

THE MIRACULOUS CONCEPTION.

“And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost 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.”—LUKE i. 35 (A.V.).

“ . . . The power of the Most High shall overshadow thee: therefore also that which is to be born¹ shall be called *holy*, the Son of God.”—(R.V.).

OF all the improvements which we owe to the Revised Version none is greater, in my judgment, than the change which it makes upon the sense of this verse. According to the A.V., as we naturally read it, Jesus Christ *became* “the Son of God”—if not exclusively yet in a new sense—in virtue of His miraculous conception: according to the R.V. it was His *holiness*, not His Sonship, which was due to His miraculous conception. According to the uniform tenor of the New Testament, when “God sent forth His Son made of a woman,” instead of thereby investing Him with any new Sonship, He simply clothed His Son with our flesh; but since He who was to “take away the sin of the world” must Himself “know no sin,” provision was made to secure this—in the august way here only explicitly announced but abundantly verified in the historical records of the life that issued out of it, and everywhere else in the New Testament taken for granted.

But does the R.V. give the true sense of the verse? Opinion is certainly divided, and there are weighty authorities on both sides. But surely the fairest way of deciding the question is to let the evangelist express himself in his own way; and if we find him using in the very next chapter the same form of expression in the sense of the R.V. of this passage, and what is more, if in other places where the same form of expression occurs it can mean nothing else, we

¹ The words “of thee” in the received text and A.V., though they have respectable authority, are beyond doubt an addition to the genuine text.

have abundant justification of the R.V. here. The phrase in question is "That which is to be born shall be called holy" (*ἅγιον κληθήσεται*)—the predicate being put before the verb. Now turn to chap. ii. 22, "They brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord, as it is written in the law of the Lord. Every male that openeth the womb *shall be called holy* to the Lord" (*ἅγιον τ. Θ. κληθήσεται*). Then turn to Matt. ii. 23, "That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, that He *should be called a Nazarene*" (*ὅτι Ναζωραίος κληθήσεται*). Also, chap. v. 9, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they *shall be called sons of God*" (*υἱοὶ Θεοῦ κληθήσεται*), and in v. 19 twice, "Who-soever shall break one of these least commandments . . . *shall be called least* (*ἐλάχιστος κληθήσεται*) in the kingdom of heaven : but whosoever shall do and teach them, he *shall be called great* (*μέγας κληθήσεται*)."

There is thus so clear an *usus loquendi* in the phrase employed in our verse, that unless there is something about other words in the same verse, or in the nature of the case, to render this sense inadmissible, we are not entitled to render it otherwise than as it stands in the R.V. But there is nothing of the kind. The only real objection to it is that it would involve two predicates—"shall be called holy" and "[shall be called] the Son of God"—which in that case would require a *καὶ*, an "and," between the two predicates, and there is none (so *Meyer*). But there is no need to take it so. Just take the one predicate to be "shall be called *holy*," and the next clause to be what grammarians would call an epexegetical definition of what is meant by "that which is to be born," namely no other than "the Son of God," and a clear and worthy sense will be the result—as if to say, "The effect of this mysterious operation upon the blessed Virgin will be that her offspring will be none other than the Son of God, *born holy* in a sense absolutely unique."

Godet, who takes the same view of the verse as Meyer and the A.V., makes one poor objection to the other sense. "With the predicate *holy* the verb should have been, not 'shall be called holy,' but 'shall be holy'; for *holy* is not a title." Of course it is not, nor was meant to be so, but to characterize the newborn One. When it was said in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be called holy," does any one suppose that to mean that every first-born male Israelite got this as a title?

Since then there are only these small objections to the rendering of the R.V., and this is the *fixed usage* in such phrases, we shall hold that it expresses the true sense of the verse before us, and will now proceed to examine the attempts made to explain away the great truth thus expressed.

