

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

ART. II.—OUR LORD'S VIRGIN BIRTH AND THE
CRITICISM OF TO-DAY.—III.

AN endeavour was made in the last paper to show the impossibility of deriving the doctrine of our Lord's Virgin birth from current pagan ideas. Before we pass to another aspect of our subject it may be well to refer to the supposed influence of the Buddhist legend upon the Christian narratives of the Incarnation. "Amongst Gentile influences," writes Professor Schmiedel ("Encycl. Biblica," Art. "Mary," iii., 2962), "those of Buddhism must also be taken into account as possible"; and the same writer in another place ("Gospels," 124) gives a list of the parallels which Seydel has drawn between the story of the childhood of Jesus and the life of Buddha. So, too, Pfeiderer, in the new edition of his "Urchristentum" (i. 411), dwells at length upon the same parallels, although he considers that no direct influence of Buddhism upon Christianity can be proved, but that the likeness in the incidents of the birth of Jesus and the Buddha owes its origin to a common source of popular Eastern folklore. But, in the first place, we may well hesitate to defer to Professor Seydel as an ultimate authority, for no writer has shown a stronger bias, or has more extravagantly elaborated the alleged parallels between our Gospels and the Buddhist sources. It would be easy to find acknowledged proofs of this extravagance in learned German critics, and one of them, whose name is well-known in England, has entered a strong and very satirical protest against Seydel's method of procedure in laying stress upon instances of a perfectly general character as supposed dependencies of the Gospels on Buddhist books.¹

But the point with which we are more immediately concerned is this. Seydel, and Schmiedel and Pfeiderer with him, refer to the virgin birth of the Buddha as if it was an undoubted part of the Buddhist story. But, to say the least, this may be seriously questioned. So far as earlier pre-Christian writings are concerned, we find no mention in some of them either of mother or of birth. And when we pass to post-Christian sources, a popular biography, or the part of a biography, like the "Lalita Vistara," while it gives us a lengthy account of the Buddha's birth, makes no affirmation of the virginity of his mother, although it does say that she had never brought forth children, and that her husband had agreed to her wish to live

¹ See *Theologische Rundschau*, February, 1899. The editor, Dr. Bousset, takes Seydel to task for these comparisons, or rather dependencies, and points out by a modern illustration how ridiculous it is to suppose that the blessing pronounced upon the parents of the Buddha involves any dependence upon such words as those of Luke xi. 29.

in ascetic chastity for thirty-two months.¹ In a later biography, the "Abhinishkramana Sutra," the Chinese version emphasizes not only the fact that Queen Maya was married, but that she had lived with her husband as his wife. These statements, which might easily be multiplied, so far from affirming, actually preclude the belief in the virgin birth of the Buddha. Moreover, it is not too much to say that the statement of the scholar Cooma Korösi, which is so often quoted in support of the virginity, not only relates to Mongolian Buddhism, which has a growth of scarcely 400 years, but that in itself it affords no substantial evidence.² Professor Rhys Davids writes of it as follows: "Cooma Korösi refers in a distant way to a belief of the later Mongol Buddhists that Maya was a virgin (*As. Res.*, xx. 299); but this has not been confirmed."

But even if more could be alleged for the virginity of the mother as a factor in the Buddhist birth stories, we should still have to account for the absurdity and grotesqueness which mark these stories, when they are placed side by side with the simplicity and reserve of the Gospels. Dr. Rhys Davids frankly admits that the idea that a man should enter his mother's womb in the form of a (six-tusked) white elephant seems a most grotesque folly, although he claims to have discovered the origin of the belief in the older sun-worship; the white elephant, like the white horse, being an emblem of the sky ("Buddhism," p. 184). But the contrast to the Gospels is not only to be found in this one marked particular, it pervades the whole story; at the conception of the Buddha the ten thousand worlds are filled with light, the child before he is born preaches to the angels who guard him; at his birth he takes seven steps forwards, and exclaims with lion's voice, "I am the chief of the world; this is my last birth." The last words of the infant Buddha remind us of another contrast to the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. The Buddha had already been born, as he himself taught, again and again; he had come into the world in his efforts to fulfil all the great Perfections time after time, alike in forms of honour and also of humiliation; thus, eighty-three times he had been an ascetic, twenty-four times a Brahman, forty-three times a sun-god, five times a slave, twice a rat, and twice a pig. Such considerations as these may further serve to illustrate the

¹ See the article of the Sanskrit scholar, the late Professor E. B. Cowell, in "Dictionary of Christian Biography," Art. "Buddha," i., p. 343, and Kellogg's "The Light of Asia and the Light of the World," p. 112.

