

The Christ of the Gospel.

No. II.—“INCARNATE BY THE HOLY GHOST OF THE VIRGIN MARY.”*

THESE words, from our English rendering of the Nicene Creed, express the truth which is also set forth in the parallel clause of the Apostles' Creed: “Conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary.” They enshrine the conviction of Christendom as to the *mode* of the Divine Incarnation. They declare that our Lord was miraculously born of a Virgin Mother. It lies outside the scope of this article to discuss the stages by which the words found entrance to the great creed of the East, and the verbal modifications which ensued.¹ The purport of the expression is sufficiently clear, and has been quite well understood by those who reject as well as by those who uphold it.

Before attempting to say anything about the credibility of the statement, it may clear the ground if I mention the points that I shall venture to take for granted. The *general* credibility of the Gospel narratives, in their account of our Lord's life and death, are assumed: there was such a person as Jesus Christ, Who lived and died in Palestine. Further, the general teaching of the New Testament, that this Jesus Christ was God's Son, incarnate in human flesh, is accepted as true. It is obvious that, apart from this conception of Christ, the story of the Virgin Birth can only be regarded as an idle tale. Those who have come to a strictly humanitarian view of Christ are bound to regard this miracle as excluded along with all the others.

¹ The Greek form as commonly received in the East since the Council of Chalcedon is: “σπικωθέντα ἐκ Πνεύματος Ἁγίου καὶ Μαρίας τῆς παρθένου.” The Latin form current in the West since the Council of Toledo is: “Incar-natus est de Spiritu Sancto ex Maria Virgine.”

* The first article in this series, “Begotten of His Father before all worlds” [“The Pre-Existent Christ,” by the Rev. E. A. Burroughs], appeared in the January issue of the CHURCHMAN.—ED.

There are, however, those who would not subscribe to this very "diminished" Christology: who *do* revere Christ as God Incarnate, and who *do* claim to be His worshippers and members of His Church, but who discard the Virgin Birth and the bodily resurrection as untenable on various grounds. And the present question is whether these alleged grounds for objection seem really valid, or whether we may still continue to believe what from the first has been believed. Those who maintain the affirmative may again be subdivided into two main schools of thought: those who hold the Virgin Birth to be an essential doctrine—essential, that is, in the sense that if it were finally disproved Christianity would collapse; and those who, accepting the doctrine as credible on the grounds of the available evidence, would still find all their main convictions about Christ unimpaired, even if it had to be surrendered.

The grounds for objection to the doctrine are partly philosophic and partly critical. There are those who would assert on *a priori* grounds that virgin birth *could not*, under any circumstances, take place, and therefore no alleged evidence could prove it. To such thinkers it is evidently useless to proffer the Birth narratives in the Gospels: the evidence is condemned before it is seen. There are others who disclaim any such antecedent prejudice, but who find the New Testament evidence to vanish away under "critical" and "historical" scrutiny. For them the story of the Virgin Birth is a legend—a beautiful and, under the circumstances, an inevitable legend—having no relation to actual objective fact. We shall probably not be far wrong if we assert that with these thinkers, too, the *a priori* conviction has played its part; their investigation whether the Virgin Birth *did* take place has been strongly coloured by their underlying conviction that it *could not* have taken place.

It is well to be aware of this philosophic prejudice because we are constantly told, with a pose of judicial gravity, that continued maintenance of our conviction is due solely to theological prejudice. Professor Gardner, in a recent article on the Virgin Birth, says that he has no wish "to disturb the belief of those

who, like our ancestors, take the Birth narratives as true without troubling themselves about the rules of historic evidence,"¹ assuming, apparently, that if the "rules of historic evidence" be followed, only one result, and that a destructive one, will be reached. His whole article is pervaded by this question-begging assumption. It can only be asserted, in flat opposition, that belief in the Virgin Birth as a historic fact is not confined to theological dogmatists; it is upheld by scholars who, after the strictest appreciation of the "rules of historic evidence," are convinced of its truth.

I can only touch, within the limits of this article, upon one or two outstanding features in the discussion. What is the positive Scriptural evidence for our belief in the Virgin Birth? It is contained in St. Matthew i., ii., and St. Luke i., ii. The remainder of the New Testament has no clear categorical assertion on the subject. The Gospel of St. Mark begins its narrative of our Lord's life with the account of His baptism. The Gospel of St. John gives no account of His birth. The Pauline Epistles, with the possible exception of the phrase, "born of a woman," in Gal. iv. 4, are equally silent, and this interpretation of the phrase in Galatians is, at the best, extremely precarious. It may readily be admitted that in the absence of the Matthean and Lucan Birth narratives, there would have been no word of clear explicit assertion in Scripture about the miraculous character of the Birth of Jesus.

