

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

IN the preceding paper attention was drawn to the proposal to omit vers. 34 and 35 from the first chapter of St. Luke without a shadow of documentary evidence, and thus to get rid of any statement of a supernatural birth. In the rest of the same chapter we are asked to see merely an account of the way in which the Evangelist places the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem, because it was necessary that He should belong to the house of David and be born in David's city. Thither Joseph goes, accompanied by Mary his wife, for both Schmiedel and Usener, of course, accept as "the indubitably earlier reading" the statement of the Sinaitic Syriac palimpsest, "he and Mary his wife being great with child, that there they might be enrolled" ("Encycl. Biblica," Art. "Mary," 2955). But both writers are entirely silent as to the possibility that even this reading might be quite compatible with a belief in our Lord's Virgin birth.

Mrs. Agnes Smith Lewis, to whom we owe the discovery of the palimpsest in 1892, has discussed this, and also the reading of the same codex in Matt. i. 15, 16, in the *Expository Times*, 1900, 1901. She fully allows that the word "wife" is more explicit than the expression used by the Greek MSS. or by the Peshitta, but she adds: "It shows clearly that Mary was under the full legal protection of Joseph." The force of this comment will be more fully seen when we turn to the same writer's remarks on Matt. i. 15, 16: "Unless our Lord had passed in common estimation for the son of Joseph, the latter could not have gratified his wish 'not to expose Mary,' v. 19." And so again: "Joseph was without doubt the foster-father of our Lord, and if any register of births was kept in the Temple or elsewhere, he would probably be there described as the actual father. Such he was from a social point of view, and it was, therefore, no wilful suppression of the truth when the most blessed amongst women said to her Son: "Thy father and I have sought Thee sorrowing." The illustrations which Mrs. Lewis adduces from Eastern social custom give additional value to her comments.

It is not surprising in this connection that Mrs. Lewis describes the genealogy of St. Matthew as a purely official one, and points out that only our Lord's social status is under consideration in it.¹

¹ The reading in the Sinaitic palimpsest of Matt. i. 15, 16 is as follows: "Jacob begat Joseph; Joseph, to whom was betrothed Mary the Virgin,

It is, therefore, entirely beside the question to assert that the genealogies both of St. Matthew and of St. Luke are based upon the supposition that Joseph was the actual father of Jesus, as if no other explanation was within the bounds of possibility.

We may gain some satisfaction in turning from such a dogmatic assertion to the words of an authority whose claims to speak on Jewish questions will scarcely be disputed: "A case such as that of Jesus," writes Dr. Dalman, "was, of course, not anticipated by the law; but if no other human fatherhood was alleged, then the child must have been regarded as bestowed by God upon the house of Joseph, for a betrothed woman, according to Israelitish law, already occupied the same status as a wife." In the light of this statement there is no difficulty in accepting the now generally prevailing opinion that both genealogies belong to Joseph, and neither of them to Mary. The Jewish view undoubtedly was that right of succession does not depend upon descent on the mother's side, and the recognition by her husband of the child supernaturally born to Mary conferred upon that child the legal rights of a son.¹

begat Jesus, who is called the Christ." One or two brief remarks may here be added. Even if it could be shown that the original genealogy ended with the words "Joseph begat Jesus" (as Schmiedel maintains), or if we hold that the Sinaitic Syriac in itself postulates such a clause, it would present no difficulty in view of the explanation given by Mrs. Lewis, with which we may compare Mr. Rackham's remarks in his exhaustive examination of the text before us in the Bishop of Worcester's "Dissertations," p. 272-302. Moreover, the greater part, at all events, of the reading in the Sinaitic Syriac codex is much more easily explained as secondary than as original. It is much more easy, *e.g.*, to suppose that the words "husband of Mary" would be altered into "to whom was betrothed" than the opposite, and a writer might desire to lay stress upon the virginity of Mary and the Virgin birth, and might alter and add to the text for this purpose. No words could be more emphatic as to the virginity of Mary, since the reading is not simply "a virgin," but "*the* Virgin," as the description of a person already well known; and in this case the scribe could allow the words "Joseph begat Jesus" to be retained without danger of any misunderstanding. These words described our Lord's relation to Joseph by the same phrase as that which described the relation of Joseph to his ancestors, a phrase implying, as is easily seen, not physical descent, but legal heirship; but still they might easily have been misunderstood if they were allowed to stand alone. Mr. Conybeare has recently maintained that the original form of Matt. i. 16 is to be found in the "Dialogue of Timothy and Aquila," but see in answer Mr. J. R. Wilkinson's acute criticism in the *Hibbert Journal*, January, 1903, pp. 354-359. Reference should also be made to the articles of Dr. Sanday, "Jesus Christ," and "Gospel of Matthew," Professor V. Bartlet in Dr. Hastings', B.D.; and W. H., "Select Readings," p. 140.

