

## THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF OUR LORD.

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Can we accept the virgin birth of Christ as a fact, and is it an essential part of the Christian system? Attention has been recently called anew to this doctrine, which has been up for discussion ever and anon since the third century of the Christian era, and after every discussion the faith of Christendom has settled back almost universally into the conviction that it can be and must be retained. The exceptions have been comparatively few in number, and have generally gone on to the rejection of all faith in the supernatural, when they have not begun in that rejection. Denial here has seemed like the little leaven which has leavened the whole lump. What are some of the reasons for believing the doctrine of the Virgin Birth of our Lord? This article makes no pretension to a full discussion of the divine mystery. It will only present a few reasons which justify the belief in it.

1. It is primarily a question of the genuineness of the text and the correctness of the interpretation. Of course, those who accept the mythical and legendary theories easily set aside the first chapters of Matthew and Luke, which contain the accounts of Christ's birth, as having no historic basis and as being no part of the Word of God. But careful and intelligent students of the text declare that there is as much reason for retaining these chapters as part of the sacred Scriptures as for retaining any other chapters of the four Gospels.

Moreover, that these accounts of Christ's birth do teach plainly and positively, and in the most chaste and delicate manner, that Jesus was "conceived of the Holy Ghost," and "born of the Virgin Mary," no candid interpreter can question for an instant. If these early chapters are to be retained in the Word of God, then the doctrine of the virgin birth is to be retained in the Christian faith.

But the doctrine does not rest solely upon the teaching of these two Gospels, as is sometimes asserted, with the im-

plication that one or two plain teachings of a truth are not sufficient to warrant its acceptance, if it is an extraordinary truth, but that it must be reaffirmed many times, as is the case with the fact of the resurrection of Christ, in order to command the belief of men. This rule would exclude many important truths of revelation. It may be asked how many times must the Spirit of God say a thing is true before it is true and worthy of confidence. But the doctrine of the virgin birth does not depend, as we shall see, upon one passage or two passages. There are many passages that can be adduced in its support outside of the limits of Matthew and Luke. Matthew alone in his narrative recalls Isaiah's remarkable prophecy, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel," and distinctly affirms that it was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus.

Turning to other parts of the New Testament we find John evidently referring to the virgin birth of our Lord when he says, "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (the Word, who "was in the beginning with God and was God"), and when he calls Christ "the only begotten Son of the Father," language which can mean nothing less than this, that God took upon himself in the birth of Christ human nature, and that that birth was unique, distinct, unlike any other birth. He was the only begotten Son of his Father. He was of divine parentage in an exceptional way. He had God for his Father in a peculiar and solitary manner. It has been often remarked that Christ never says "Our Father," including himself with his disciples. It is always "My Father." The language of John which separates Christ from the whole race of men, does not refer to his exalted character or to his exceptional life, but to the one distinct and definite fact of his birth.

Paul also evidently refers to something remarkable and noteworthy when he says Christ was "made of a woman." There would be no necessity for such a remark about any merely human being or any ordinary human birth. The strikingly remarkable thing is that God should send forth his Son, whom the apostle elsewhere characterizes as "the image of the invisible God, the first born of every creature," to be "made of

a woman," that is, to enter by a process of generation into human nature, while bearing still the likeness, the image, the lineaments of his Father, God. Herein is the uniqueness, the supernaturalness, and at the same time the humiliation of the birth of Christ.

Moreover, Christ's own teaching about himself, properly understood, bears witness to his supernatural birth. He clearly taught his pre-existence when he said, "Before Abraham was I am," and when he spoke of the "glory he had with his Father before the world was". It seems impossible to conceive of a divine pre-existent being coming into this world by a birth, if both parents are human. If Jesus was the son of Joseph and Mary, he could not have been pre-existent. If he was pre-existent, he must have been conceived by the Holy Ghost. A pre-existent personal life which continued to exist in this world, in a human form and in conjunction with human nature, must have been in some mysterious manner the generating principle in the Babe of Bethlehem.

2. But it may be remarked, in the second place, that the question of the virgin birth of our Lord hinges upon the possibility of believing in the supernatural at all. If we deny the supernatural, we of course abandon all faith in the virgin birth of Christ, and also in his resurrection, and in fact, in every miracle of Christ recorded in the Gospels, as well as all faith in his divine character and in the divine origin and authority of the whole Christian system. Christ is brought down to the plane of humanity and Christianity is reduced to the level of a natural product. A naturalistic theory of interpretation destroys every distinctive characteristic of the Christian religion, every thing that has given to it power and progress in the world, every thing that has given to it its remarkable hold upon the faith of men and of nations.

