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The Virgin Birth

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THE VIRGIN BIRTH.

It is all to the good that our modern ears are startled by the words "born of a Virgin." But, believing in the Virgin Birth, the Catholic Church rejoices at the very uniqueness of the event. She is grateful to the modern spirit, which will not suffer the miracle to slip into the brain unobserved. The greater the emphasis that is laid on the isolation of such a manner of birth, the better will it accord with what one's instinct would feel to be the natural mode of entering the human life of such a Being as we believe Jesus Christ to have been.

Let us at the outset clear our thoughts of any confusion in the order of the steps of the argument. The Christian man does not begin from the Virgin Birth to argue step by step to the Deity of the Virgin-Born. The process is reversed; on wholly different grounds the Christ is confessed as God—on the foundation of faith in His Deity rests the acceptance of His Virgin Birth. Such in history was the order. There is not a single suggestion in the New Testament that, before the resurrection, any of the Apostles of Jesus Christ knew that their Master was born of a Virgin, and it is only in the natural order of things that the Virgin Birth should have formed no part of the original preaching of the Gospel of Jesus, such as, for example, is recorded in the earliest of the Gospels. And the order is the same now. No one would be found to open his argument for the Godhead of Jesus with the fact of the Virgin Birth. It would not prove His Deity if it were true, nor disprove it if it were false. If the impossible could be achieved, or if an indisputable letter of the Virgin were to be discovered, proving beyond the shadow of a doubt that Jesus was not Virgin-Born, that discovery would not demolish the Godhead of Jesus; it would not by any logical process make that belief more difficult. We know so little of the mystery of birth and heredity that we are wholly unable to state that there was anything impossible in the entering of the Most Holy into human life by ordinary birth. That the Virgin Birth is more natural and more congruous, more easy for the Christian reason to accept, is true enough. The Christian welcomes the Virgin Birth, not as a fresh marvel to

stagger his faith, but as a relief from the intruding problems of heredity which surround the ordinary transmission of human life. He finds in the Virgin Birth that which might probably and naturally break the entail of moral taint, but he does not presume to dictate to Deity what shall be the only possible manner of entering into the stream of human life. To us, therefore, who see in Jesus a Person wholly and utterly unique, it would be harder of credence that His Birth should *not* have been unique. The central wonder is that the Infinite Deity should enter into the conditions of finite life. That He should be born of a Virgin is an easy corollary to the fact of the Incarnation.

And it should be remembered that biological science can have no single objection to raise to the Virgin Birth of such a Being. Surely and securely as the scientist argues from the universal experience of the origin of human life, he has obviously nothing to say to what is, by the Christian hypothesis, not a new life taking its origin, but an already pre-existent Being entering into new conditions. If Christ be divine, science has absolutely no data on which to argue against His birth of a Virgin.

Let it be granted that human life can only come into existence by the union of male and female—and to grant so much is to ignore the existence of the Creator—yet still there is no ground for maintaining that life already pre-existent from all eternity must enter human conditions by that process by which the non-existent comes into being. There is nothing, therefore, which, in the name and authority of biological science, throws the Virgin Birth into the region of the incredible. It lies beyond its sphere. For on that point from end to end the New Testament is conclusive. St. Paul and St. John may perhaps be silent about the Virgin Birth, but they insist on the pre-existence of Christ, and it is this pre-existence which is the vital point.

We do not, because we have no need to do it, seek to prop up the belief in the Virgin Birth by reference to the instances of parthenogenesis in the lower forms of animal life. However many might be the species in the lower orders of life which reproduce from a single parent, we should be told, and truly, that there was no argument there for a human Virgin Birth; the conditions of lower

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life are not the conditions of human life; nor, to advance a step further, are the conditions of human life those of superhuman. This is the point of view from which we regard the Virgin Birth. Jesus is to us the Divine Son. He is the Eternal and Infinite who became Man. How that Incarnation should be accomplished we should have no means of guessing, were it not that the records exist which relate it. That these records describe a Virgin Birth is not to us surprising; nothing could surprise where there is no experience to create any other expectation. What would have been astounding, though we could not say even then that it was impossible, would have been to read in those records that an event so extraordinary was accomplished in a manner wholly ordinary.