That this truth should be rejected as a historical fact by the negative, anti-supernatural school of critics is only what we expect. It is with them a foregone conclusion. But it is interesting to observe how they get rid of it. The genuineness of the text being beyond dispute, both in Luke's explicit announcement of a miraculous conception and in Matthew's presupposition of the precise nature of it, they view it simply as one of the many floating traditions of the story of Christ's life, which are to be accepted or rejected according to such canons of criticism as each one for himself may think fit to test them by. In this case, who has not read of those prodigies of strength and wisdom and valour who were fabled to have been *god-born*? and what could be more natural than that one so transcendently great in goodness—so God-like in character—should be thought to have had a mother in some way divinely gifted from the moment of her conception, to give birth to one so uncommon? To this it might be answered that such legends were quite foreign to Jewish ideas, and the answer

would be pertinent enough. But even here there may be an element of truth. For what could give rise to such legends of great heroes being *god-born*, but a presumption that supreme human excellence must be due to some peculiarity of birth. And certainly if there be such a law, this would be the crowning expression of it!¹

Schleiermacher's way of getting rid of the supernatural character of the birth I should pass by unnoticed, were it not for his great name, and still more because he has been substantially followed not only by the best of the negative critics, but by some who are better affected to the higher features of evangelical Christianity (I refer especially to Meyer). Schleiermacher's *Critical Essay* on this Gospel lies before me in an English translation, issued anonymously upwards of sixty years ago, with an elaborate introduction by the translator (the late Bishop Thirlwall, in his early days).² The first thirty pages are spent in a laboured comparison and contrast of the first two chapters of this Gospel and the corresponding narrative in the first Gospel, —wearisome as well as painful reading it is. The gist of it may be given in a few sentences. The first chapter of Luke is a piece of patchwork, consisting of detached bits

¹ "We are referred to traditions concerning the birth of great men from pure virgins (*παρθενογενείς*), as for instance Buddha. . . . Such traditions are by no means opposed to biblical history—as little indeed as are analogous presentiments of an expected Redeemer. On the contrary, they bear witness to the very correct notion that noble minds are to be found in every nation; that nothing can result in the way of natural procreation (nor therefore from the womb of mankind), which could correspond with the ideal represented in the human mind; they vouch for the general desire of such a fact, for the longing after it, and hereby for the historical realization. . . . To this must be added that the narrative of the procreation of Christ through the Holy Ghost stands in a necessary connexion with His entire destination to be the Redeemer of infirm humanity, since it would have been impossible for any one who had himself sprung from the sinful human race to heal the wounds from which it suffers."—*Olshausen*.

² *Critical Essay on the Gospel of St. Luke. By Dr. Frederick Schleiermacher. With an Introduction by the Translator, containing an account of the controversy on the three first Gospels since. Ep. Marsh's Dissertation.* London, 8vo, 1825.

of written tradition, with connecting clauses inserted probably by the writer who wrought them into one narrative. The story of the angel's visit to Mary is certainly a piece by itself, cast in a poetic form but originating possibly in some historical fact. Matthew's narrative is naked prose and more of a historical-looking character. The two stories, however, are totally contradictory, and "all attempts to reconcile them seem only elaborate efforts of art to which one should not needlessly resort. Luke supposes everywhere that before the birth of Jesus—which took place at Bethlehem quite accidentally—Joseph and Mary lived at Nazareth. Matthew, on the contrary, knows nothing of any accidental cause of the birth happening at Bethlehem, and clearly supposes that Joseph, but for the intervention of some particular circumstances, would have returned to Judæa after his flight, and therefore manifestly takes that, and not Galilee, to have been his usual place of abode" (p. 48). Is any reply to this required? Hard pushed indeed must that penetrating critic have been to find a contradiction here. Matthew had no occasion to refer to the imperial edict which brought every male Israelite to his tribal city to be enrolled. The object he had being to state how Joseph's honourable scruples as to Mary's condition were divinely removed, he simply records the fact that, this done, he "took unto him his wife and" lived with her in the manner there stated "until she had brought forth a son"—"Jesus." On his return from Egypt Joseph did indeed intend to settle in Judæa, but that does not prove that he had lived there before, but that "Bethlehem of Judæa" being "the city of David," the royal city, he deemed it the fitting place for the infant King of Israel to be brought up, until "warned of God in a dream, he withdrew into Galilee and dwelt in Nazareth." But Luke's express object being to relate what brought Joseph to Bethlehem, and how he brought his betrothed wife with him, though on the eve

of her confinement, goes on to relate the annunciation to the shepherds of the birth of a Saviour that day at Bethlehem, with their visit to the Babe, and His presentation in the temple, not even mentioning His return thereafter to Nazareth. He simply presupposes it, for the very next scene which he relates brings the family to Jerusalem when He was twelve years old, without even telling us where they came from—Nazareth being their understood place of residence. I am almost ashamed to have said so much on so forced an attempt to make the two evangelists contradict each other.