Mr. John Morley has said: "Many of those who have ceased to accept the inspiration of the Scriptures, or the miracles contained in them, or the dogmas into which the churches have hardened the words of Christ, still cling to what is, after all, *the great central miracle of the entire system, after which all others become easily credible—the mystery of the Incarnation*

*of the Supreme.*" Dr. W. Robertson Nicoll comments on these words as follows: "We cordially agree with Mr. Morley that, granting the entrance of the Son of God into human history, granting the miracle of the Incarnation of the Supreme, there is little to cause any difficulty. Without the Incarnation, without the Resurrection, we have no form of religion left to us that will control or serve or comfort mankind. It is the fact of our Lord's deity that gives its meaning to his every action and his every deed." Divinity has come to have a very uncertain meaning. It may mean much or little, according to the intent of the person using it. But deity has a definite signification, and the deity of our Lord can be predicated only on the basis of his virgin birth, that is, the actual incarnation of the Supreme.

The birth of Christ is represented as occurring partly in the order of nature and partly out of the order of nature. The principle of parthenogenesis which is advanced by scientists to-day, may have no probative value; but it serves as an illustration to diminish the incredibility of the virgin birth of Christ. At any rate the virgin birth of Christ is no more incredible than the resurrection of Christ after his death on the cross and burial in Joseph's tomb, a fact which was preached vigorously by the apostles, and has been accepted by Christians of every name throughout the world, as the crowning act of Christ's earthly manifestation and the convincing endorsement of his saving mission, giving authority to his teaching, value to his sacrificial death and the recognition of God to his claims upon the love, obedience and worship of mankind. "He was declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead." And we declare unto you glad tidings, how that the promise which was made unto the fathers, God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children, in that he hath raised up Jesus again; as it is also written in the second Psalm, "Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee"; that is, declared or exhibited thee as my begotten Son. Christmas and Easter, as commemorative observances of supernatural facts, stand or fall together.

Again, the virgin birth is no more incredible than the rais-

ing of Lazarus from the dead after he had been in the tomb four days, than the feeding of the five thousand with the five loaves and two small fish, than the walking on the sea, than the curing of congenital blindness, and than the turning of water into wine. To believe in the reality of the supernatural is to bring all these recorded wonders within the bounds of credibility. To say that no amount of human testimony can be sufficient to establish the credibility of a miracle is to pre-judge and summarily to dismiss the whole case.

3. It may be added that the narrative of the birth of Jesus is beautifully consistent throughout. Granted a supernatural birth, and all the attendant circumstances fall into place without a jarring or discordant note—the angelic annunciation and ante-natal naming of the divine Child, the song of the heavenly host, the worship of the shepherds, and the visit and conduct of the eastern wise men. All these things constitute a most charming and consistent story, and if it be only a story of the imagination, it is the most wonderful story that simple, unimaginative men ever constructed.

Moreover, strongly confirmatory evidence to the truth of the virgin birth of our Lord is found in the obvious fact that it harmonizes perfectly with the entire earthly manifestation of Christ. It prepares the way for what follows and indeed explains it, viz.: the sinless character, the matchless wisdom and recognized authority, the exercise of superhuman power and grace, the atoning death and its extraordinary circumstances, the glorious and triumphant resurrection and ascension to the right hand of God. That birth is the appropriate beginning of the extraordinary middle and the supernatural ending. Each chapter of Christ's biography is in beautiful and absolute harmony with the other chapters. The whole life is a unit in the character it reveals, and in the impression it makes. The personality remains the same from beginning to end, from Bethlehem to Olivet. There are no abrupt surprises which astonish and bewilder us. Dr. R. W. Dale well says, "That Christ should have worked miracles does not surprise me. It would have surprised me if he had not." Accept the virgin birth of our Lord, and what follows is the natural unfolding

of a life thus begun. Deny his virgin birth, and the supernatural becomes not only the unexpected, but the unnatural, the superstructure has no adequate foundation, the massive pyramid has no base on which it rests. What the world has always needed, and what it still needs, is not a partial, a mutilated Christ, but a whole Christ.