Luke iii. 23-38) and in Matt. i, ii. This account is therefore contained in two of the New Testament books, whose attestation is so strong as to make it practically impossible that they were written after the close of the first century, and exceedingly probable that they were written very much earlier. Nor is there any external evidence really worth considering to show that these Gospels did not originally contain the accounts of the birth. These accounts appear in all the Greek manuscripts, in all the ancient versions and in the *Diatessaron* of Tatian (omitting the genealogies). It is true that Cerinthus and Carpocrates and a class of Jewish Christians did not believe in the virgin birth, and did not accept those portions of the Gospels which supported that doctrine; but it is pretty evident that their action was motivated by dogmatic rather than historical considerations. Even if it is held that heresy in the early Church was, in most cases, a tenacious holding to the ancient simplicity in the face of the developing theology of the Church, yet this does not affect the narrower textual question now under discussion. It may be perfectly true, for example, that a certain class of Ebionites were not mistaken in regarding the natural birth of Christ as the correct and original belief; yet it is evident that their omission of the opening chapters of Matthew and Luke was not textually justified. Perhaps the Ebionites were right in refusing to assert that the virgin birth was a fact; in any case, there is no good reason to suppose that they were right in omitting the account of that supposed fact from their copies of the first and third Gospels.\* Marcion's rejection of the first two

\* Usener (*Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen*, I, 92f., 98f., etc.) is of a different opinion. He maintains that the ancient heretics, who belonged to a time when the Gospels were not yet fixed, bear witness by their doctrines to the state of the Gospel tradition at the time when they wrote. Thus, for example,

chapters of Luke shares in the low estimate which is to be attached to his other numerous alterations of the text of the New Testament books.\* As Harnack says, Marcion felt himself to be a reformer, and so the principle† that heretics become heretical only because they faithfully maintain conditions beyond which the main body of the Church has since the separation advanced, is certainly, in his case at least, not to be applied.‡

One other supposed testimony to an original form of Luke's Gospel which did not contain the first two chapters must be mentioned for the sake of completeness. In 1902, Conybeare§ called attention to the fragments added to the two manuscripts (both from the year 1195) of the Armenian translation of Ephraem's *Commentary on the Diatessaron*. These manuscripts, which, Conybeare believes, represent widely separated texts, both add to the *Commentary* various fragments, which are attributed to Ephraem. One of them—a brief account of the manner of writing of the Gospels—contains a notice about Luke, which Conybeare translates as follows: *Lucas autem initium fecit a baptismo Ioannis, sicut primum de carnalitate eius locutus est et de regno quod a Davide, et deinde quidem a Abrahamo incepit*. This notice, Conybeare supposes, was found by Ephraem at the end of the *Diatessaron*, and, since it follows the more ancient tradition in various particulars, is very old. The text and the interpretation of the latter part of the notice about Luke are exceedingly uncertain, and this might seem to suggest the notion that the text is corrupt in the first clause; but Conybeare insists that the reading "baptism" could never have arisen if the reading "birth" had been original. With regard to this point we should certainly not be too positive, but it does not seem altogether impossible that a scribe

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if Carpocrates did not hold the doctrine of the virgin birth, it was not because he mutilated the Gospels, but because the Gospels that he knew contained no account of the virgin birth. But Usener has failed to take account of the evidence in its entirety—for example, he seems to have ignored Aristides and Ignatius. As witnesses with regard to textual questions, they are of far more value than those heretical thinkers who, from all that we can judge, would presumably be more influenced by the requirements of their systems. As Harnack remarks, Usener, in his zealous investigation of the Gnostics, seems almost to forget that there was in the second century such a thing as a Catholic Church. Why should we look to the Gnostics to establish by indirect means the literary development of the Gospel tradition, when we can establish it directly through the writings of the Catholic Church?

\* For a very different estimate, see Usener's section on the Gospels of Marcion and Luke, *op. cit.*, 80f.

† Usener, *op. cit.*, I, 14.

‡ Harnack's criticism of Usener, *Theolog. Literaturzeitung*, 1889, 205f.

§ *Zeitschrift f. d. neut. Wissenschaft*, 1902, 192f.

might have been confused by the notice about Mark which immediately precedes, and thus might have been led to change the unusual phrase "birth of John" to the more usual one "baptism of John." It must be borne in mind that Ephraem's copy of the *Diatessaron*, without the slightest doubt, contained the first two chapters of Luke, so that if Ephraem appended the note in question to his *Commentary*, or left it as he found it at the close of the *Diatessaron*, he must have done so without observing its real meaning. It seems more probable to suppose that the corruption of the text of the notice extends further than Conybeare thinks; but if not, it is possible that the note was written by one of those heretics who, as we have already observed, did not accept the first two chapters of Luke. In any case, it cannot be said that this notice, existing only in manuscripts of the year 1195 and there attached to a work of the fourth century, carries us back to the fact of an addition to the third Gospel, which, if made at all, was made early in the second century; especially since we can point to circles where such an idea about the Gospel arose at a later time from dogmatic considerations, and whence the notice in question might have come. We conclude, then, that there is no external evidence of any account to show that the Gospel of Luke ever existed without the first two chapters.

But our proof of the early date of the accounts of the birth is not indirect and negative merely. We are not forced to rely solely on the argument that the chapters under discussion are firmly fixed in the first and third Gospels, that these Gospels have early attestation, and that therefore the chapters are early. On the contrary, there is the strongest kind of evidence for the early use, not only of the first and third Gospels in general, but of those very parts of the Gospels which contain an account of the birth.

For the virgin birth—the most remarkable thing narrated in the chapters under discussion—was part of the firmly fixed Christian belief at a very early time. In the first place, it formed part of the original "Apostles' Creed" (though expressed in slightly different words from those we use to-day), which arose, according to Harnack, about 150 A.D., according to Zahn, certainly not later than 120. And even aside from the question as to the origin of the Creed as a whole, more or less fixed and creed-like statements of the virgin birth—statements pointing to what Harnack calls "an Eastern Christological  $\mu\acute{\alpha}\theta\eta\mu\alpha$ "—can be detected in early writers.\*

\* The evidence for the early knowledge of the virgin birth has been admirably collected in convenient form by Gore in *Dissertations on Subjects Connected with the Incarnation*, 41ff.

It is beyond dispute that Irenæus gave to the virgin birth a place in the rule of faith, at least in so far as he had any definite rule of faith at all. As to Justin Martyr, Hillmann\* has raised objections, not, indeed, to the fact of Justin's testimony, but to the manner of it. He says that Justin is evidently a pioneer in the support of the virgin birth, because he regards as Christians (*ἀπὸ τοῦ ἡμετέρου γένους*) those who deny the doctrine (*Dial.*, 48). But how else would you expect him to speak of those who accepted Christ as the Messiah, though holding a peculiar view of the manifestation of His Sonship? In other words, how else could he express the idea of "heretic" as opposed to "unbeliever"? And to hold that Justin regarded the virgin birth as something uncertain or unimportant is to run counter to the large number of passages (both in the *Dialogue* and in the *Apology*) where it is mentioned as one of the fundamental facts about Christ.