² See a letter in the *Guardian*, December 3, 1902, by the Rev. Graham Sandberg, who has made a special study for many years of all forms of the Buddhist faith, which will repay perusal on this and other kindred points.

recent remarks of Dr. Fairbairn, in speaking of our Lord's supernatural Person as presented to us in the Gospels: "The marvellous thing is not that we have two birth stories, but that we have *only two*." ("Philosophy of the Christian Religion," p. 349).

But it would seem that any discussion of the question of the Virgin birth of our Lord has now to consider the religion of Egypt, no less than that of Buddhism. Professor Sayce has recently reminded us of the belief in the virgin-birth of the god Pharaoh, which carries us back at least to the time of the Eighteenth Dynasty. From the inscriptions we learn that he had no human father, and that his mother was still a virgin, when the god of Thebes "incarnated himself," so that she might "behold him in his divine form." Two comments may here be made. In the first place, such statements, whatever else they may be, are a further evidence of what may be called "the craving of the human consciousness for the intervention of the supernatural," when men are seeking how to describe the origin of lives which they have held to be of more than superhuman greatness. The evidence of this craving was abundant in Egypt. The birth of each king would seem to have been regarded as a special act of the gods; the gods said on the day of his birth, "we have begotten him"; the goddesses said, "he went forth from us." But if it is sought to institute any parallel between the virgin birth described in the inscriptions and scenes from the temple of Luxor in Egypt and the narratives of the Gospels, it must not be forgotten that in the former we have at least some elements of that glorifying of sensual desire which is so far removed from the chaste restraint and simplicity of the Evangelists, and which, as we have seen, was so unlikely to commend itself in the least degree to the consciousness of the early Church. Professor Sayce's own translation on the same page of his work gives us quite sufficient justification for this statement.¹

But the remark of Dr. Fairbairn, to which reference has been made, reminds us of the stress laid upon the silence of the other Evangelists, St. Mark and St. John, as to our Lord's

¹ Said by Amon-Ra, etc.: "He (the god) has incarnated himself in the royal person of this husband (Thotmes iv., etc.); he found her lying in her beauty; he stood beside her as a god; she has fed upon sweet odours emanating from his majesty; he has gone to her that he may be a father through her; he caused her to behold him in his divine form when he had gone upon her that she might bear a child at the sight of his beauty; his loveliness penetrated her flesh, filling it with the odour of all his perfumes of Punt."—"Religions of Ancient Egypt and Babylonia," p. 249, 1902.

Virgin birth. And in each case silence has been interpreted as nescience. But so far as St. Mark is concerned, the earliest Gospel avowedly adopts as its starting-point the starting-point of Apostolic testimony, and if St. Peter, as there is very good reason to believe, was the main source of St. Mark's pages, there is a striking coincidence between the Evangelist's opening narrative of John's baptism, and St. Peter's words in Acts i. 21, where he defines the witness of the twelve as "beginning from the baptism of John." This silence of St. Mark is supposed to be emphasized by reminding us that he was not only the interpreter of Peter, but that he lived some time in the company of Barnabas and Paul. But Luke was also some time in the company of Paul, and Mark with him. At the period when the two Evangelists were thus together in Rome, it may fairly be presumed that St. Luke had already collected in Palestine the main materials for his tracing the course of all things accurately from the first. But if this is a fair inference, it becomes difficult to believe that St. Mark was altogether ignorant of the incidents of the Lord's birth which St. Luke narrates so fully, whilst at the same time his silence may be interpreted by the plan of his Gospel. The Apostolic testimony, on the lines of which St. Mark plainly followed, was, above all, as the Acts of the Apostles enables us to see—i. 22, x. 37, xiii. 24, 31—an appeal to our Lord's public ministry, to facts which were open to the scrutiny of the Jews in Jerusalem and elsewhere, facts of which the Twelve claimed to be witnesses. Moreover, the Apostles were preachers and missionaries, no less than witnesses; they had a message to deliver, and the message which the Twelve and St. Paul with them placed in the forefront of their teaching was the message of Jesus Himself, as it had been of the Baptist before Him—repentance and the forgiveness of sins (Mark i. 4, 14; Acts ii. 38, v. 11, xiii. 38). It would seem, therefore, that there need be no difficulty in allowing that a narrative of what preceded the baptism of John did not regularly belong to the elements of the first missionary preaching. And St. Mark himself had been fully acquainted with missionary methods; he had known, too, how vividly St. Peter had represented the life of Jesus and His official ministry as characterized by action, energy, and power (Acts ii. 22, x. 38); and as St. Peter notes the public appearance of Jesus as the commencement of the Messianic work of salvation, so, too, St. Mark commences his Gospel with the Messianic messenger and his announcement of the coming Christ.