¹ Dalman, "Die Worte Jesu," p. 263; E.T., p. 319. B. Weiss still maintains the Davidic descent of Mary; and see, to the same effect,

But to proceed a little further. Schmiedel and Usener both admit that twice in the beginning of Luke's story Mary is spoken of as a virgin (*cf.* i. 27). How is it, then, they ask, that in Luke ii. 5 she is spoken of as Joseph's wife? This is the answer: "We are in a position to infer with certainty from Luke ii. 5 that in the original form of the narrative after i. 38 stood the further statement, hardly to be dispensed with (even though judged inadmissible by the redactor who interpolated i. 34, 35), that Mary was then taken to wife by Joseph, and that she conceived by him." Here we notice that another of the characteristic indubitable inferences is based upon the same reading of Luke ii. 5 to which attention has been drawn above, and upon a supposed interpolation which "ought to come between Luke i. 38 and i. 39" ("Encycl. Biblica," iii., Art. "Mary," 2960, and *cf.* Art. "Nativity," 3350). This is the method of reasoning which Schmiedel and Usener pursue in justification of their paradoxical conclusion that Luke, so far from telling us anything of a supernatural birth, presupposes the very opposite. Their reference to such a passage as Luke ii. 48 in support of their position is quite beside the mark, as the verse is easily intelligible on the view already mentioned.

But if we are thus to rule out any reference to the supernatural birth from St. Luke's narrative by conjectural interpolations or omissions, where are we to look for the origin of the story? To St. Matthew. The redactor in Luke i. 34, 35 is really effecting a compromise with the legend as set forth by St. Matthew; in St. Matthew's narrative we have something entirely new—*viz.*, that Jesus was conceived and born of a virgin; in chap. i. 18-25 this theory is set forth from first to last with full deliberation ("Encycl. Biblica," iii., Arts. "Mary," 2960, "Nativity," 3350).

Now, hitherto we have been accustomed to regard the narrative in St. Matthew as Jewish Christian in its derivation, and to recognise that whilst St. Luke's account is written from the standpoint of Mary, St. Matthew's is written no less plainly from the standpoint of Joseph. It is not only that St. Matthew gives us the more public account as con-

Edersheim's "Jesus the Messiah," i. 149; also F. Delitzsch, "Messianische Weissagungen," p. 69, second edition, 1899. Dr. Charles, it may be noted, has lately maintained ("Ascension of Isaiah," p. 75), that whilst the descent of Mary as well as of Joseph from David cannot be conclusively deduced from the New Testament, yet Mary's Davidic descent was a belief early established and accepted in the first half of the second century, and even earlier still. Dr. Dalman shows in a most interesting manner the trustworthiness of the Jewish tradition of the Davidic descent of Joseph.

trasted with the recital of the facts known only within the family, and gained, no doubt, from within the family circle or its intimate surroundings, but St. Matthew alone tells us that it was Joseph who proposed to put Mary away secretly; how an angel appeared unto Joseph in a dream; how Joseph arose from his sleep and obeyed the commands of the Lord; how, too, on two subsequent occasions an angel of the Lord again appears to Joseph in a dream, warning him to flee into Egypt with "the young child and his mother," and afterwards bidding him to return. But all this obvious setting of St. Matthew's narrative, and its dependence on information which presumably points to Joseph, as also the intensely Jewish background of St. Luke's early chapters, is to go for nothing—"Paul being unacquainted with the doctrine of the Virgin birth, scholars long reckoned it to be Jewish Christian. That, however, was a mistake" (Art. "Mary," *u.s.*, 2963). Nothing need be said for the moment as to this calm assumption of St. Paul's ignorance, but it is of interest to note at once that while in earlier days Keim was convinced that the belief in the Virgin birth had its rise on Jewish soil, the origin of this belief, according to Schmiedel and Usener, is to be sought in *Gentile* Christian circles. According to both of these writers, Isaiah vii. 14 could not possibly have given occasion for the shaping of the birth story, unless the doctrine of the Virgin birth had first commended itself on its own merits. The passage in the prophecy was only adduced as an after-thought in confirmation (Arts. "Mary," 2963; "Nativity," 3351).