That Aristides believed in the virgin birth is attested by the Syriac and Armenian versions as well as by what remains of the original Greek,† and it is probable that the phrase "born of the Virgin Mary" found a place in his creed.‡

In regard to Ignatius, it would seem that the two passages, *Eph.* xix. 1, καὶ ἔλαθεν τὸν ἄρχοντα τοῦ αἰῶνος τοῦτου ἢ παρθενία Μαρίας καὶ ὁ τοκετὸς αὐτῆς ὁμοίως καὶ ὁ θάνατος τοῦ κυρίου τρία μυστήρια κραυγῆς, ὅτινα ἐν ἡσχία θεοῦ ἐπράχθη, and *Smyrn.* i. 1, ἀληθῶς ὄντα ἐκ γένους Δαβὶδ κατὰ σάρκα, υἱὸν θεοῦ κατὰ θέλημα καὶ δύναμιν θεοῦ γεγεννημένον ἀληθῶς ἐκ παρθένου, were sufficient. Hillmann, however, by a process of reasoning, arrives at the conclusion that the author did not know Luke i. 34, 35, iii. 23. The author, he says, in *Eph.* xviii. 2, xx. 2, and *Smyrn.* i. 1, regards Jesus as begotten (1) ἐκ σπέρματος μὲν Δαβὶδ, (2) πνεύματος δὲ ἁγίου. This can be explained only on the Adoptionist view, for the generation from the seed of David cannot be regarded as coming through Mary, since in the first passage it is parallel with πνεύματος δὲ ἁγίου, and since in *Trall.* ix. 1 ἐκ γένους Δαβὶδ is regarded as distinct from ἐκ Μαρίας. Now, even if we admit that Ignatius regarded Mary as not of the tribe of Judah (which does not seem to me to be clearly proved by the passages cited above), it does not follow that because he then derived Jesus' Davidic descent through Joseph, he did not know Luke i. 34, 35, iii. 23. For if those passages stood where they stand to-day, the very same supposed contradiction was present in the first part of the third Gospel as is present in

\* *Jahrb. f. protest. Theol.*, 1891, 255f.

† J. Rendel Harris, *The Apology of Aristides*, 78.

‡ Harris, *op. cit.*, 25. Cf. Swete, *The Apostles' Creed*, 44ff.

Ignatius. Ignatius simply took over the two sides of the account in Luke without reflection. That this view of the matter is correct is made perfectly evident by the fact that Ignatius in the two passages quoted above distinctly states the virginity of Mary—a fact which nullifies the inferences of Hillmann. Without sufficient reason, Hillmann regards the phrase *γεγεννημένον ἐκ παρθένου* (*Smyrn.* i. 1) as an interpolation; *Eph.* xix. 1 (which Swete calls the classical passage) he does not mention at all. Swete calls attention to the fact that the testimony of Ignatius is made more valuable by the nature of his argument. He is arguing with Docetics, and is urging against them the reality of the birth of Jesus. It would, therefore, have suited his purpose to point to the natural birth; but instead of this he says in effect that, though of course supernatural, the birth was yet real. So there is nothing against the statement of Harnack that “Ignatius has freely reproduced a ‘kerugma’ of Christ which seems, in essentials, to be of a fairly definite historical character, and which contained, *inter alia*, the Virgin Birth, Pontius Pilate, and the ἀπέθανεν.”\*

We have thus traced a firm and well-formulated belief in the virgin birth back to the beginning of the second century. The question at once arises whether the accounts of Matthew and Luke were the sources of that belief. Some kind of an argument might be derived from the manner of statement of the doctrine in the early patristic writers, but this would not be absolutely convincing, for example, in the case of Ignatius. However, the decision is made very probable by the following considerations. It is just this virgin birth which is most urged as necessitating a late date for Luke i, ii; Matt. i, ii, or certain portions of those chapters—indeed, if it were not for the virgin birth, probably those chapters would, in view of the great weight of manuscript attestation, have passed unchallenged as original parts of the Gospels. But it is just this virgin birth which we have shown to have been accepted as a fundamental fact so early as the days of the Apostolic Fathers. At the beginning of the second century, then, the first and third Gospels were used, and the virgin birth was accepted. According to a great weight of manuscript evidence, the virgin birth found a place in those Gospels. The conclusion is at least a natural one that the Christians of that time derived their belief in the virgin birth from the account of that birth which is so firmly fixed in the Gospels, or at any rate that they derived the belief partly from those Gospels. If, as seems to be

\* Herzog, *Realencyclopädie*, 3. A., I. 751. *The Apostles' Creed*, E. T., 59f.

possible, for example in Justin, an extra-canonical source was also used, any argument for the trustworthiness of our canonical accounts is rather increased than otherwise, since another testimony is added to the two that we already possess. If the extra-canonical source was itself the source of our two accounts, then by it we are carried still further back. Our accounts are demonstrably old; if a still older account containing the virgin birth was used along with them at the beginning of the second century, then we have worked back very near to the time of the supposed facts. If the early writers enumerated above used only some account different from our account, then it is still significant that just that element in our accounts which has met with most objections was a firmly fixed part of the Christian belief at the beginning of the second century. But there is practically conclusive evidence that these early writers did know our accounts, and this fact, coupled with the evidence of the manuscripts and versions, leads to the conclusion that Matt. i, ii, and Luke i, ii, were parts of the original Gospels, and were therefore written in all probability before 80 A.D. This conclusion may be shaken by internal considerations, but they must be considerations of great weight if they are to overcome such an array of external evidence.

2. Thus far we have exhibited the external evidence which goes to show that the New Testament account of the birth of Jesus was written at a time when authentic tradition as to the facts might still have been available. We now turn to the internal evidence bearing upon the trustworthiness of the account.

In the first place, it may be well to see if the account itself gives us any evidence which will enable us to penetrate beyond it. The most obvious fact in this connection is that we have two narratives of the birth of Jesus. What is the relation between them? The hypotheses that one is a source of the other, and that they have a common source, might seem to be out of the question, if we did not, as a matter of fact, have before us attempts to prove them.

Pfleiderer,\* choosing the former position, believed at one time that Matthew used Luke's poetical composition and presupposed a knowledge of it on the part of his readers; and that Matthew was therefore able to take for granted the acceptance of the virgin birth, which Luke had been obliged laboriously to introduce and support; but that he changed Luke's material to suit his own purpose: thus, for example, the account of the Magi is a story invented to typify Luke ii. 31 ("a light for revelation to the Gen-

\* *Urchristentum*, 1. A. 480f.

tiles"), the star especially being a sensible counterpart of Luke's indefinite "light." This whole theory is beset with such obvious difficulties that it is not at all surprising that Pfeiderer has himself abandoned it.\*

Recently there have been several attempts to indicate a common source for the infancy narratives. One of these—that of Conrady—we need not consider at this point; for Conrady undertakes to show that both our accounts are derived from the so-called *Protevangeliium of James*, which he thinks is a work of pure invention. His treatise, therefore, is an attempt to explain our narratives without the help of the facts, and so belongs to the second part of our discussion. At present we shall confine our discussion to an examination and criticism of the view that the narratives are what they are, only because the facts were what they were. When we come to the the other view of the narratives, we shall criticise that as well.†

The other attempt to exhibit a common source for the birth narratives of our Gospels is that of Resch.‡ He thinks that this common source was a סֵפֶר תּוֹלְדוֹת יֵשׁוּעַ הַמָּשִׁיחַ, written originally in Hebrew after the plan of the Book of Ruth (and so provided with a genealogy), and translated afterward into Greek; that from this family history, the first Evangelist took those portions which suited his purpose of exhibiting events as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy; that afterwards the third Evangelist made use of the rest of the book, but was pressed for space (owing to the exigencies of ancient book-making), and so was obliged to omit what had already been narrated by the author of Matthew, as well as to condense what he was actually able to relate. The differences to be observed in Justin are due, in Resch's opinion, to Justin's use of a different recension of the source, while the pro-

\* Pfeiderer, *Urchristentum*, 2. A. II, 550f., now accepts the suggestion of Hillmann and others that Luke i. 34, 35, is an interpolation. So even if Matthew did know Luke, the earlier Gospel (about which point Pfeiderer is no longer at all certain), it does not follow that he acquired from it the idea of the virgin birth. In general, Pfeiderer abandons the theory that Matthew's infancy narrative is in any way dependent upon that of Luke. There is something suggestive in Pfeiderer's change of view. If the new interpolation theory about i. 34, 35, could be proven false, would Pfeiderer, on the supposition that the virgin birth was not a fact, be forced back again into the insecure position we have just been discussing? However, there are, of course, many other things besides the interpolation theory which have led Pfeiderer to shift his ground. All this would belong, properly, to the second part of our discussion.