We may even go further and say that the evidence would have pointed in the other direction. The people, astonished at the works of Christ, asked: "Is not this the carpenter's son?"² At Nazareth they said: "Is not this Joseph's son?"³ His mother said to Him: "Thy father and I sought Thee sorrowing."⁴ Within the Birth narrative in the third Gospel the term "parents" is more than once used of Joseph and Mary in relation to Him.⁵ These facts, taken along with the silence of St. Mark, St. John, and St. Paul about the Virgin Birth, seem

¹ *The Modern Churchman*, May, 1914, p. 79.

² Matt. xiii. 55.

³ Luke iv. 22.

⁴ Luke ii. 48.

⁵ Luke ii. 27, 41, 43.

to point to a negative conclusion. And yet we have the two Birth narratives with their explicit testimony. How are we to adjust them ?

A rash and hasty criticism answers that they are incapable of adjustment. The evidence of the main stream of Apostolic tradition both in its assertions and its silences is quite self-consistent. The statement of the Birth narratives drawn from different and mutually discrepant sources represents legendary accretion of no historical value.

Let us recall the main facts about the Birth narratives. Their contents are familiar to every student of the Bible. They appear to come from different sources and to be of independent origin. Possibly the source in each case was a private one. It is generally agreed that the one in St. Matthew presents the events from the point of view of Joseph, while that in St. Luke presents them from the point of view of Mary. The differences in the narratives are well known, but they do not amount to contradictions;¹ they are confined to points of detail, and do not impair the general agreement.

They agree as to the main fact of the Virgin Birth ; they agree in attributing this to the special action of the Holy Spirit ; they agree in the name of the child, the places of His birth and boyhood, His Davidic descent. The genealogies, which are clearly independent, agree in this, that they connect Jesus with David through Joseph, and not through Mary. This combination of agreement as to the main facts with discrepancy as to subsidiary detail is, so far as it goes, in favour of the general trustworthy character of each narrative.

Before continuing this examination of the narratives it may be convenient to speak here of the silence of the other writers. It is quite true that St. Mark does not mention the Virgin Birth, nor does it appear to have had a place in Q. The limits of Q and much else about it are wrapped in such complete obscurity that no adverse conclusion can be drawn from its

¹ "Between these two accounts of Matthew and Luke no contradiction exists."—O. Holtzmann, "Life of Jesus," p. 85.

omissions. With regard to St. Mark, it may be observed that his memoir begins with the public life of Jesus. If it represents—as it not improbably does—the “witness” of St. Peter, bearing testimony to the time when our Lord “went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil,”¹ the events of the infancy and boyhood lie outside its scope. It is also worth observing that, while St. Mark calls Him “Son of God,”² and “Son of Mary,”³ he nowhere calls Him the Son of Joseph. There is here no explicit contradiction of the Virgin Birth.

With regard to St. John, it is generally held that he wrote with the Synoptic narratives before him, and that, where he deemed it necessary, he made additions or corrections. There is every reason to suppose that he would know the facts about our Lord’s birth, and it is difficult to believe that if he had regarded the narratives as inaccurate he would have let them pass without protest. Some, indeed, have held that he *did* protest, and that the Logos doctrine as set forth in the Prologue to his Gospel is his substitute for what he held to be an unspiritual narrative. This is a rather far-fetched hypothesis. It is at least equally credible that the absence of any direct contradiction means tacit agreement, and that his Logos doctrine in the Prologue was meant to lead his readers on to further and deeper truth about the Lord—the truth of His eternal pre-existence with the Father. There is no contradiction between virgin birth and pre-existence. The Johannine doctrine may well be supplementary to the Lucan narrative.

The silence of St. Paul has been variously interpreted. For my own part, I think those scholars are probably right who believe that St. Paul was unacquainted with the fact of the Virgin Birth. It would seem natural that the secret should be jealously guarded during the early days by those who knew it, and that possibly during the whole period in which St. Paul

¹ Acts x. 38.

² Mark i. 1 (with BD. & omits); *cf.*, too, Mark iii. 11; v. 7; xv. 39.