It is then a question of evidence, and we possess evidence of a very remarkable kind. At the beginning of the second century, the Virgin Birth is an established article of the Christian Creed. Ignatius, who was martyred about 110 A.D., ranks it with the atoning death of Christ.

"Hidden from the prince of this world were the virginity of Mary and her child-bearing, and likewise also the death of the Lord—three mysteries to be cried aloud, which were wrought in the silence of God."¹

The earliest form of the Apostles' Creed, which Harnack places between A.D. 140 and 150², includes the words, "Born of the Virgin." New doctrines do not at once find their way into creeds. If at the opening of the second century the Virgin Birth was placed in the baptismal creed side by side with the central facts of the atoning death and resurrection of our Lord, it is evidence that at some considerable time before the belief had gained a wide currency. This is, of course, explained by the narratives of the Birth in St. Matthew and St. Luke. It is very significant that these Gospels tell the story from the point of view of the two principal witnesses, the Blessed Virgin and Joseph. It is not the devout fancy of credulous Catholics which has traced in St. Luke's opening chapters the hand of the Virgin herself. No name among modern Bible critics carries greater weight than that of Dr. Sanday. He believes that in these chapters St. Luke was using an older writing, and he declares that the narrative must be ultimately

¹ Ignatius, *Ep. ad Ephes.*, 10 (Lightfoot's translation).

² A. Harnack, *The Apostles' Creed* (Eng. Trans.), 1901, p. 70 ff

derived from the Virgin herself.¹ Professor Ramsay, of Aberdeen, adds: "There is a womanly spirit in the whole narrative which seems inconsistent with transmission from man to man."² The narrative, reticent as it is, reveals the inner emotions which Mary herself experienced. It emphasizes the ignorance and wonder of the Blessed Virgin. She is unconsciously self-portrayed in the few sentences that she speaks, and in the whole narrative of her autobiography—it is almost that—as a woman wholly devoted to the Heavenly Will. Silent, contemplative, knowing much, yet ignorant of much more of the amazing nature and actions of her Son, she and Joseph are described as marvelling at Simeon's words of the *Nunc Dimittis*. They leave Jesus alone after the journey up from Galilee for the Passover, ignorant of the fact that the Child had tarried behind. The search for Him is made in distracting sorrow and anxiety. The meaning of the answer of the Child Jesus is wholly beyond her: "They understood not."³

This presentation of the inner emotions, and especially of emotions which imply Mary's inadequacy to the demands made upon her motherhood by this marvellous Childhood, must have come from herself; dramatic imagination such as this would otherwise imply does not, on the whole, belong to the literature of the age, or to the evangelist physician.

The touch of a woman's hand appears unmistakably in the narrative. What man would have dated events as they are dated here? "Elizabeth conceived and hid herself three months; . . . and in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent."⁴ Between the two mothers such reckoning would be natural and almost inevitable, but to no one else. The incident of the visitation is told in language in which is embedded the confidences of the two holy women: "when the voice of my salutation sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy."⁵

The account of the Annunciation is similarly full of the traces of the Virgin's own narration. Thus when she

¹ Hastings's *Dict. of the Bible*, ii. 643 f.

² W. M. Ramsay, *Was Christ Born at Bethlehem?* 1898, p. 88 (quoted by Sunday, l.c.).

³ St. Luke ii. 50.

⁴ St. Luke i. 24, 26.