† The less fully developed theory of Reitzenstein may best be treated in connection with that of Conrady.

‡ *Das Kindheitsevangelium*. Gebhardt-Harnack, *Texte und Untersuchungen*, X, 5.



logue to the fourth Gospel, as well as even the apocryphal Gospels, are thought to preserve for us certain isolated readings of the original writing which but for them would be lost. In support of this theory Resch urges the following considerations:

(1) The title at the beginning of Matthew's account, *βιβλος γενέσεως, Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ*. A brief narrative of forty-two verses could not be called a "book," whereas if we put Luke i, ii, and Matt. i, ii, together we have a writing about the size of the Book of Ruth.

This argument ignores the very probable view that *βιβλος* refers merely to the genealogy—a view which the parallels in Genesis seem at least to suggest, even though, according to the usage there, this would be called the book of the generations of Abraham, rather than of Jesus. The noun in the genitive indicates the main purpose of the genealogy, hence, perhaps, the change in usage. In any case, it is extravagant to claim that we can say just how large a *βιβλος* had to be. Furthermore, even though we could show that the title stood originally at the head of a larger work, it does not follow that the rest of that work was occupied by the narrative at present contained in Luke.

(2) The character of the extra-canonical recensions.

To criticise the details of this argument would be too great a task for the present occasion, since Resch has amassed a great number of interesting citations from the early patristic literature and the apocryphal gospels; but in general it may be said that, in the first place, he attributes too much importance to variations which might well be due to careless citation, and in the second place, he has not shown with sufficient clearness why the phenomena must be due to just the particular cause which he assigns. It may be true, for example, that Justin used some extra-canonical source; but it has not been proved that that source was a recension of the hypothetical *Book of the Generations of Jesus Christ*.

(3) The points of contact, with regard to matter, between the two accounts. But these, so far as they go, might be explained by the basis of the two narratives in a common series of facts.

(4) The Johannine Prologue shows evidence of being a philosophical reflection on the original source, which was, however, used in an extra-canonical recension.

An examination of the supposed parallels (pp. 243ff.) will show the insufficiency of this argument. One of the most striking parallels is obtained only by means of the at least doubtful reading in John i. 13, *ὅς . . . ἐγεννήθη*.

(5) The habits of the two authors account for their choice of

matter. But the purpose of Luke to give only what was left, and to give it as briefly as possible, will hardly account for the particular wording of ii. 39.

(6) The two narratives exhibit linguistic affinities, and the differences may be accounted for by supposing that the first Evangelist broke in upon the original form of the source more than did the third Evangelist.

But an examination of the linguistic parallels on pp. 26, 27, leads to the opposite result from that sought by Resch, for the parallels consist merely of commonplaces; and where anything more than a commonplace is observable the difference is far more noticeable than the similarity. In general, it may be said that the difference in character between the two narratives is enough to destroy Resch's hypothesis. Matthew is terse and prosaic in form even where the subject would naturally lead to a more elevated style, *e.g.*, the story of the Magi. Luke, on the other hand, moves in a region of simple and fresh, but exalted poetry. It will not do to say that the original book was simple and dignified in the narrative portions, and flowing and poetical where poetry was demanded; for there are narrative portions in Luke's account, which yet exhibit the same contrast in style as against Matthew, as may be seen even in the Magnificat. On the whole, in view of the audacity of the attempt to reconstruct the original Hebrew of the source, and in view of the enormous weight of evidence which would be required to prove the contention, it is not at all surprising that Resch has remained the sole defender of his Hebrew *Book of the Generations of Jesus Christ*.

It seems, therefore, reasonably clear, on the hypothesis that the narratives are based upon historical traditions, that there was no common written source of the two widely diverging accounts. But we are not altogether debarred from attempting to trace a little further back the history of the ideas presented in our narratives. Zahn\* makes such an attempt, on the basis of Luke and Matthew taken separately. He says, in the first place, that Luke, writing to assist the faith of the Gentile Theophilus, would include in his Gospel only those things which were generally held throughout the Christian congregations—an argument which perhaps takes too much for granted for our present purpose. Zahn's argument with regard to Matthew† is much more remarkable, although at the same time much more doubtful. He says it is clear that, as Mat-

\* *Das apostolische Symbolum*, 58f.

† Cf. J. Weiss, *Theologische Rundschau*, 1901, 159, and Wernle, *Syn. Frage*, 189, 190.

thew's purpose throughout his Gospel is distinctly apologetic and polemic (see especially Matt. xxviii. 11-15), so it is polemic also in this first section—polemic against the Jewish slander to the effect that Jesus was a son of dishonor, silencing the slander, first, by the citation of prophecy to show that what had given offense is really a holy work of God, and, secondly, by the fact that Joseph had openly recognized Mary as his wife before she bore her eldest son. The polemic character of these first two chapters appears, also, Zahn says, in the genealogy. The women so singularly mentioned have all something shameful about them, at least to a Jew, even Ruth being a Moabitess. Matthew's argument, therefore, according to Zahn, is that if the Jews did not take offense at these dark spots in the history of the house of David (admittedly the bearer of the promises), neither ought they to take offense at the stain upon the birth of Jesus, even admitting it to be a fact; Jesus might still be the Messiah. Now this polemic, Zahn argues, proves that the opposing view was widely spread among the Jews at the time when Matthew wrote; and as every one [except Haeckel] admits, that Jewish view was a caricature of the original Christian report about the supernatural conception, the view that the two opinions stood in the reverse relation being clearly excluded. But in order that there may be a caricature, the thing caricatured must be well known; therefore, in order to allow time for all this, the belief in the virgin birth must have been widely current long before our Matthew was written.

The argument is perhaps ingenious rather than sound. In the first place, it is very doubtful whether the author who had chosen the lofty way of refutation represented in i. 18-25 would ever have descended to admit, even for a moment, and for the sake of argument, that the mother of the Lord might have shared in the disgrace connected in the popular mind with such names as Tamar and Rahab. And then, it is very doubtful whether the women mentioned in the genealogy are mentioned because of the disgrace connected with them, rather than simply because their names called up something remarkable in the line of descent. Finally, and most important, it may be objected that Zahn's theory must always remain a mere supposition. For, according to Hilgenfeld, we have no mention of that Jewish slander against Christ supposed to be combated in Matthew until the year 130, and the reference there is extremely doubtful. Indeed, the story is not mentioned even in Justin Martyr, as we should certainly expect (with Hilgenfeld) if Justin knew of it, and becomes prominent only in Celsus about

180 A.D.\* It seems, therefore, extremely unlikely that the slander arose in the period between the crucifixion and the composition of Matthew, especially since the doctrine of the virgin birth does not seem to have been part of the earliest Christian preaching and therefore could not have been caricatured so early by the Jews. We therefore reject the attempt of Zahn to show by this particular line of argument the existence of a general Christian belief in the virgin birth long before the composition of Matthew. But we do not therefore by any means weaken our opinion that the doctrine of the virgin birth must have originated at a very early date. For the very independence of the two narratives, coupled with their agreement in the essential fact, shows that the two lines of tradition—so far as we can judge from objective considerations—must have begun to diverge at a very early time. Indeed, the suggestion is not an unnatural one that the lines began to diverge at the facts themselves—the two narratives being based upon the accounts of different eye-witnesses.

Thus far we have tried to trace back the accounts of the birth as far as possible, and then, merely from general considerations, to penetrate behind them to the tradition upon which they rest.†

But we have pursued the investigation just as we should in the case of any historical narrative—we have taken no account of difficulties arising from the peculiar content of the particular narrative now under discussion. We must now examine the narratives themselves more in detail. What objections are to be opposed to the external evidence already considered?