With regard to these statements one or two remarks may here be made. In the first place, it is exceedingly convenient for Schmiedel and Usener thus to take their stand upon the derivation of our Lord's Virgin birth from *Gentile* sources. In this way they escape the insuperable difficulties which must always be encountered by those who would trace the belief in question to a Jewish origin. "Such a fable as the birth of the Messiah from a *virgin* could have arisen anywhere else easier than among the Jews," wrote the great historian Neander, himself a Jewish convert, and no subsequent criticism has deprived these words of their force. We may compare with them the remarks of B. Weiss in the latest edition of his "Leben Jesu," i. 210, in which he emphasizes the fact that, according to the view of Judaism, not the virgin condition, but that of marriage was regarded as a Divine institution, and the children of marriage as a blessing from God.

But further: they thus escape the necessity of the hazardous attempt to find in the language of Philo a source for the belief

in the Virgin birth of Jesus amongst Jewish Christians. The wives of the patriarchs, according to Philo, have intercourse with God; but the wives for the interpretation advocated by Philo are not women of flesh and blood, but in his allegorizing language virtues, which, conceiving from God—*i.e.*, united with the knowledge of God—bring forth all moral perfection for them who are lovers of virtue—*viz.*, the patriarchs. But such thoughts as these were not a product of Jewish soil at all, and Professor Usener, in commenting on this same passage in Philo's "De Cherub." 13, is careful to point out that the philosopher himself speaks of his doctrine as something quite new, and that we must look for its origin, not to the influence of Palestine, but to the Hellenistic atmosphere of Alexandria.

The same consideration—*viz.*, the wide and impassable gulf which separates the definite statements of the Evangelists from the spiritualizing language of Philo—also discounts another attempt to trace the Virgin birth to Jewish sources. We are asked, *e.g.*, by Beyschlag, to take such expressions as Gal. iv. 29—"he that was born after the spirit"—used of Isaac, and to see in them a first step towards assuming the generation without a human father of Him who, more than Isaac, was the Child of the promise. But the expression thus used of Isaac is found in close juxtaposition with the assertion that both Isaac and Ishmael were equally sons of one father, Abraham—one by a bondmaid and one by a freewoman (*cf.* vers. 22 and 30)—so that both were, in one sense, born after the flesh. In the same manner, it is equally arbitrary to argue from the language used of John the Baptist (Luke i. 15) that it was but a short step for Jewish thought to advance from such statements to the promulgation of the theory of a Virgin birth.

But, without laying further stress upon these considerations, we may, from one point of view, derive no little satisfaction from the position taken up by Schmiedel and Usener. For it is quite evident, on the showing even of the most destructive critics, that we can no longer be referred to Isaiah vii. 14 as the origin of the "myth" of the Virgin birth. No Christian, of course, can be debarred from looking back upon the record of that birth, and finding in it a *fulfilment* of Isaiah's prophecy. But this Christian interpretation must always be kept distinct from the current Jewish interpretation of the prophet's words. In this connection the verdict of Dalman will carry weight: "No trace," he writes, "is to be found among the Jews of any Messianic application of Isaiah's words concerning the Virgin's Son from which, by any possibility—as some have maintained—the whole account of the miracu-

lous birth of Jesus could have derived its origin" ("Die Worte Jesu," 226; E.T., 276).