⁵ St. Luke i. 44.

sees the angel she apparently does not recognize in him any supernatural visitor. It is not his appearance, but his salutation which troubles her, as naturally it would in a country where it was remarkable for a man to hold converse with a woman. The emotions of increasing wonder and awe are faithfully recorded; step by step she understands who this visitor is, and that she is to be not only mother of Messiah, but Virgin Mother of the Son of the Highest.¹ It is either simple narration of emotions actually and vividly experienced, told with the simple artlessness of truth, or else it is one of the literary wonders of the world. There is, indeed, no literature in the world which contains, crowded into twenty lines, so true and adequate a description of the inner emotions in so tremendous an experience. No scribe would ever have resisted the temptation to describe the marvellous in the language of marvel. What later piety, picturing the event from the standpoint of a later age, would have thought that it was any addition to the dignity of the Virgin Mother, or to the marvel of the angel-visitant, to portray him as being obliged to say that he was an angel before he was recognized as such?

And it should be remembered that the explanation of the prevalence of the belief in the Virgin Birth at so early an age is invariably attributed by those who reject it to the love of marvel, and the desire to surround the origin of Jesus with the sort of wonders that in other religions attend the birth of demi-gods or heroes. The narration of St. Luke is, in itself, a sufficient confutation. It is the work of no portent-monger. Its key-note is simplicity and naturalness. Equally certain it is that no later piety would have invented the limitations of the simple village Mother. "They understood not the saying." Yet, what was there in it that could be a difficulty to one who knew the heavenly origin of Jesus? "Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?"² In that touch rises to sight all the puzzled wonder which must have been so characteristic of the relation of Mary and Joseph to the tremendous Child-personality of Jesus.

Certainly, by its own internal evidence, the narrative in St. Luke repudiates alike the authorship of superstition which would rival pagan myths, and of a devout piety

¹ St. Luke i. 26 ff.

² St. Luke ii. 49 f.

which would exalt the dignity of Mother and Child by well-meant but mistaken embroidery upon the simple Gospel story. It is a woman's account, and that woman is the Mother herself. And it is quite unequivocal concerning the virginity of the Mother. Joseph is publicly spoken of as the father throughout the narrative,¹ as the circumstances would obviously demand. But in the most definite manner Mary states that her Child was born of no human fatherhood. "The power of the Highest shall overshadow thee; therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God."

Let it be remembered that it is the opinion of profound and impartial New Testament scholars that here we have the Virgin's narrative. There is no need to follow them into the discussion of the channel through which it reached St. Luke, whether it were Joanna, the wife of Chuza, who supplied the link, as Dr. Sanday thinks, or whether St. Luke received it direct from St. Mary.² We know him to have been a physician, and in that capacity he might have been associated more closely with women than it was the custom for other men to be. We also know that he was an accurate and careful historian. His work in the Acts of the Apostles has received the most brilliant verification in our own times.³ No wise man now will lightly disparage St. Luke's history. He tells us in his preface to his Gospel that the task he set before himself was personal verification by reference to the actual eye-witnesses. There is no suggestion or shred of evidence for the suggestion that these earlier chapters are not part of the original text of his Gospel.

Quite certainly and surely we may say that these first two chapters are strong evidence that he derived them with but little intermediary, perhaps with none, from the one person concerned—the Mother of Jesus. If the account of His Birth given by the Mother of Jesus be not utterly false, Jesus was virgin-born.

But there is a second narrative which very remarkably gives us the story from the standpoint of Joseph. His

¹ *E.g.*, St. Luke ii. 33, 41, 48.

² Hastings's *Dict. of Bib.*, ii. 644. Ramsay, *Was Christ Born?* 73 ff.