The first thing to be noticed is, naturally, the miraculous character of many of the events narrated—indeed, the very sum and substance of the whole account is a miracle. Now, of course, for probably the majority of those who deny the essential truth of the narratives, the presence of miracle settles the matter at the outset. A miracle cannot be true; the narratives are suffused with the miraculous; therefore the narratives are false, be the origin of the falsification easy or difficult to explain. Such a position we cannot now attempt to refute. For we freely admit that in order to prove that miracles are possible and have actually occurred the virgin birth is not the place to begin. We are thoroughly in agreement with Peter and Paul, who began rather with what could be supported by direct and ample testimony—the Resurrection. The miraculous, further-

\* Hilgenfeld, *Zeitschrift f. wissenschaftliche Theologie*, 1900, 271f.

† To this latter discussion we shall return, from another point of view, in the second article.

more, must be supported by an argument which far exceeds the limit of bare testimony. For there is a presumption against every miracle which hardly any testimony will overcome. One might not believe a hundred men of the highest character and intellect if they told him that a man had arisen from the dead. But it is different if they tell him that Christ has arisen from the dead. He knows he is a sinner; he knows there is a righteous God; he knows he needs a tremendous event to save him, for a tremendous cure is needed for a tremendous ill; Christ is offered as the Saviour. That He should rise from the dead seems to be not impossible, for great as is the event, there is an adequate occasion for it. Our investigator is thus favorably disposed in this case for the reception of the direct testimony. It is only with men who at least see the force of some such reasoning that we now argue—men who are ready to accept a miracle, if the occasion and the testimony are sufficient, but who have some particular difficulties about the particular miracles contained in the accounts of the birth of Jesus.

These particular objections to the miracles of our narratives may be classified as occasioned either (1) by the angelic appearances or (2) by the virgin birth.\*

(1) Against the angelic appearances it is urged that they exceed the limits which even supernatural revelation may allow itself. The extended conversations and especially the name "Gabriel" are objected to. Two lines of defense may be pursued. In the first place, we may say with B. Weiss that the form of the revelations is supplied by the author, who preserves, however, the essential truth. Or (with more reason as it seems to me) we may point to the conditions under which the revelations were made. It is perfectly true that angelic appearances in the twentieth century would be eminently out of place, and so, contradictory to the grave, unsensational spirit of revelation. But if we suppose, as is not unlikely, the existence in Israel just before the time of Christ of a circle of pious *πρωτοί* who were not contaminated by the prevailing formalism and corruption, but kept their faces turned steadily toward heaven in simple, childlike faith that Jehovah would yet fulfil His ancient promises; if there were really in Israel shepherds like the shepherds of Luke and saints like Symeon and Anna (and their existence seems presupposed by the later history), then the angels do not seem so unworthy of a God who adapts His revelations to the needs and capacities of His creatures.

Connected with the objection to the angels is the objection to

\* Resch, *op. cit.*, 325.

the narrative of Luke because it is poetical. The fact we freely admit—indeed, even Conybeare credits the author with “a very pretty fancy”[!]—but we refuse to draw any derogatory inference. The narrative may well be both true and poetical—especially if, as we have just tried to show, the poetry is largely in the facts themselves. Indeed, Prof. Briggs, for example,\* suggests that the sources of the narratives were actually poems, and yet attributes to these sources a high degree of historic value.†

(2) The virgin birth is objected to (a) because it is not adequately attested, and (b) because, so far from there being any adequate occasion for it, it is positively detrimental to Christian doctrine.

To the second of these objections (referring to the occasion for the miracle) we cannot attribute so much weight as is sometimes done. True, the principle is a correct one, that the reality or non-reality of a miracle must be determined very largely by the occasion. But we must distinguish between the importance of the event and our understanding of its importance. If we admit that Christ was a supernatural person, we do not have to be able to explain the special reason for every one of His miracles in order to believe that the miracles really happened. The virgin birth, being connected with Christ, has an adequate occasion. The fact may well be enormously important—in view of our profound ignorance as to the origin of every human soul, to say nothing of the Incarnation of the Son of God—even though the futile physiological and psychological speculations with regard to its exact meaning have not brought us any nearer to the truth. Surely the Incarnation, if it was real, was an event stupendous enough to give rise to even the greatest of miracles.

Yet the question cannot be dismissed without a few words, even in a purely historical discussion. For if it be shown that the Church has made a mistake in including the virgin birth in the Creed; if it be shown that the doctrine of the virgin birth is not one of the fundamental facts of Christianity, so that without it the Christian religion could exist unimpaired; then one argument for the doctrine has been removed. For there is a great weight of evidence from Christian experience which goes to show that Christianity is essentially true. The question is whether we have to run counter to all this evidence if we deny the fact of the miraculous conception. You cannot quite get rid of the theological question, therefore, even in discussing the question of history.

In order to show a proper occasion for the virgin birth, it is not

\* *New Light on the Life of Jesus*, 161ff.

† Cf. Box, *Zeitschrift f. d. neut. Wissenschaft.*, 1905, 95f.

necessary, as is so often assumed, to prove that this miracle was necessary to the divine Sonship of Christ in any sense that confuses His eternal Sonship with the conception by the Holy Ghost, or that it was necessary to His sinlessness. Indeed, the derivation of the sinlessness of Christ from the virgin birth is, as has often been pointed out, inconsistent. For if the law of heredity could not be suspended by the Spirit of God, then the only logical result would have been the immediate creation of the human body of Christ independent of both parents; for if sin is necessarily handed down by the ordinary course of generation, then the human motherhood of Mary is enough to carry on the taint. Yet the virgin birth is a great doctrine for all that, its importance being exhibited by history from the second century on into the twentieth. For the account of the virgin birth is the great testimony to the absolute miraculousness of Jesus throughout His whole life. If the virgin birth is a fact, then Christ did not grow up into His divinity—He is divine in a far higher sense than that. This doctrine is therefore the great obstacle in the way of the Adoptionists of all ages and of all shades of opinion; it is something to be gotten rid of not only by Cerinthus but also by all his modern followers. Perhaps we cannot see but that Christ *might* have been a miraculous person even if He had been born outwardly in the ordinary way; but if He was born in the way described in Matthew and Luke, then He *must* have been a miraculous person.\*

We have tried to show that, rightly considered, the virgin birth is of enormous importance to Christian faith, so that there is ample occasion for the miracle. It is next in order to consider the actual testimony, which we shall most conveniently do in connection with the general question of the trustworthiness of the whole account.

Since, however, we desire to be as fair-minded as possible in conducting the inquiry, it may be well, by way of preface, to make a few remarks in exposition of what we conceive fair-mindedness to be. For, strange as it may seem, there is apparently a good deal of confusion afloat with regard to the matter. For example, we object most strenuously to the identification—widely prevalent in some quarters—of “apologetic” with “unscientific” or even “dishonest,” especially with regard to questions of harmony. If you have judged beforehand that any defense of a thing must necessarily be false, then the only truly scientific and impartial attitude would be to deny everything. If, however, you listen patiently to the

\* For some suggestive remarks on this subject, see *Church Quarterly Review*, October, 1904, 207ff.

