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There is an interesting variant reading of this verse in some Old Latin texts (supported in part by one Old Syriac manuscript), which replaces the plural by the singular. The end of v. 12 and beginning of v. 13 then run: ' . . . even to them that believe on the name of Him who was begotten not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a man . . . ' If this reading were established, it would, of course, be a Johannine testimony to our Lord's Virgin Birth. But it has no support in our Greek authorities, and cannot be accepted. Yet the Evangelist may have chosen his words carefully so as to suggest an analogy between the spiritual birth of believers and the birth of Christ Himself.

(To be continued)

THE VIRGIN BIRTH

By FREDK A. TATFORD

The incarnation of the Son of God was an essential to the redemption of the race: as sin came into the world by man, so also must atonement be made by man. Adam's race was universally tainted by sin: God, therefore, Himself became man so that there might be a sinless vehicle through which redemption could be effected. When the Word became flesh, it was patently necessary that this should take place in such a way that there should be no transmission of a sinful nature. Hence, Christ entered the world by a virgin birth. 'It was in every way most fitting,' writes Professor Addis, 'that he should enter the world in a new manner, breaking the long chain of birth which had transmitted sinful inclination from age to age, and inaugurating a new order. A fresh start had to be made, and He Who was untouched by the carnal passion was to raise us from "the death of sin to the life of righteousness". . . Christ was not an ordinary man. He is, in a sense absolutely unique and incommunicable, the Son of God, free from the least taint of sin, the Head of a redeemed and renewed humanity. That being so, the Virgin Birth is no longer a difficulty.'

When Adam was brought into being, it was by the creative power of God and without the necessity for human parents. When Eve was born full-grown, it was without the instrumentality of a

mother. When the Second Adam came into the world, He was born of a virgin mother and possessed no human father. Parthenogenesis is not an unfamiliar method of reproduction to a biologist, but it is unique in the history of the human race, and it is not surprising that the story of Christ's birth has met with doubt and scepticism. Yet the fact had been plainly predicted centuries before. The earliest Messianic prophecy gave a clear intimation of the Virgin Birth since it referred to the coming Deliverer as 'the seed of the woman' (Gen. 3:15). Again, more than three millenniums later, Jehovah gave Ahaz a sign that 'the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and call His name Immanuel' (Isa. 7:14). Here were specific statements, the significance of which was indisputable, although it is obvious from the N.T. narratives that the meaning of these prophecies was not realized until after the event which they foretold.

It has sometimes been maintained that Isa. 7:14 is not a prophecy of the Virgin Birth since the word *almah*, which is translated 'virgin,' actually means a young woman of marriageable age and not necessarily a *virgo intacta*. In the only other instances in which the word is used in the O.T. (viz., Gen. 24:43; Exod. 2:8; Psa. 68:25; Prov. 30:19; Cant. 1:3; 6:8), however, there is little doubt that it relates to an unmarried maid. It is of interest, moreover, that the Septuagint uses the Greek word *parthenos* (virgin) in Isa. 7:14, whilst the Divine intention is made perfectly clear in Matt. 1:23, where, in quoting the prophecy, the writer also uses the word *parthenos* (virgin).

Very little is said in the N.T. upon the subject of the conception and birth of our Lord. Mark is silent about it, but this is explained by the fact that his narrative commences with the Baptist's ministry and naturally would not mention an earlier event. Moreover, the picture he paints of Christ is one of a servant, and it would be inappropriate to record the origin and genealogy of a servant. The Fourth Gospel was penned after the other three and indubitably with a full knowledge of their contents, but it raises no question as to their accuracy. John does not refer to the way in which Christ came into the world. He paints the glories of the Son of God and it is sufficient for his purpose that 'the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us.' One rendering of John 1:13, however, is 'who was not born of double blood (i.e. of human father and mother), and not of a will of the flesh,