If we turn to the Gospel of St. John, we must remember that that Gospel makes a special claim to be, before all things,

a Gospel of personal testimony, and that we have, therefore, no right to expect in its pages details which are not involved in that claim. But it does not follow that the silence of St. John is correctly interpreted as equivalent to his ignorance of the mystery of our Lord's birth. When—*e.g.*, in vii. 21, 22—he recites the words of the multitude: "What! doth the Christ come out of Galilee? Hath not the Scripture said that the Christ cometh of the seed of David, and from Bethlehem, the village where David was?" There is no reason for supposing from this quotation of the question of the ignorant multitude that St. John was himself unaware of the Lord's birth at Bethlehem. The writer of this Gospel, if he was St. John, could hardly have been ignorant of such a fact, and in any case, even if we suppose for a moment that St. John was not the writer, his narrative is quite consistent with the supposition that the birth at Bethlehem was not denied, but rather presupposed. In connection with this interpretation of the passage, it is of interest to quote the closing words of Professor Bacon's note in his "Genealogy of Jesus Christ" (Dr. Hastings' B. D., ii. 138): "The *author*," he writes, "presupposes the birth in Bethlehem."

Professor Schmiedel, indeed ("Encycl. Biblica," Art. "Mary," 2959), seems to think that Jesus should not have allowed the multitude to continue in their mistake, if there was a mistake. But we may reasonably ask, if He had told them the truth, would they have believed Him? They had certainly not shown any marked disposition to do so, and if He had revealed to them the secret of His birth, such a disclosure would only have anticipated in a more painful form the mockery and calumny of a later date. Professor Usener ("Encycl. Biblica," Art. "Nativity," xiv. 3347) fastens upon this passage in St. John, because, in his opinion, "it reveals the hidden path by which Bethlehem found its way into the Gospel tradition," and he evidently also thinks that the Davidic descent attributed to Jesus may be traced to the belief expressed in this same passage of St. John, that the Messiah was to be descended from David. But we have already pointed out that whilst prophecy undoubtedly pointed to the birth of the Messiah at Bethlehem, it is most improbable that the circumstances which brought about a fulfilment of that prophecy in the case of Jesus could have been invented. And so far as the Davidic descent is concerned, we may not only refer to its remarkable defence by Dalman ("Die Worte Jesu," 263; E. T., p. 320), but to the acknowledgment of Professor Bacon ("Genealogy," Hastings' B. D.), that if critical science has shown the futility of harmonistic theories of our Lord's pedigree, it has more than compensated

for it by establishing with equal certainty the acceptance of the fact of the Davidic descent of Jesus by Himself, His contemporaries, and His immediate followers, and that Messianic pretensions absolutely devoid of evidence of Davidic descent could not have passed unchallenged as those of Jesus seem to have done.¹

Moreover, without pressing the fact that the narratives of the Synoptists would have been current long before the publication of St. John's Gospel, according to all reasonable probability, there is a further consideration of no little importance. Supposing for a moment that Dr. Harnack is correct, and that the fourth Gospel comes to us from the presbyter John. This personage, in Harnack's view, had lived for a long time in Ephesus, and had received traditions from the Apostle John, the disciple whom Jesus loved. The Gospel which he then edited could not have been later, according to Harnack, than 110 A.D. But this brings us within a few years of the martyrdom of St. Ignatius, and no one has emphasized more strongly than he the Virgin birth of our Lord, or placed it more prominently, as we shall see, in the forefront of the Church's Creed. Can we, then, suppose that what was known to St. Ignatius, and was specially insisted upon by him in writing to the *Ephesians*, was unknown to the writer in whom Harnack sees the chief ruler of the Church in Asia? ("Chronologie," i. 677 *et seq.*).