³ See, *e.g.*, Harnack, *Luke the Physician* (Eng. Tr., 1907); *The Acts of the Apostles* (Eng. Tr., 1909). W. M. Ramsay, *St. Paul, the Traveller, and the Roman Citizen*, 7th ed., 1907.

innermost thoughts find expression, and we are allowed to see his perplexities, nay more, his suspicions, when the fact of Mary's maternity became evident. We can discern in him the play of opposing feelings; his deep regard for Mary fighting with what seemed to be the only other inevitable conclusion. He was minded to put her away, to break off the betrothal, albeit secretly. But while he was still debating with himself, he was warned from heaven of the true nature of her conception.¹

Now I firmly believe that this represents Joseph's point of view and is derived from him. In this case it is true that we have nothing but internal evidence to guide us. St. Matthew's historical reputation has not received the vindication of St. Luke's; nor is there any likely means of communication, such as, in the case of St. Luke, is discovered in the person of Joanna. Dr. Gore's conjecture that Joseph very possibly left this account in writing for his family to protect the character of the mother,² must remain a conjecture, though it is a conjecture that is possible and probable. But the internal evidence at least demonstrates this fact, that, wherever the narrative came from, it is not the invention of the pious fancy of some later scribe seeking to glorify the birth of Jesus. What devout disciple would have imagined such horrible suspicions as those which are attributed to Joseph in this chapter? It is, I believe, inconceivable that this should be any but an authentic version of Joseph's innermost thought; yet in the most downright way, the more convincing because we are shown the prejudice which had to be broken down in Joseph's mind, we are told, "That which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost."

Of this narrative we may say three things:—

(1) It is not the creation of the brooding fancy of devout disciples, weaving round the story of the birth of Jesus the romance of Virgin Motherhood. Had it been that, it would never have contained the record of suspicions so prevalent that even Joseph admitted them to his mind.

(2) If it is not the work of a later piety, then it ranks as an early witness and must be admitted as evidence.

(3) It is utterly independent of the account in St. Luke, written from an entirely different point of view. It is full

¹ St. Matthew i. 18 ff.

² C. Gore, *Dissertations on Subjects Connected with the Incarnation*, 1895, p. 28.

of things which none but Joseph could have known. It gives us even the dreams of the man. Never once does it attempt to portray Mary's emotions; yet, in the outstanding fact of the Virgin Birth, it absolutely corroborates her narrative even to the phrase, so remarkable in narratives saturated with Jewish feeling and Jewish expressions, that the Birth is the work of the Holy Ghost; a phrase, as Dr. Sanday, has pointed out, uncommon in the Old Testament Scripture.

We have, then, preserved to us the inner history of Mary's wonder and Joseph's fear. To me it seems to be evidence of a high order that it is quite impossible to disregard. But we have still to face the fact of the silence of St. Mark, St. John and St. Paul; practically, that is to say, of the whole of the New Testament, except these four chapters.

Now, to begin with, the argument from silence is always weak. It is the most untrustworthy weapon in the whole armoury of dialectic. No wise man will ever set tracts of silence against a single definite statement. Unless it can be shown that there was very real necessity to speak of the Virgin Birth, or that it was the one thing needed to crown the argument of the Epistle, or to complete the Gospel, it is a very feeble argument to say that, because St. Paul's epistles and St. John's and St. Mark's Gospels do not mention the Virgin Birth, therefore it is not true. It must first be shown that, if true, St. John, St. Paul, and St. Mark must have known of it, and, if they knew of it, must have mentioned it.

That can never be shown. And if, on the other hand, reason can be shown why it should have been concealed at first, then the argument from silence falls to the ground.

I admit most frankly that the Virgin Birth was no part of the primary evangel. It was not, so far as we know, once so much as named in our Lord's own preaching, nor did it emerge into the position of an article of faith till long after His ascension. But was there not a cause? We know from Mary's own narrative, from the very chapters which reveal the secret of the Virgin Birth, that she habitually spoke of Joseph as the father. She even addressed to Jesus that word, "thy father." This is not surprising. Certainly, no one would think it an argument against the positive statement of the same narrative

that Joseph was not the father of Jesus. Obviously the circumstances demanded that Jesus should pass as the son of Joseph. The same necessity would certainly apply to the period of the public ministry of Jesus. Had He come before Judaea with the story of His Virgin Birth, it would have created the deepest prejudice against His message and His own origin. It would have been unbelievable and unbelieved by any who had not, on other grounds, come to see in Him a super-human personality.