defense of theories which destroy the trustworthiness of a narrative but stigmatize as necessarily untrue any defense of "harmony" or of what may be called the "conservative" position, then you have been anything but fair-minded. Again, fair-mindedness does not require or even permit us to regard our accounts of the birth as fallen from the air, to be judged solely according to the inherent likelihood or unlikelihood of the events narrated—a principle which is apparently ignored by Soltau,\* who seems to think he has made an important utterance when he says that "The murder of the infants at Bethlehem, . . . as well as the strange appearance of the Magi on the scene, would certainly not have been believed if it had not been the Evangelical recorder who related them." Of course they would not, but then, as a matter of fact, it was the Evangelical recorder who related them, and his testimony is worth more (on any critical view) than the testimony of a man, for example, who wrote ten centuries later. True impartiality does not consist in deciding every question in entire disregard of everything else. In order to judge impartially the narratives of the birth, we must keep in mind the results of related investigations. It is fully as great an offense against scientific method to refuse to hold presuppositions founded upon proven fact as it is to insist upon holding presuppositions founded upon fancy. Therefore, in discussing the trustworthiness of the accounts of the birth, we must remember that they are firmly united from an early time to two very ancient books which admittedly possess very considerable historical value. On such testimony we ought to be inclined to admit as historical many things which we should reject if the testimony were not so strong. This much we regard as justifiable presupposition. On the other hand we must regard as a false presupposition, based on theory rather than fact, the statement of Soltau that all records in the first and third Evangelists which are not derived from the "two definitely established sources are of eminently slighter trustworthiness." For (aside from the question of the truth or falsehood of the two-document hypothesis) it would be necessary for Soltau to demonstrate the unity of those portions of the gospels not derived from the two sources in order to involve the accounts of the birth in any supposed untrustworthiness attaching to the other fragments. On Soltau's theory, the Evangelists used some trustworthy documents as well as some untrustworthy ones. We ought not to connect the accounts of the

\* *Die Geburtsgeschichte Jesu Christi*, E. T., 6, 7.



birth with the latter class, rather than with the former, until we have carefully examined the accounts themselves.

After these preliminary remarks, we proceed to examine the special objections which have been urged against the trustworthiness of our narratives. These objections may conveniently be classified as follows: (1) inconsistency with well-attested history; (2) inconsistency with the other New Testament literature; (3) inconsistency within the birth narratives themselves.

1. Under the first head some objection has been made to the slaughter of the innocents at Bethlehem, on account of the silence of Josephus; but the argument from silence is not conclusive, and it has been pointed out that the massacre is quite in accord with the character of Herod during his later years. A far more serious objection is that against the census of Luke (Luke ii. 1ff), a discussion of which would be beyond the scope of the present paper as well as beyond the ability of the writer. We refrain from this intricate chronological question with the better conscience because we do not believe that it has such a vital connection with our subject as is sometimes assumed. If, indeed, it can be proved that the whole census passage is an invention in order to change the place of birth to Bethlehem, then, indeed, the trustworthiness of the narrative will be seriously impaired. But it is just this that has not been proved. On the contrary, it seems unlikely that the author should have put all this imperial machinery in motion, and thus exposed himself to easy refutation, in order to accomplish what might have been easily accomplished by a simpler expedient and one which would perhaps have been less ignominious to the Messianic king.\* Nor is the census passage to be explained as an invention of the author by appealing to the tendency of Luke to bring the facts of Christianity into connection with events of the Roman empire, for that very purpose could not have been attained unless the events related about the empire were authentic and could thus command general recognition. There are thus grave objections against regarding the census as a mere invention of the author or redactor. If, on the other hand, the note about the census is conceived of as the result of a mere blunder, we need not necessarily give up the general trustworthiness of the account. It all depends upon the nature of the blunder. If there never was and never could have been any census which might have brought Joseph and Mary down to Bethlehem, or rather which might have been one motive for their journey, then the attack upon the narrative at this point is a serious one. But in view of the ten-

\* Gore, *op. cit.*, 20.

acity with which the Jews held to their real or supposed family trees, it does not seem impossible that an enrolment based upon genealogical principles might have been held; and the narrative does not preclude the supposition that the actual execution of the decree was carried out in Judæa under Jewish auspices. If, however, Luke has merely made some blunder such as placing the first governorship of Quirinius a few years too far back (*i.e.*, at a time when Saturninus was really governor), it does not seem reasonable to draw any very serious conclusions about the trustworthiness of the whole infancy narrative—especially if, as is very probable, the chronological note is an addition made by the author or redactor of the whole Gospel. In general, it may be said that the archæological researches of Ramsay and others have at least made it clear that our knowledge about the official history of the Augustan age has not been (and probably is not yet) so complete as to warrant us in using too confidently the argument from silence. It will not be worth while to notice here the various specific attempts to solve the difficulty—some of them are not at all unlikely, though no single one of them can be firmly established as correct. At any rate, these attempts have shown that the difficulty might not be insoluble if we had more information. Meanwhile, it does not seem unfair to regard the census passage as neutral with regard to the question of the trustworthiness of the account—at any rate, as affording no decisive evidence on the negative side. The question must be settled on the basis of other considerations.

2. It is objected further that the infancy narratives are in disagreement with all the rest of the New Testament literature, in which not only are the minuter incidents of our narrative not referred to, but even the virgin birth and the birth in Bethlehem are not mentioned. From all that we could learn from the rest of the New Testament, it is argued, Jesus was born at Nazareth, of Joseph and Mary; while some passages seem even to exclude the virgin birth.

In the Gospel of Mark, and in Matthew and Luke outside of the first two chapters and the genealogies, there is probably no allusion to the virgin birth; indeed, in Mark vi. 1, Nazareth is evidently referred to as the *πατρις* of Jesus; in Mark vi. 3 His brothers and sisters are mentioned—all of which, however, is not inconsistent with the infancy narratives. That the Spirit should be said to be the source of Jesus' miraculous power (Matt. xii. 28) is inconsistent with His activity in Luke i. 35 only on a very mechanical view of the Spirit and of His activities. Furthermore, Holtzmann's objection at

this point is based upon a false view of the meaning of the descent of the Spirit at the baptism. More serious, perhaps, is the argument from Mark iii. 21, 31ff. where Jesus' kinsfolk are represented as thinking Him mad, and His mother is included among them, if ver. 31 is to be connected with ver. 21. The latter point is not certain, but even if it be granted, the mother might have been overpersuaded by the brethren, as Swete suggests. Or, more probably, we should have to think of another case of her failure to understand. She might have had the announcement from the angel, and thus been led to expect a great career for her Son—yet His actual conduct must have seemed strangely inconsistent with what she had expected of the Messiah (compare the doubts of John the Baptist). The objection that Christ would not have spoken about His mother as He does in iii. 31ff. if she had been so highly favored of God as is implied in the fact of the virgin birth is, of course, frivolous. It is remarkable that Mark has *ὁ τέκτων* in vi. 3, as against *ὁ τοῦ τέκτονος υἱός* in Matthew xiii. 55 (cf. Luke iv. 22, *οὐχὶ υἱός ἐστιν Ἰωσήφ οὗτος*). If there is any reference here to the virgin birth,\* then there can be no question but that the form of the statement in Matthew is the original one, for of course the scoffers did not know of the miracle. The form in Mark would rather be a correction made by the Evangelist to prevent misunderstanding from the absence of an account of the birth in his Gospel. But it is, after all, far more likely that the form in Mark is due to the fact that Joseph had died.†

In the fourth Gospel, Jesus is called the son of Joseph not only by the Jews (vi. 42), but also by Philip (i. 45); He is regarded as coming from Nazareth (vii. 41); His brothers did not believe on Him (vii. 5). Yet in no case is a suitable occasion indicated for correcting these opinions, supposing them to be false, for that Jesus should describe the manner of His birth in opposition to false ideas would be out of all harmony with His established methods, and furthermore, could give rise only to suspicion, not to faith. Beyschlag lays stress upon the objection that the statement in John i. 31, 33, *καὶ γὰρ οὐκ ᾔδειν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ* is inconsistent with the intimacy of Mary and Elisabeth as described in Luke i; but the objection is not necessarily fatal. If John was in the desert until the time of his public appearance, he may well have never seen Jesus the Galilean, and exactly what he would have been told is merely surmise. The view of Soltau that "throughout

\* As Hilgenfeld, *Zeitschrift f. wissenschaftliche Theologie*, 1901, 317, and A. Wright, *Synopsis*, Introd., xli, xlii, suppose.