nor of man's will, but of God,' whilst an even more ancient reading says, 'Who was born, not by mixing the blood of a man and a woman, and not by the will of a man, but of God'—both renderings, therefore, applying the verse to Christ, and not to those who receive Him, as in the A.V. Matthew and Luke alone furnish details of the manner of the incarnation, but the relevant passages appear in all the ancient manuscripts, so that no question of any interpolation arises. The two accounts are very different from each other and are patently the work of independent witnesses, but they do not conflict in the slightest respect: in fact, examination shows that they completely corroborate one another. There is little doubt that the Lucan record was based on information supplied by Mary. Many of the details were such as were only known to her personally and the whole story is told from her angle. Matthew's record, on the other hand, is presented from Joseph's angle and contains incidents which were peculiar to him alone, e.g. the four dreams in which angels appeared to him personally (Matt. 1:20; 2:13, 19, 22). Joseph presumably committed to writing the remarkable facts of Mary's first Child and the document was made available to Matthew after the Resurrection.

No other N.T. writer makes a direct reference to the Virgin Birth, unless the apostle Paul's words 'having come of a woman' (Gal. 4:4) may be so interpreted: they certainly suggest his awareness of the fact. Moreover, as Gore says, 'Paul's conception of the "Second Adam" postulates His miraculous birth.' It is perhaps relevant that the word translated 'made' in Rom. 1:3; Gal. 4:4 and Phil. 2:7 is not derived from the verb *gennaō* (beget) but *ginomai* (become).

The facts, as recorded in Matt. 1:18-2:11 and Luke 1:27-2:12 were as follows. Towards the end of the reign of Herod the Great, a virgin named Mary was espoused to a descendant of David, named Joseph. During the betrothal period, it was revealed to her by an angel that she would conceive and bear a son, who was to be called Jesus. In answer to Mary's perplexed inquiry as to how such an impossibility could happen, the explanation was given that 'the Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and 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.' Visiting her cousin Elizabeth immediately afterwards, Mary was

greeted as 'the mother of my Lord'—a confirmation that she had at least been singled out to mother some outstanding Personage. When Joseph discovered Mary's pregnancy, he decided to divorce her quietly, but was apprised in a dream by an angel that he need not refrain from marrying her since the conception had been by the Holy Spirit and that a Son should be born who should be named Jesus, because He should save His people from their sins. The angel declared that these amazing circumstances were a fulfilment of the O.T. prophecy of Isa. 7:14. Completely convinced, Joseph took Mary as his wife, although refraining from intimacy with her until after the child's birth at Bethlehem. The birth was attended by the appearance of a new star, which led magi from the east to bring offerings to the new-born king, and by an angelic proclamation to shepherds in the fields close by.

One of the strongest evidences of the truth of the story is that Joseph obviously believed it. His decision to divorce his betrothed was rescinded and he accepted without question the revelation of the angel. No further doubt appeared to cross his mind and his confidence must have received additional confirmation when his wife bore a son (*and not a daughter*), precisely as the angel had predicted.

What did actually happen? It seems from the inspired record that God appeared in a theophanic cloud and that, in some mysterious manner, the Virgin was impregnated by the Holy Spirit. Although it is beyond human comprehension, the One around whom the garment of flesh was woven in Mary's womb was the Eternal God. Because He was eternally pre-existent, Christ could not be passive at the moment of conception. 'He came,' says Bavinck, 'with full consciousness and will. His conception was His own deed. He assumed consciously and freely our human nature.'

The ordinary process of generation results in the origination of a new personality, but this is patently achieved only by the union of a man with a woman. The incarnation of Christ involved neither a change of personality nor the assumption of a new personality. He assumed a nature which He had not previously possessed and entered into practical experiences which were new to Him, but His original and eternal personality remained unchanged. Hence there was no need for a human father: all that was essential in His case was the vehicle of a mother's body. This

is unique in human history, but, as Oussani points out, 'since we inevitably associate with the ordinary process of generation the production of a new personality, . . . the denial of the Virgin Birth must necessarily involve the position that Jesus was simply a human person in specially intimate relationship with God.'