One more important "silence" remains to be considered, that of St. Paul. In the first place we must remember that St. Paul is not writing a Life of Jesus, but a series of letters to various Churches, in which a large amount of teaching is evidently presupposed. It was scarcely to be expected that in a letter the Apostle would accentuate the details of the Virgin birth, but it may be fairly maintained that he makes statements which are quite consistent with, if not dependent upon, a belief in that fact. Moreover, it is strange that critics, who are never tired of telling us that St. Paul's thoughts moved around two facts and two only—the death and resurrection of Jesus—should express surprise at his

¹ It is noteworthy, although of course too much stress should not be laid upon it, that in Germany, not only Dr. Resch, but Dr. Blass and Dr. Zahn, have recently declared themselves in favour of the remarkable and early attested reading in John i. 13, where, after he had spoken of believing "in the name of Jesus Christ," the evangelist proceeds, "Who was born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh," etc. See Blass, "Philology of the Gospels," p. 234, and Findlay, *Expositor*, February, 1899, where he points out that the phrase in 1 John v. 18, R.V., is a remarkable parallel, as applied to our Lord, to the phrase, in the reading above, of John i. 13, "who was born of God."

apparent ignorance of the miraculous birth, which in their own showing did not form the centre of his Gospel of salvation. It must, of course, not be forgotten that there may be allusions in St. Paul's Epistles to the fact under consideration. The most important passage in this connection is Gal. iv. 4, "God sent forth His Son, made of a woman," etc. The expression, "made of a woman," is sufficiently striking to have caused even Hilgenfeld and Steck to note that it is in excellent accordance with the generation of Jesus without a human father, although not expressly attesting that fact. Amongst more recent writers it is noteworthy that Dr. Zahn asks the following question: "Why does Paul here only mention the mother, since it is evident that it was much more decisive for the subjection of Jesus to the Mosaic law, to which the context refers, that He should have been born and have grown up as the Son of an Israelitish man?" And his answer is this: "Plainly, because in the thought of Paul there was no room for Joseph as the father of Jesus beside His heavenly Father" ("Das Apostolische Symbolum," p. 64).

But whilst Dr. Zahn's interpretation of the words before us shows us that they are not to be lightly dismissed in their relation to the present subject, there is no occasion to press this verse into service, and although we cannot agree with Lobstein¹ in saying that it decisively excludes the Virgin birth, yet it is no doubt open to him and to other opponents to maintain that in the phrase "born of a woman" St. Paul's object is to express our Lord's likeness to other men, and not to distinguish Him from them. But it is quite a different matter when Schmiedel maintains that St. Paul's statement in Rom. i. 3, to the effect that Jesus was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, is quite irreconcilable with the Virgin birth ("Encycl. Biblica," Art. "Mary," iii., 2958). Such words, as we have seen above, need not by any means be taken to involve the paternity of Joseph, and it is also to be noted that on more than one occasion St. Ignatius does not hesitate to assert the Davidic descent in the same breath as the Virgin birth; "fully persuaded," he writes to the Smyrnæans in the opening paragraph of his letter, "as touching our Lord, that He is truly of the race of David according to the flesh, but Son of God by the Divine will and power, truly born of a Virgin," and with this we may compare his language in writing to the Ephesians (xviii. 2)

¹ In a lengthy pamphlet, "Die Lehre von der übernatürlichen Geburt Christi," p. 17.