† See Meyer-Weiss on the passage in Mark.

the Johannine writing there prevails what might be described as a polemical attitude toward those who will only believe in Jesus on condition that He is a son of David and a native of Bethlehem" is without a shadow of evidence.

In general we may conclude that the virgin birth was, according to the Gospels, not generally known during the lifetime of Jesus; indeed, was not known even within the circle of His neighbors and kinsfolk. On the other hand, there is no satisfactory evidence to show positively that Jesus Himself or His mother did not know it; for even if they had known it, they could not be expected to correct the current impression. It was not the habit of Christ to reveal sacred mysteries to those whose hearts were hardened.

As to the Evangelists themselves, we should not expect that Mark would mention the virgin birth even if he knew it, since he is concerned to give only the events of the public ministry of Jesus—things which formed the basis of the earliest preaching. Luke and Matthew would not need to express themselves again on the matter if they included in their Gospels the infancy narratives giving a full account of the event. But how is it with John? The Prologue might be interpreted in three ways: as presupposing the virgin birth (Zahn), as containing a polemic argument against it, or as saying nothing about it one way or the other. The verse especially referred to is i. 13. It has been suggested that the author urges against the view that Jesus was born in a peculiar way the consideration that all Christians may be said to be born "not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." Schmiedel\* has suggested this view of the matter only to reject it, for, he says, the meaning of the verse is simply that in the case of the elect it is not their human birth that matters so much as their election. We are thus led to the view of Zahn that ver. 13 presupposes the virgin birth.† According to Zahn, John means to say in vers. 13, 14, that what is true of the new birth of the children of God is true of the real birth of Christ. Thus the reading of Irenæus and Tertullian and of some Latin authorities,  $\delta\varsigma$ . . . .  $\epsilon\gamma\epsilon\nu\eta\theta\eta$ , though not original [as Resch supposes], yet exhibits a proper sense of what is the true meaning of the juxtaposition of ver. 13 and ver. 14a. Such an interpretation, however, attributes to the Evangelist a confusion between the spiritual and physical spheres, or rather an elaborate parallel between them, which, if intended, would have to be more clearly indicated. Furthermore, there is a good connection between

\* *Encyclopædia Biblica*, Art. *Mary*, ¶ 10.

† *Op. cit.*, 62f.

ver. 13 and ver. 14a other than that suggested by Zahn. In ver. 13 the two spheres—the heavenly and the earthly sphere—are contrasted, and this leads the author to speak in ver. 14a of the descent of the Logos from the heavenly to the earthly. Ver. 14 describes the connection formed between the two spheres, by means of which the new birth described in ver. 13 is made possible. We must conclude, therefore, that, although the interpretation of Zahn is possible, it is not proved. On the other hand, the objection that the pre-existence of the Logos excludes the virgin birth is even more unprovable. In the Prologue, then, John does not clearly imply the virgin birth, though his exalted doctrine of the Incarnation seems rather to favor some such event than to exclude it. How explain his silence? It should be noticed that some of those who deny the early date and historicity of the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke yet feel constrained to put the fourth Gospel still later, so that the temporal relation between the two is the same as upon the most "conservative" view. For these critics, therefore, the silence of John is a problem as well as for those who accept the virgin birth, and they can only say with A. Sabatier\* that, whereas the other Evangelists did not mention the virgin birth because they did not know of it, John did not mention it because he had something better, *i.e.*, the doctrine of the Logos. Now if the two doctrines were exclusive of each other, then we should have here what Schmiedel calls a "tacit rejection" of the virgin birth by the fourth Gospel. But if the two doctrines cannot be shown to be inconsistent, then there is a sense in which we can heartily accept Sabatier's statement of the matter. John omitted in his Gospel what had already been related in the others. Accordingly, he omitted the account of the birth, and went on to speak of what had not been touched upon by his predecessors, *i.e.*, the pre-existence of Christ. It is therefore true that he omitted the virgin birth, if not because he had something better, at least because he had something more. Again, if the purpose of his Gospel was to bring forth testimony (xx. 31), it is natural that he should not mention the virgin birth, for from the very nature of the case it never could and never can be a proof that Jesus is the Son of God. In the Apocalypse, chap. xii seems to show a knowledge of Matt. ii, but the matter is not at all certain, and the relation has even been reversed.

In Acts, the speeches of Peter and Paul would indicate that the virgin birth was no part of the earliest missionary preaching; but to regard these speeches before hostile or uninstructed audiences

\* *Enc. des Sciences Religieuses*, Art. *Jésus Christ*, vii, 363.

as fine opportunities for mentioning the virgin birth is to stifle the historical sense.\*

In Paul, Rom. i. 3 and Gal. iv. 4 are the *loci classici*, and have been claimed with equal futility as involving the virgin birth and as excluding it. In Rom. i. 3, 4 (τοῦ γενομένου ἐκ σπέρματος Δαυὶδ κατὰ σάρκα, τοῦ ὁρισθέντος υἱοῦ θεοῦ ἐν δυνάμει κατὰ πνεῦμα ἁγιοσύνης ἐξ ἀναστάσεως νεκρῶν), it is claimed that since Paul is contrasting the earthly physical life of Jesus with His heavenly life after the resurrection, if he believed in the virgin birth, it would not have been true to say that Christ was born of the seed of David according to the flesh. The Spirit would have had a part even in His physical life. But is this not an over-refinement? Paul is simply saying that Christ took upon Himself the form of a man—that is just as true on the theory of the virgin birth as on the opposite theory—and that in so far as He was a man, He was of the seed of David. In Gal. iv. 4 (γενόμενον ἐκ γυναικός, γενόμενον ὑπὸ νόμον), it is absurd to expect Paul to say γενόμενον ἐκ πατρῆου, since the matter in hand is the likeness of Christ to men, not His difference from them.† On the other hand, Zahn is claiming too much when he argues that if Paul had not known the virgin birth, it would have served his purpose far better, according to Jewish ideas, to have mentioned not the mother but the father. For “born of a woman” is just a paraphrase for “human,” as the commentators prove, especially from Matt. xi. 11.

As to Paul's doctrine, it can hardly be used one way or the other with any degree of certainty. How preëxistence is incompatible with the virgin birth it is difficult to see. If anything, it rather favors the doctrine. The comparison of Christ with the second Adam might seem to suggest something in the nature of a creative act to correspond with the creation of Adam.‡ In general it may be said that while Paul's doctrine agrees better with the virgin birth than with a birth from Joseph and Mary, yet he does not say anything definite one way or the other. With regard to his silence, it is of great importance to notice that, in general, “his epistles are almost exclusively occupied in contending for Christian principles, not in recalling facts of our Lord's life.” Where Paul does relate facts of Christ's life (1 Cor. ix. 23ff., xv. 3ff.), he does it in so purely incidental a way as to suggest that he actually knew a great deal more than he tells in his Epistles.§

\* Against Hillmann, *op. cit.*

† Zahn, *op. cit.*, 64.

‡ Gore, *op. cit.*, 11.

§ Gore, *op. cit.*, 10ff.

The net results of our examination, therefore, are the two propositions: (1) that the New Testament, outside of the infancy narratives, does not affirm the fact of the virgin birth, and (2) that it does not deny it. In order rightly to understand the significance of this we must ask the question whether the spread of the report about the virgin birth might have taken place in a way consistent with this silence. If the virgin birth were true, must it have been mentioned in any place where as a matter of fact it is not mentioned?