Prima facie, the secret of our Lord's birth was not disclosed generally until after His resurrection. God had chosen an espoused virgin so that Joseph could be the legal guardian of Mary's Son, and prior to the crucifixion, the disciples (like everyone else) evidently regarded Jesus as Joseph's son (Matt. 13:55; Luke 4:22; John 1:45; 6:42). In one instance only, He is referred to as Mary's son (Mark 6:3), which is possibly an indirect reference to the Virgin Birth. Through marriage, Joseph was His putative father and was clearly recognized as such. Jesus was brought up with the family—He apparently paid Joseph filial respect and obedience (e.g. Luke 2:51), and was considered by neighbours and friends as a member of the household. Jesus stood *in loco parentis*. He assumed full parental responsibilities and obligations, and legally and socially Jesus was his son.

But the N.T. genealogies do not affirm the paternity of Joseph. 'The Evangelists are very careful in the language they use,' writes Professor Orr. 'Matthew has a periphrasis expressly to avoid the idea: "Jacob begat Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ." Luke carefully inserts the clause, "as was supposed"—"being the son, as was supposed, of Joseph".'

It is extremely improbable that the subject was ever discussed in the home, but that our Lord Himself was well aware of the facts is suggested by His remark to Mary at the age of 12, 'Wist ye not that I must be about My Father's business?' (Luke 2:49). That Mary had mentioned the matter to Him at that age is most unlikely, and the only conclusion which can be drawn is that the knowledge was His own. Prior to the Cross, there is little doubt that the remainder of the family were quite ignorant of His miraculous birth and regarded Him merely as a brother. Presumably the statement, which Joseph almost undoubtedly left of the remarkable facts of the conception and birth, was produced by Mary after her Son had proved His Divinity by rising from the dead.

The Virgin Birth was a necessity not only—as has already been suggested—because it was a pre-existent Personality who was com-

ing into the world, and the creation of a new personality, needing the intervention of a human father, was completely irrelevant, but also because there was no other way of avoiding the transmission of the sinful nature of the human race. Adam sinned and the taint of sin has been transmitted to every one of his descendants. Christ was sinless. Orr says, 'It is sometimes argued that a Virgin Birth is no aid to the explanation of Christ's sinlessness. Mary being herself sinful in nature, it is held that the taint of sin would be conveyed by one parent as really as by two. It is overlooked that the whole fact is not expressed by saying that Jesus was born of a virgin mother. There is the other factor—"conceived by the Holy Ghost." What happened was a divine, creative miracle wrought in the production of this new humanity which secured, from its earliest germinal beginnings, freedom from the slightest taint of sin. Paternal generation in such an origin is superfluous. The birth of Jesus was not, as in ordinary births, the creation of a new personality. It was a Divine Person—already existing—entering on this new mode of existence. Miracle alone could effect such a wonder.'

It is, of course, necessary to avoid the docetic view that our Lord was born through (*dia*) and not of (*ek*) Mary. The Virgin was the mother of Jesus in the perfectly normal sense and He derived His humanity from her. It is sometimes said that Mary must obviously have been a passive instrument at the conception and consequently communicated no sinful impulse to her unborn child. There is nothing, however, to suggest that the period of gestation was anything but normal or that her pre-natal influence was restricted in any way. Conception, gestation and birth seem to have followed the natural course. So far as His humanity was concerned, Jesus differed from other babes only in His non-possession of a human father.—*The Harvester*



Dr Jowett used to say that the prayer-meeting was the real 'Business Meeting' of the Church. If the prayer-life of the Church breaks down everything breaks down.

God's Ships of Treasure sail upon the boundless sea
of Love Divine, of Power Infinite.

To change their course, retard their onward way,
Nor wind nor wave hath might.

Prayer is the TIDE for which the vessels wait
Ere they can come to port; and if it be the TIDE is low
How then canst thou expect God's TREASURE SHIPS to see?