and to the Trallians (ix. 1) (*cf.* Swete, "Apostles' Creed," p. 55).¹

But quite apart from these and other verses, there are portions of St. Paul's teaching in which the supernatural conception may well have formed the background of his thought. For whilst his Epistles are in entire agreement with the teaching of St. Peter and of other New Testament writers, in referring to our Lord as of the seed of David, and to His human lineage as derived from the Jewish fathers, they also consider Him from another point of view peculiar to the writer. St. Paul represents our Lord as the second Adam, as the pure and sinless Head of humanity in contrast to the first Adam, through whose transgression a sinful taint had been inherited by every member of his race. No one will dispute that St. Paul is the writer who emphasizes most strongly the propagation of sinfulness from Adam down, while at the same time he also insists most strongly that Jesus was without sin in the flesh in which sin before had reigned. But such a conception certainly seems to make a new creative act of God, a cancelling of the natural continuity, an almost indispensable consequence in St. Paul's theology. No words could describe this consequence better than those of Neander, "Life of Jesus," p. 17, E.T., but in more recent days the same point of view has been emphasized by Lechler, Schmid, B. Weiss in Germany. If through the sin of one man all sinned, all knew sin, with the exception of Him who knew no sin (2 Cor. v. 21), surely some factor must have been present in the birth of this One Being which differentiated it from the birth of any other son of man. And if we ask, What was that factor? is it unnatural to turn for an answer to the Gospel of St. Paul's companion and friend, and to his account of the birth of Him, who was for the Evangelist, as for St. Paul, the second Adam? Or, are we to suppose that what was so fully known to St. Luke was entirely unknown to St. Paul? It is full of significance, in this connection, that whilst St. Luke is the Evangelist who describes the human nature of Jesus as due to a new creative act of God (Luke i. 35), he is also the Evangelist who describes the first man as "the son of God" (Luke iii. 38), in virtue also of a new creative act. There was thus a parallel in St. Luke's mind, as in that of St. Paul,

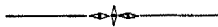
¹ Schmiedel further quotes Rom. viii. 3, and affirms that it contains an impossible statement, the Virgin birth being held. But it cannot fairly be said that either the Greek or the argument represents the flesh of Christ as *sinful flesh*, and it has been well said that the flesh of Christ is "like" ours, inasmuch as it is flesh; "like," and only "like," because it is not sinful (Sanday and Headlam, "Romans," p. 193, and Gifford, "Romans," *in loc.*).

between the first and second Adam. But there was also a contrast; the second Adam was the restorer of life and the renewer of sonship, the Saviour, in whose name remission of sins should be preached; and that contrast, although more definitely expressed in the letters of St. Paul, is most surely implied in the language and representation of St. Luke.

But it must not be forgotten that there may have been special reasons why the Virgin birth was not made publicly known at an earlier date than the New Testament records enable us to affirm. It is, of course, easy for Schmiedel to sneer at what apologists have called the "family secret," a secret which in his judgment had no existence.¹ But such a judgment entirely overlooks what Dr. Weiss again emphasizes in his new edition, "Leben Jesu," i. 209—viz., the high and holy interest which the family of Jesus had in keeping this secret of the house. "If there was never a doubt," says Dr. Weiss, "among the people that Jesus was the actual son of the man in whose house He grew up, if the reproach of illegitimate birth is not employed by the enemies of Jesus till a much later date, and *is obviously based upon our Gospel narratives*, this is an evident proof that the honour of the house was not exposed by affording a pretext for each unbeliever to designate Jesus as one born in sin and shame." And in this consideration he finds an ample reason for the comparatively late dissemination of the facts concerning the Virgin birth.

R. J. KNOWLING.

(*To be continued.*)



ART. III.—ST. LUKE'S GOSPEL AND MODERN CRITICISM.—III.

IT may be useful ere we approach the supposed garbled prophecies to vindicate yet further Luke's connection with those who from the beginning were "eye-witnesses and ministers of the Word." In this paper I shall argue that the historical setting of a number of incidents bespeaks a writer who either had this privilege or is a mere romancer, who invents situations as he thinks fit. I do not claim for Luke that he has succeeded throughout in setting the details of our Lord's life in general chronological sequence. But I do claim that again and again he shows that his source was a

¹ Schmiedel insists upon such passages as Mark iii. 21 and the unbelief of our Lord's brethren, but see in answer Edersheim's "Jesus the Messiah," i. 543, and Weiss, *u.s.*, p. 207.