No one in the world would use the Virgin Birth as an argument by which to win faith in the unique divinity of Jesus. But, believing in the Godhead, we welcome as reasonable and congruous the Virgin Birth. It is only when men have come to realize that the Son of Mary pre-existed as God from all eternity, that they will receive her account of His Birth. Mary could not have communicated these facts of His Birth to those who saw in Jesus only the Son of Man. Nor does the Virgin Birth constitute the essential of the first preaching. Its real place is secondary. Belief in it will first be demanded because of what Jesus Christ has done. It is because He died and rose, and because of the spiritual significance of that death and resurrection as the expression of the message which, in His preaching, He gave to the world, that the Apostles sought to win for Him the allegiance of all men.

But when, at last, that faith in Mary's Son is a thing accomplished; when, in the Christian assembly, the prayers are addressed to Jesus, not as the Son of Mary, but as God; when, in death, men like St. Stephen commend their souls, not to the Jehovah of their fathers, but to the Lord Jesus; when, in the Sacrament of the breaking of bread, the disciples are grown conscious of that spiritual union with Jesus, which is to this day a proof of His universal presence; then, at last, there is an atmosphere into which the mother of Jesus could whisper her amazing secret, certain not of scorn, but of credence.

May not this be the real reason for that silence which, be it remembered, a thousand other causes unknown to us may have made necessary? The Virgin Birth was not essential to the work which the New Testament, as a whole, aimed at accomplishing, nor could it have been made public, until the unique personality of Jesus was fully confessed.

Certainly the very instant that the Virgin Birth was made known the Church seized upon it, and set it in her creeds. From that day to this it has held its place.

And, although we should not dare to say of it that it was an essential without which the creed would fall—that would be to pry into regions where the most advanced science cannot enter, for none can tell when or how the human embryo receives that breath of the universal Spirit, that spark of the fires of God's Being which make a spiritual being—yet this, at least, we would dare to say:

I. We know of no ordinary human birth in which the heredity of evil is utterly broken off. Now the sinlessness of Jesus was not less than a moral miracle. It is undoubted. The character of Jesus is, and will be, the final standard, not only of human virtue, but of any professing revelation of divine holiness. What was it that broke this heredity of evil, universal to humanity, with the solitary exception of Jesus? Human as Jesus undoubtedly was at the bottom, His nature was distinct from ours; His spiritual experience was unlike our own, and the distinction lay in this—that He knew no sin. We will venture to say that, of all conceivable explanations of that break with heredity in one born of a woman, the Virgin Birth is the most inherently probable and reasonable.

II. Yet again, if St. Paul, when he wrote his Epistle to the Romans, did not mention, because, as is possible, he did not then know, that Virgin Birth, yet, nevertheless, his characteristic view of Christ as the second Adam seems naturally to accord with it. In Christ Jesus, according to St. Paul, there comes flooding into the stream of human life a new and vitalizing force. From His human life a renewed manhood issues. Into the dried and withered veins of humanity Jesus infuses new life. He thus became a second Adam, the universal Father of a regenerate race. For such an entering into human life, is it not fitting that there should have been a new putting forth in God of creative power, such as the Virgin Birth would suggest?

III. Certainly the Virgin Birth has deserved well of the world. To it womanhood may be said to have owed everything. It was the fact that woman had stood in the unique relationship of Mother to the Incarnate God that set a halo round the head of every woman. It was no longer possible to regard woman as the inferior of man

when God Himself had bestowed upon a woman a dignity not given to any man.

In Christian history the belief in the Virgin Birth of Jesus has been the main source of the chivalry which relieved a rude and barbarous age with acts of noble sacrifice made by the strong for the sake of the weak. Still, in the courtesy and protection which every true man gives to every woman, we pay unconsciously our tribute to the Virgin Mother of Jesus. Not in vain for eighteen hundred years has the Church of God, in the most solemn moments of worship, repeated these words so astounding and so precious :

“I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary.”

GEORGE ST. GEORGE.