Let us suppose the narratives of Matt. i, ii, and Luke i, ii, to be substantially correct, and ask ourselves what we should expect the course of development to be. According to those narratives, there were only two persons who at first knew of the virgin birth—Joseph and Mary—nor is there any record that they confided in any one else. The report of the shepherds (Luke ii. 20) and of Anna (Luke ii. 38) need not have reached a very wide circle, and like the visit of the Magi (in which case there were special reasons for silence), took place in Judæa, far from Nazareth, the subsequent home of the family, and several years before their return. It has been further suggested by Ramsay that fear of Antipas may have been a special reason for silence after the return.\* Probably Joseph died before Jesus reached maturity, in which case Mary was left as the sole keeper of the secret. True, this "secret" is denounced as an apologetic expedient, but a little exercise of the historical imagination will remove the odium. One great fault of the treatment of this subject is that too little account has been taken of the personal equation. For it seems hardly in accord with the character of Mary, as it is painted in such distinct colors in the infancy narrative of Luke (the truth of which we are assuming for the sake of the argument), that, after she had undergone experiences of the most mysterious kind and had submitted to a command which ran counter to every instinct of her soul, she should proceed to engage in idle gossip about the matter, thereby subjecting herself to the blackest slander. Some women might have done so; the Mary who "kept all these sayings pondering them in her heart" certainly would not. There is every reason to suppose that she would keep the secret even from her younger children—or, rather, most carefully of all from them. So the years went by, and He who was to rule over the house of Jacob forever continued to labor at a carpenter's bench until the time of His majority had come and gone. Must not the miraculous events of

\* *Was Christ Born at Bethlehem?* 76.

thirty years ago have come to be to Mary like a wonderful dream? Must not her faith have undergone a terrible trial? And then when her Son did come before the nation, how different was His coming from what she had pictured to herself! It does not seem at all surprising that, like John the Baptist, she should have been puzzled, and should have begun to wonder whether she had interpreted those far-off mysteries aright. But she learned like the rest, and after Pentecost had come, and the little company of Christians were praying together, comforted by the Spirit whom Jesus had sent, she must have continued to ponder over all those things, though in a far different spirit. Then, at last, within the little circle of believing and sympathetic women or near friends, she may have been led to breathe things too sacred and mysterious to be spoken to mortal ears before. These things were, of course, not reported at once to the official governors of the little Church, like the progress of the daily collections. Still less were they included in missionary sermons, where the great effort was to adduce facts which could be testified to by all, and where the humble woman's mystery would have brought forth nothing but scorn and slander. And so, perhaps supplemented by a long-hidden family register, the marvelous tale of the Mother of the Lord found its way gradually into the Gospel tradition and Creeds of the Church, and into the inmost hearts of Christians of all centuries.\*

Like Beyschlag (with regard to his own very different theory), we do not say that it was thus; we only say that so it might have been. If the infancy narratives were true, the silence about them in the Gospels and in the Acts does not involve any psychological impossibility. The silence of the other books has already been explained.

3. Lastly, it has been suggested that inconsistencies in the birth narratives themselves destroy any belief in their trustworthiness.

We shall examine for a moment, first, the alleged inconsistencies between the two accounts. We may safely pass over without much discussion such objections as those of Usener, that "the divinity[?] of Christ is attested in Luke by the angel's words to the shepherds and the song of the heavenly host, in Matthew by the appearance of the star in the East; the new-born Messiah receives his first adoration in Luke from the shepherds, in Matthew from the Magi."† The obvious answer in the former case is that there might be more than one attestation of the divinity of Christ; in the latter case,

\* See Ramsay, *op. cit.*, 73ff.; Sanday, *Hastings' Bible Dictionary*, Art. *Jesus Christ*, II, 644; Gore, *op. cit.*, 12ff.

† Usener, *Encyclopædia Biblica*, Art. *Nativity*, § 4.



after the word "first" (for which there is no warrant in the accounts) has been removed, a similar answer might be made. It is objected with more show of reason that "Joseph's home in Matthew is Bethlehem, in Luke Nazareth." But it should be noticed that Matthew does not expressly say that Joseph's home was Bethlehem before the birth of Jesus; indeed, the mention of Bethlehem in ii. 1 rather than in i. 18 might possibly suggest that the facts were otherwise. Very likely, however, it suggests nothing at all. For the story about the Magi (Matt. ii), the place (Judæa) and the time (while Herod was alive) were of vital importance. Hence what look like local and chronological data about the birth of Christ (Matt. ii. 1) are probably only incidents in the narrative of the wise men. Not very serious is the objection of Beyschlag that if Mary had had such a revelation as is recorded in Luke i. 30ff. she would have repeated it to Joseph; so that he would not have been ignorant of the true cause of Mary's pregnancy, as is implied in Matt. i. 19. On any adequate view of the character of Mary, she might be expected to do anything rather than speak of the mystery to her betrothed husband.

Most formidable, perhaps, is the objection that, according to Luke, the family returned to Nazareth forty days after the birth (Luke ii. 39); whereas in Matthew they are represented as still in Bethlehem a considerable time (perhaps two years) after the birth, and as then obliged to flee into Egypt. In answer we first suggest the order of events which seems to do most justice to the narratives, and then ask whether the narratives cannot be harmonized on the basis of such an order. The order we suggest is (1) Birth, (2) Adoration of the shepherds, (3) Presentation, Circumcision, etc., (4) [Return to Bethlehem], (5) Adoration of the Magi, (6) Flight to Egypt, (7) Return to Nazareth. Now it is perfectly evident that neither one of our evangelists or of their sources knew of such an order of events (Luke ii. 39, Matt. ii. 23). One explanation is, that each writer had only limited material at his command, being left ignorant of much that the other relates and of still more of which we have no record at all. Are the narratives such as to preclude the view that each author used his sources faithfully in the main, though, here and there, in working up the narrative, he may have used terms of expression which he would not have used if he had known more? We believe that they are not. For example, suppose the author of the chapters in Luke had in his sources the account of the birth, the shepherds, the presentation, etc., and then in addition merely the notice of the life in Nazareth. In working this material up into a narrative, what more natural than that

he should join two parts together by the use of the sentence in ii. 39? Even in a modern work, unless, perhaps, of the most strictly scientific character, such a mere copula would hardly be objected to as going beyond the established data. Similarly, suppose Matthew did not have any note that the former life of Joseph and Mary had been in Nazareth, but only the account of Joseph's suspicions, etc., without mention of the place, and then the notice of the place of birth. Under such circumstances, Nazareth in ii. 23 would be new to the reader, and so would naturally be mentioned merely as "a city." As for the cause assigned in Matthew for withdrawing to Galilee, the supposition that Joseph and Mary had settled in Bethlehem after the birth is by no means worthy of the contempt with which it is treated. Of course, it is only a suggestion, to show that perhaps some of the difficulties may be due to our lack of knowledge.

We conclude, then, that the alleged contradictions between the two accounts, being really only contradictions between the statement of one account and the silence of the other, destroy a belief in the trustworthiness of the accounts only if you maintain that in order to be trustworthy the accounts must form a complete and orderly life of Christ. Such a copula as Luke ii. 39, even if many events came in between, is quite in accord with the methods of arrangement prevalent all through the Gospels.

Now if this is a correct view of the matter, we have not only answered objections but also adduced positive evidence for the trustworthiness of the narratives. For we have clearly shown that the accounts, though not seriously contradictory, are absolutely independent of each other, so that they furnish a double witness for those things (and they are not unimportant) which are common to both.\* It has even been argued with a good deal of plausibility that in various little ways the narratives actually explain and supplement each other. For example, on the basis of Luke's narrative alone, it is difficult to see how Mary could accompany Joseph to Bethlehem when she was only betrothed to him; so that ἐμνηστευμένη, the correct reading in Luke ii. 5, is explained by Matt. i. 24, 25. It may, however, be objected that if, as we have suggested, the accounts in Matthew and Luke go back to eye-witnesses, the eye-witnesses could only have been members of the same family, so that the very difference in the things chosen for narration (to say nothing of actual contradictions) is proof of the untrustworthiness of the

\* See Resch, *op. cit.*, 18.

accounts.\* To this we reply that the difference may have arisen not so much from the source as from the destination and purpose of the stories. The family of Jesus may well have been led, for example, to tell the things relating to the early persecution to one set of hearers who happened to be interested in that, and the things of a more private character to another set. And perhaps the matter was a little more complicated in the course of a brief line of transmission.