But our satisfaction ceases when we further read concerning the Virgin birth, as recorded by St. Matthew, that "here we unquestionably enter the circle of pagan ideas" ("Nativity," 3350). Let us suppose, then, that the story does come to us from *Gentile* Christian sources. If this is so, we must at the same time remember that the only ground which St. Matthew—or, at all events, the Gospel which bears his name—adduces for introducing the story is the fulfilment of a *Jewish* prophecy—a prophecy which is applied in such a manner as to be totally at variance with the application hitherto given to it by the Jews themselves. In making this application, the writer runs counter, not only to Jewish feeling in the days of Jesus, but long after His time. Thus, in Justin Martyr's "Dialogue with Trypho the Jew," the Jew says: "We all expect the Christ to be a man of men." Nothing is said or intimated of a supernatural birth. Moreover, in Luke's narrative, which is much more full than that of St. Matthew, and comes to us admittedly from Jewish Christian sources, it will be remembered that no reference whatever is made to Isaiah's words. How are we to account for the amazing boldness of the writer, or editor of St. Matthew's Gospel, in thus introducing a prophecy of uncertain meaning in Jewish circles into the midst of a story with an unmistakably Jewish background, to support an element unmistakably un-Jewish—viz., the Virgin birth—unless upon the supposition that he felt sure of his ground, and that Isaiah's prophecy had received the fulfilment which he claimed for it?

But the prophecy, we are told, is merely an after-thought, and would not have been introduced unless the doctrine of the birth from a Virgin had already received confirmation. Before, however, we admit the validity of this confirmation, we may be pardoned for venturing to ask a previous question. "Here we enter the circle of pagan ideas": the whole sentence assumes that an entrance has been effected before even the possibility of an open door has been seriously considered. Is it a likely supposition that the Christian Church or its representatives would make an incursion into the circle of pagan ideas to derive therefrom the story of the birth of their Holy Redeemer from sin? No doubt it may be urged that the mythological conception of sons of the gods and of heroes might seem to afford an analogy which would tend to enhance the greatness of the origin of Jesus in Gentile circles, but Dr. Weiss expresses the verdict of the Christian consciousness of to-day, no less than of that of the early Church, when he repeats with no hesitation his earlier words: "The shame-

less glorifying of sensual desire in these myths could only provoke in the primitive Christian consciousness the deepest abhorrence; every endeavour to refer any such idea to Jesus must have appeared a profanation of what was most holy, by thus dragging it through the mire of sensuality" (*"Leben Jesu,"* i. 211, 4th edit.). Fortunately, we can pass beyond even the most probable conjectures, and lay our hands upon statements in more than one early document which give us positive proof of this deep abhorrence. The earliest Christian "Apology" which we possess—that of the philosopher Aristides (126-140 A.D.)—plainly accepts the Virgin birth, and places it amongst the primary and established facts of the Christian creed. It may, no doubt, be urged that careful attention should be given to the different versions and the Greek text of the "Apology," but it would seem that, making all allowances for this consideration, we are justified in regarding the words "being born of a pure virgin, He (the Lord Jesus Christ) assumed flesh," as the actual words of Aristides himself; and it is evident from the context that this fact is placed upon a level with the facts of the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and Ascension. It must, therefore, have been a fact which had been previously both known and established, as otherwise it would scarcely have found a place in a writing which took the nature of an "Apologia."

But the point with which we are more immediately concerned is that this same "Apology" which thus asserts most unequivocally the Virgin birth also emphasizes, and describes at length, the horror and disgust which inspired the Christians as they recalled the heathen legends of the doings of gods and goddesses. This is abundantly evident whether we have recourse to the Syriac or to the Greek. Thus, in the Syriac, chap. ix., we read, "By reason of these tales, O king, much evil has arisen among men, who to this day are imitators of their gods, and practise adultery and defile themselves . . . for if he who is said to be the chief and king of their gods does these things, how much more shall his worshippers imitate him?" and with these remarks we may compare similar utterances in chap. xi. of the Greek. A few years later we pass to the writings of Justin Martyr, and we note not only his frequent references to the Virgin birth, but also that, like Aristides, he regards that fact as occupying the same position in the Christian summary of belief as the other great facts relating to our Lord, and that, like Aristides, he speaks in a manner which shows the condemnation pronounced upon the coarseness of Greek mythology by representatives of the Early Church. An American writer who has lately examined at great length the testimony of the ante-Nicene writers to