³ Mark vi. 3.

was writing those Epistles of his which we still possess, the knowledge of it had not come to his ears. If this be the true solution, it at any rate shows that St. Paul could hold the lofty views of the significance of Christ's Person which are set forth in Colossians and Ephesians without the Virgin Birth as a necessary factor. He certainly could and did teach, not only the Incarnation, but the Eternal Sonship of Christ without reference to the Virgin Birth. It is well to remark this, when the assertion is made that if the Virgin Birth be rejected the foundation-stone of Christianity is gone. The doctrine is to be accepted, if at all, because the testimony to it is good and reliable. And it is at any rate reasonable to suppose that St. Matthew¹ and St. Luke prefixed the narratives to their respective Gospels, not because they felt them to be psychologically indispensable, but because they held the sources to which they had access to be reliable and true.

The silence, then, of the New Testament, apart from the Birth narratives, does not involve negation of their contents. Let us now return to a further consideration of the narratives themselves.

It is well known that each narrative presents a textual crux of some importance. That in St. Matthew is in i. 16. The generally accepted reading is: "Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus which is called Christ." The Sinaitic Syriac, however, has: "Joseph to whom was betrothed Mary the Virgin, begat Jesus, Who is called the Christ;" while the Curetonian Syriac has: "Joseph to whom was betrothed Mary the Virgin who bare Jesus Christ." At the first glance the reading of the Sinaitic Syriac seems to deny the superhuman Birth, and it is not surprising that, when it became known, it was variously regarded as heretical, or claimed as the original form of text, according to the sympathies of different critics. I think the reasonable verdict on it is pronounced by Dr. Kenyon (no theological dogmatist) in words which I venture to transcribe:

¹ The term "St. Matthew" is used here, and throughout the paper, to indicate the unknown compiler of the first Gospel, without raising the question of St. Matthew's own contribution to its contents.

“That this text, *if* it denies the Divine Birth, cannot be original, may easily be shown, since the context of the passage proves the writer's knowledge of the Christian story (‘*Mary the Virgin,*’ ‘the Christ,’ ‘when Mary His mother was espoused to Joseph, when they had not come near to one another, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost,’ and the reference to the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy of the Virgin Birth), and the difference of the reading from that of all other authorities makes it highly improbable that it is the true form of the text. But, in addition, good reason has been shown for the belief that the words used in verse 16 were never intended to deny the Virgin Birth at all, the use of the word ‘begat’ being precisely analogous to its use throughout the genealogy, in which, as is well known, it does not always indicate literal descent, but rather an official line of succession. The variant reading, therefore, though interesting (and possibly coming near to the text of the original document from which St. Matthew's genealogy was derived, and in which our Lord would of course be entered as the Son of Joseph), has no important doctrinal bearings.”¹ Zahn's verdict also is to the same effect: “A writer like Matthew, whose purpose was to silence the calumnies raised against the miraculous Birth of the Messiah, and who knew how to utilize the smallest details of an intractable genealogy to this end, cannot at the same time have accepted in his narrative statements directly contradicting his view of that occurrence. Any text of Matthew's Gospel containing such features would be pre-condemned as one that had been tampered with in a manner contrary to the conception of the author.”²

The point of textual interest in the Lucan narrative is in i. 34, 35. These words are unmistakable in their reference to the Virgin Birth. In fact, it has been said that they are “the

¹ “Handbook to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament,” pp. 131, 132.

² As quoted by Nestle, “Textual Criticism of the Greek Testament” (E.T.), p. 249. Cf. the full discussion of the passage in Zahn, “Introduction to the New Testament” (E.T.), vol. ii., pp. 565-567.

only reference to the Virgin Birth in the Third Gospel," and but for their presence the whole narrative in chapter i. could be harmonized with the rest of the New Testament silence. But the verses are there; and they are there as an integral part of the text. There is no hesitation in manuscript authority as to their presence. The most famous editions—TR., R.V., WH., Tischendorf, Nestle—contain them without mark or question. The only remedy, then, for those who find their contents unacceptable is to excise them as an interpolation. This is done by various German scholars on entirely subjective grounds, and their action need not detain us longer. Once the principle is admitted of tampering with the text and permitting the removal of what appear to be incongruous passages, sober scientific criticism is at an end. Our space does not admit of any minute examination of verbal details, but it may fairly be said that the attempts made to disintegrate the Lucan text at this point have been attended by signal failure.¹