We come now to the alleged inconsistencies within each narrative taken separately. It is urged, in the first place, that Mary could not have failed to understand the adoration of the shepherds (Luke ii. 19), or of Symeon (Luke ii. 33, *θαυμάζοντες ἐπὶ τοῖς λελουμένοις περὶ αὐτοῦ*), or the answer of the boy Jesus (Luke ii. 50), if she had already received the revelation recorded in Luke i. 30ff. and undergone the experience there prophesied. Here we reiterate what we have already said about the character of Mary. It is preposterous to argue that Mary may have found nothing puzzling and mysterious about the events in the life of her remarkable child; about the strange words of the shepherds and of Symeon, and about the yet stranger answer of the quietly obedient child. A modern scientific mind might have had the whole thing reasoned out beforehand on the basis of the data already given; but the people of those days were not scientific. If we are going to enter into the realm of psychology at all (and we do so only to repel objections), all we can say is that it is perfectly in accord with the mental habits of the time, and especially with a quiet, incommunicative, simple character such as Mary's is represented to be, that she should keep "all these sayings, pondering them in her heart"; that she should marvel at "the things which were spoken concerning him"; and that she should not understand "the saying which he spake unto them."

A much more important objection is that Jesus is, in the infancy narrative of Luke itself, as well as elsewhere (see Acts ii. 30), regarded as the son of Joseph (*e.g.*, *γονεῖς*, ii. 27, ii. 41; *πατήρ*, ii. 33).† These expressions are, indeed, perfectly natural as indicating merely the adoptive relation, especially as Jesus was actually born in Joseph's house and was at once acknowledged as his son. But more serious is the consideration that in Luke i. 27 and in the genealogies (*cf.* Luke i. 32) the Davidic descent of Jesus seems to be traced through Joseph. This has been denied, so far as the Lukan genealogy

\* See Beyschlag, *Leben Jesu*, I, 150.

† *πατήρ*, in ii. 48, is not in the same category, being the word used by the mother to the boy Jesus.

and Luke i. 27 and Luke i. 33 are concerned, by B. Weiss, but his view is maintained only by a very questionable exegesis of Luke i. 27 as well as of the genealogy. It may be held as a private and pious opinion that Mary was also of the house of David (such an opinion is not excluded by the fact that she was a kinswoman of the Levite Elizabeth, Luke i. 36), and for this a good deal may be adduced, but it can never be proved from the narratives themselves. We see, then, two propositions lying side by side in the accounts of the birth: (1) Jesus is heir of the Davidic promises because He was the son of Joseph, (2) Jesus was not begotten by Joseph but of the Holy Ghost. It is hardly to be doubted that in the early Church these two propositions were both held by the same persons, viz., by the authors or redactors of the genealogies, who wrote Matt. i. 16 and Luke iii. 23 in their present form. Unless, therefore, the infancy narratives have suffered interpolation (which requires special proof), the most natural supposition is that the writers of those narratives, like the writers or redactors of the genealogies, held to both propositions—the supernatural conception and the Davidic descent through Joseph. Now if it be discovered that the two propositions are in point of fact contradictory, though the authors did not see it, then, of course, one or the other must be false, so that the narratives are not, as they stand, trustworthy. But if the two propositions are not actually contradictory, but only very difficult to harmonize (and the testimony of the writers themselves is very valuable in favor of this view of the matter, since they were better acquainted than we with ancient conditions), then the fact that the writers have made no attempt to harmonize, but have simply set down the two sides of the truth as they were handed down to them, is the best possible indication of their trustworthiness. Are the two propositions absolutely contradictory?

In attempting to answer this question, we do not for a moment try to slur over the difficulty. Indeed, we freely acknowledge that just at this point we lay our finger upon the really fundamental objection to the virgin birth, for it must be admitted that according to modern ideas, if Jesus was not the actual son of Joseph and if Mary was not of Davidic descent, then Jesus did not fulfil the conditions of the Messiah. Be it remembered, however, that the promises were made not to modern persons, but to Jews, and the promise is fulfilled if the fulfilment corresponds to the expectations of those to whom the promise was made. So in the first place, it ought to be noticed that, according to Jewish ideas, the line of descent had to be traced through the male side; this would explain why, even

if Mary had been of the house of David, still the Davidic origin of Joseph would, to Jews, have been of vital interest. Furthermore, there is evidence that among the Jews "ideas of genealogy were," as Gore expresses it, "largely *putative*," as is shown, for example, by Levirate marriage. Jesus, born of Mary and acknowledged by Joseph her husband, was Joseph's heir, and hence heir to the throne of David. But I venture to think we can go still further. E. P. Badham\* has advanced the theory that the apparent contradictions in the birth narratives are explicable only on the view that the writers supposed Jesus to have been actually begotten of Joseph, but without his conscious instrumentality and in a supernatural way by the divine agency (*ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος ἁγίου*). We, of course, concur in the general rejection of this bizarre theory, yet we venture to believe that there is an element of truth in it which has been often neglected. Too often the conception from the Holy Ghost has been treated exactly like an ordinary conception, so that it is at once assumed that the relation between Joseph and Jesus was adoptive pure and simple. Rather ought we to consider that the conception of the Holy Ghost lifts the whole matter into the realm of the extraordinary and miraculous and mysterious, where rash affirmations should be avoided. I am not at all sure that we can say with certainty that Jesus was not, by the miraculous power of God, the son of Joseph and of David in some sense far more profound than at first appears. At any rate, we must remember that the relation of Jesus to Joseph was in any case far closer than that of an ordinary adopted child, in that Joseph was more truly an earthly father of Jesus than any other human being.

We have been answering objections. Let us now, before we leave this part of the discussion, pause for a moment to emphasize one or two of the positive considerations which make for the trustworthiness of the narratives. In the first place, the restraint of the narratives is very remarkable, in contrast, for example, with the apocryphal gospels where fancy had free play. In the second place, the character of Mary would have been exceedingly difficult to invent and, in general, the picture of the circle of pious *πρωτοί* among whom the events take place is finely suited to the later development, in exhibiting a starting-point for Christ's work.† In the third place, the delicate personal touches, pointing to Mary as the source of Luke's account and perhaps to Joseph in Matthew's account, could never have been produced artificially.‡ Finally,

\* *Academy*, November 17, 1894.

† Resch, *op. cit.*, 321f.

‡ C. J. H. Ropes, *Andover Review*, XIX, 698.

the purely Old Testament character of the whole narrative could never have been invented in the later period. Especially would no later writer ever have invented prophecies like the prophecies of the Messianic King, Luke i. 30ff., which did not seem to have been fulfilled, or at any rate were not fulfilled in the sense originally understood.\* And then the very difficulties of the account, especially those connected with such expressions as *γονεῖς* and *πατήρ* in view of the virgin birth, are an evidence that the author has followed fixed sources rather than allowed his invention free play, for in the latter case he could have smoothed out the rough places.

We have now arrived at the close of the first part of our discussion, namely, the examination of the hypothesis that the narratives are a true record of fact. Of course, we have not here demanded absolute verbal accuracy in the narratives, but rather have classed under this first head all opinions which explain the chief ideas in the accounts—notably the virgin birth—as due, not to myth or to invention, but to fact. If we keep in mind the strong external evidence and are unprejudiced with regard to the miraculous, we shall conclude that the objections against the trustworthiness of the accounts are not unanswerable. But it is, after all, useless to deny that there are difficulties, and grave difficulties. What we shall next have to consider, therefore, is the question whether there are not still graver difficulties against any view which explains the chief ideas in the narratives in some other way than as produced by the facts. Explanation there must be of one sort or the other.

*Princeton.*

J. GRESHAM MACHEN.

\* Gore, *op. cit.*, 16ff.