the Virgin birth, emphasizes Justin's repudiation of the Greek mythological explanation of this doctrine; and "whether," he adds, "the Christian conception be right or not, Justin has, in so far as he represents the early second-century thought, freed it from the grossness of similar heathen stories, and has preserved in his own more explicit language much of the chaste quality of the Gospel narratives themselves."¹ Certainly it may be urged that there are other passages in Justin in which he refers to Greek mythological stories as furnishing a kind of parallel to the Christian acceptance of the Virgin birth, or in which he maintains that these pagan stories had been invented by the demons to imitate the truth or to detract from its significance. Schmiedel has strongly insisted upon these passages and ideas (Art. "Mary," 2964), but he has no comment whatever to make upon those other passages in which Justin differentiates the Christian belief from the gross fables of the Greeks. Moreover, it must be remembered that in all their references to pagan myths the Christian apologists started with a belief in the Virgin birth as an acknowledged fact, so that such references cannot account for the origin of that belief, although they may have been used to support deductions from it.

It is, of course, still asserted that similar stories of a miraculous birth have gathered round the name of a Plato or an Augustus. With regard to the former, there is no evidence that any such story of the birth of Plato was known in the days of Speusippus, Plato's nephew;² and even if Plato's mother is regarded in any of the accounts as a virgin, yet the authorities are so conflicting that it would be most precarious to build upon their statements. Diogenes Laertius, in his account of the life of Plato, mingles together history and legend, truth and fiction, in a wholesale manner, and the origin of the birth story in this case is most probably to be sought for in the eagerness with which in the Grecian world similar stories gathered around great and illustrious names.

The supposed parallel in the case of Augustus has again

¹ "The Virgin Birth," *American Journal of Theology*, July, 1902. The same writer points out the important fact that if Justin was in possession of some extra-canonical material, as, *e.g.*, in his mention of the birth of Jesus in a cave near Bethlehem, yet that he was evidently very little influenced by any such source of information, and that it supplanted or coloured in a very small degree his reflection of the canonical infancy stories.

² Whereas there is reasonable ground for believing that the information of the Evangelists came to them from the members and friends of our Lord's family circle.

been recently emphasized in a pamphlet ("Die Geburtsgeschichte Jesu Christi") published last year by Professor Soltau, whose name has been frequently referred to of late in connection with our Gospels and their contents. According to him, it is possible that the message of salvation in Luke ii. 14 was first derived from the words of some inscriptions in honour of Augustus, and that then the further step was easily made to transfer the belief in the supernatural birth of the Emperor to the case of Jesus. It really seems as if no absurdities are too great to be pressed into the service of the deniers of the facts relating to our Lord's birth. In the inscriptions to which Soltau refers it is quite true that reference is made to the Emperor as a saviour, that the day of his birth is described as a day of glad tidings for the world, that peace is spoken of as a prevailing blessing, and that the Emperor's benevolence and benefactions are duly celebrated. But it is not too much to say that every one of the words so much emphasized by Soltau may be paralleled from the Old Testament and the Apocryphal books. The word "Saviour," for example, finds a place, and a very frequent place, in passages which may be cited from these two sources; the expression "to bring glad tidings" is found again and again in the Old Testament, and sometimes in close connection with the thought of the salvation of God; and, to say nothing of the fact that if we adopt, in Luke ii. 14, the R.V. rendering, Soltau's parallel is apparently destroyed, the thought of goodwill towards men, expressed by the same Greek word as in the angels' hymn, finds a place in the Old Testament, as, for example, in Ps. cvi. 4 (*cf.* Ps. v. 12; l. 18). But Soltau apparently has nothing to say to the Jewish phraseology in the first clause of the same angelic hymn: "Glory to God in the highest." If anyone desires to see an account of the fantastic dreams and portents which were associated with the birth of Augustus, he could not do better than consult the extracts given at so much length in the closing pages of Soltau's pamphlet. In addition to all this, it must never be forgotten that no parallel of any weight can really be instituted between the Gospel narrative and the story in question, because in the latter case no birth of a *virgin* is in question.

(To be continued.)

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