In this connection a word may be said on the attitude that is frequently taken up towards the Birth narratives as coming from separate sources. The investigation and the criticism of "sources" has gone to great lengths in recent years, and many interesting hypotheses have been made as to the "sources" of the Synoptist writers and the earlier chapters of Acts. We have already admitted the probability that St. Matthew and St. Luke draw their Birth narratives from distinct, and possibly in each case from private, sources. But in each case the matter so used forms an integral part of the whole Gospel going under the writer's name. The writer in each case incorporated the material contained in his source, and did so, presumably, because he believed it to be of equal worth with all that followed in his Gospel. It may perhaps savour of "theological dogmatism" to lay much stress in this connection on the idea of inspiration, though many will not lightly surrender their conviction that the compilers of the Gospel narratives were

¹ For an exhaustive discussion see the article, "Virgin Birth," by Mr. Box, in the "Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels," vol. ii., p. 806.

Divinely guided and controlled. But in the case of St. Luke we may at least remark that his Birth narrative follows directly on his preface, in which he speaks of his dependence on "eye-witnesses and ministers of the Word," and of his "having traced the course of all things accurately from the first," and that there is no reason to doubt that it is as much founded on fact as any other of the narratives embodied in his Gospel.

In addition to the assertion of the general integrity of the texts as we possess them, it may be further maintained that the Palestinian character and origin of each narrative has been firmly established. The intensely Jewish character of the Matthean narrative is admitted. It is thoroughly accurate with regard both to Jewish feeling and to Jewish law. The perplexity of Joseph and his proposed course of action are indicated not only with fidelity, but with the greatest sobriety, reserve, and delicacy. To find any analogy in this with the narratives of heathen mythology is literally absurd, and a comparison with the later apocryphal narratives, such, for example, as that in the "Protevangelium Jacobi,"¹ makes clear the absolute gulf between the Canonical narrative and all others. In St. Luke's narrative it is very obvious, on linguistic grounds, that he is depending on a Jewish source, and the whole character of the contents strengthens the same conclusion. It is needless to insist on the delicacy and purity of the whole narrative. All the internal evidence points to the probability that it comes from a woman, and that woman may well have been the Virgin herself. The intimate touches of personal detail point strongly in this direction. If it came to St. Luke through the medium of others, they were still most probably women, and Professor Sanday's conjecture that it may have been some of the women mentioned in Luke viii. 3, xxiv. 10, is very likely to be true.

In spite of all the indications that point to origins exclusively Jewish and to intimate knowledge, the hypothesis has been

¹ Available for English readers in T. and T. Clark's "Ante-Nicene Christian Library," in the volume containing "Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, and Revelation."

constantly reaffirmed that the origin of the Birth narratives is to be sought in the influence of Gentile mythology, and that these legendary stories about intercourse between mortals and deities form the true analogue. It is well in this connection to remember the logical rule that the value of the argument from analogy depends, among other things, on the ratio of the ascertained points of resemblance to the ascertained points of difference. When this is borne in mind, the great majority of Greek and other non-Jewish fables can be dismissed. The points of difference utterly outnumber any traces of resemblance. There is "in the Gospel story a pure and beautiful reticence which has nothing in common with Greek or Hindu narrations of birth from a Divine and a human parent—narrations which anyhow do not tell of virgin birth at all, but of gods possessed with human passions. It is, indeed, strictly veracious, as Dr. Orr has proved ('The Virgin Birth of Christ,' chapter vi.), to say that no ethnic parallel to birth from a pure virgin has been found. The contrary is often stated, but at the crucial point the alleged parallel invariably breaks down; and even radical critics are obliged to grant that pagan ideas, if adopted by the Evangelists, were transformed out of all recognition."¹ This verdict is endorsed by the trenchant words of J. Weiss: "The shameless 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."²

It cannot, then, be said that the attempt to trace the idea of the Virgin Birth to the influence of pagan ideas of the generation of heroes by gods and their birth by women has any serious claim to acceptance. What is to be said of the view that it arose under the influence of Jewish beliefs, and in particular of a pre-Christian Jewish belief that the Messiah would be born of a Virgin? Harnack, for example, would trace the genesis of

¹ Mackintosh, "The Person of Jesus Christ," p. 530.

² Quoted by Knowling, "Our Lord's Virgin Birth," p. 42 f.

the whole matter to Isaiah vii. 14. The purport of that text is too large a subject for discussion here. The probabilities, however, would seem to be that in its original form the text does not refer to distinctively virgin birth at all. This is true of the Hebrew, and it is probably true of the LXX also. There appears to be no evidence of any expectation in purely Jewish circles that the Messiah would be born of a virgin. We know of no evidence that the birth of the Messiah was to be abnormal, and it is seriously open to question whether in Jewish circles the text was regarded as Messianic. The general tendency, too, of the Old Testament was to glorify marriage as compared with virginity rather than the reverse. After an exhaustive examination of this point, Professor Buchanan Grey concludes that "the Christian belief that Jesus was born of a Virgin rests either on fact or on the influence in early Christian circles of Gentile thought."¹ This latter alternative he explicitly excluded from the sphere of his discussion. If, as we have seen, it appears thoroughly untenable, then we are brought back to the view that the belief rested on historic fact. It should further be observed that St. Matthew, in his use of Isaiah vii. 14, does not in any way give the impression that he is deriving the fact from the prophecy. He simply quotes the passage as a Scriptural "proof text" to repel innuendoes against Mary's honour.

The disposition to trace the origin of the Birth narrative to Christian reflection in Old Testament prophecy seems to be gaining ground. The alternative and—as it seems to me—the more probable view is that the Virgin Birth is a historic fact, and that when it was disclosed to the primitive Christian community the tendency was to search for Old Testament texts which could in any way be regarded as prophetic of it. The general use of the Old Testament Scriptures in St. Matthew seems to bear traces of this process—the historic fact followed by the attempt to construe it with the aid of prophecy.

I have tried hitherto to indicate some of the main objections

¹ "The Virgin Birth in Relation to the Interpretation of Isaiah vii. 14," *Expositor*, April, 1911, p. 308.

made from the side of criticism in history. For the philosophic side a word must suffice. Those who regard Nature as a closed system, working always on strictly uniform lines, from which there is no evidence of any variation, are by their view precluded from any acceptance of the Virgin Birth. Miracle in general, and certainly such miracle as this, is frankly inconceivable. But suppose that the world is in some living relationship to God, and that He is therefore perpetually at work in His world creatively; suppose that what He may do in the future is not exclusively dependent on what He has done in His universe previously; that His government of the world is not of a rigid and impersonal cast, and that He has *not* established an immutable course of things—on this view of Him and His relation to the world “we ought perpetually to hope for new, incalculable, and amazing Divine acts.”¹ Belief in the possibility of miracle is, fundamentally, belief that there is a living God. A conception such as this, at any rate, leaves us free to believe that if God were to become incarnate, He might do so in a way “new, incalculable, and amazing.”

This brings us to what may be called the positive aspect of the general argument. We are not concerned to maintain the general possibility of virgin birth; the birth in question is that of Jesus Christ alone. We believe Him, on many grounds, to be an entirely exceptional Person; we believe Him, even apart from the contents of the Birth narratives, to be God incarnate. We believe Him to be a supernatural Person—and, believing this, we are at any rate prepared for the possibility that He may have been supernaturally born. All well-meant arguments about the biological possibility of parthenogenesis are entirely beside the mark; if we accept the Birth narratives at all, we must accept them as the account of the entrance into the mortal sphere of a supernatural Person. To say that without the Virgin Birth the Incarnation and Redemption would have been impossible is rash and unwarrantable. As Professor Mackintosh well says, the case is one more for the application of the

¹ Wendland, “Miracles and Christianity” (E.T.), p. 85.

category of τὸ πρέπον than of τὸ ἀναγκαῖον. On the other hand, we must beware of arguing that because it seemed fitting, *therefore* it did actually happen. Whether it did happen depends on the historical evidence. Two Evangelists have narrated it as historical. Each one believed it himself, and evidently expected that his narrative would carry conviction. And it is not easy to see how either narrative could have originated without historical foundation. To suppose that any early Christian writer could have invented and penned these stories, as we have them, is to postulate a greater miracle than the historical fact itself would be.

Finally, we have to think of it in relation to the other great miracle of the Resurrection. If our Lord's relation to God was a unique one ; if we believe, as we think we may, that His leaving the world had a unique character corresponding to that unique relation ; then it is at any rate harmonious that His entrance into the world should also have been unique.

In the Creed the statement about His Birth follows on the exalted language about His Person : "God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God." And it depends upon it logically. It is of One so described that virgin birth is predicated. And when we take the character of the historical evidence, along with the profound spiritual fitness of such a Birth, we still feel that without reserve or hesitation we can go on to say : "Incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary."

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[The third article in this series, "Crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate," will appear in the March issue of the CHURCHMAN, and will be contributed by the Rev. J. Kenneth Mozley.]