The most reverential critic of the negative school, whose deep sympathies, like De Wette's, were with the very truths whose historical basis he seeks to undermine—I mean Keim—follows Strauss in another poor objection, that Luke places the angel's visit to Mary *before* the conception, whereas Matthew makes the same angel's visit to be *after* the conception, and not to Mary, but to Joseph; the two stories therefore being contradictory. Incredible, one might think, that any contradiction existed here. Yet even Meyer indorses it: as if one visit could not be paid to Mary to prepare her for that taking place on her which had never been known to occur before, and could not have been believed but for a Divine assurance, and a subsequent visit to Joseph to set his mind at rest about the condition of his betrothed could not also take place!

As to the *poetry* which Schleiermacher makes of the angel's annunciation to the Virgin—as if that relieved us of the necessity of viewing it as fact—exalted indeed is the strain, and all-worthy of the stupendous revelation it conveyed; but that only helps to lift the spirit into a preparedness to welcome the expected event.¹ For myself, I have always felt at a loss to say whether the sublimity or

¹ "The angel touches upon the most sacred of mysteries, and his speech becomes a song."—*Godet*.

the exquisite delicacy of the language here employed is the more to be admired. Calvin seems to have been struck with it, and the best expositors have felt it.

Having thus disposed of the sense and the language of the verse, we are prepared to deal with the objections to the fact itself. They are three; but formidable-looking though they are, a little examination will suffice to show that they are groundless.

I. *The silence of the Gospels about the miraculous conception save at the outset of the first and third ones, is held to be fatal to its historical truth.*

Evidently this objection is deemed unanswerable, for every writer on the negative side, from Schleiermacher downwards, appeals to passages in which our Lord is spoken of exactly as He would be if He were the legitimate offspring of Joseph and Mary. "Is not this the carpenter's son? is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren, James and Joses and Simon and Judas? and his sisters, are they not all with us?" Such language from His Nazarene townsmen, who must have known everything about the family, is surely unaccountable if any such unheard-of birth had taken place. But in the whole body of the evangelical narrative not a word occurs implying that He was born otherwise than we ourselves. Most of all, in the fourth Gospel, if written by the Apostle John, to whom our Lord on the cross committed His mother, and who took her to his own home—how is it that even there there is no hint of such a birth, the fact of which, if he knew it not before, he must have learnt from her?

Now in the Synoptic Gospels it is quite true that there is no indication that anybody knew of our Lord's peculiar manner of birth. I believe it was entirely unknown to the nation at large—unknown even to the Twelve—unknown indeed to His own family—unknown, as I think, to all but His virgin mother and her husband Joseph. Do you ask,

Why such secrecy? Why, just think what would have happened if it had been noised abroad through the little town of Nazareth that the wife of just and devout Joseph had become a mother before her marriage, and that he, instead of immediately giving her a bill of divorcement, had taken her home to him as his wife as if nothing wrong had happened! Where would have been the reputation for virtue of either of them from that time forward? And if, when He entered on public life and gave Himself forth as the long-promised and expected Messiah, what would have been the effect of a breath of suspicion about the manner of His birth? Would it not have been brought down upon Him as fatal to His claims? True, you may say, but what about His own family, could they be ignorant of such a peculiarity in His birth, if such there was? Well, first, this depends to some extent on whether they were born to Joseph by a previous marriage, or whether He was the offspring of both parents in the usual way. But waiving this, the thing was scarcely a subject for family talk; and if it was of any consequence that it should not be known outside, it is not very likely that they could entirely keep it to themselves, had the fact been communicated to them. Indeed, when we read in the fourth Gospel that "even His brethren did not believe on Him" (John vii. 5), and this too not long before His death, we can scarcely see how this could be if they were cognisant of the supernatural manner of His birth. I believe therefore that in the high wisdom that presided over every step in this matchless Life, it was ordered that only His virgin mother and His legal father should for a time know how "unto us a Child was born, unto us a Son was given, whose name should be called Wonderful, the Mighty God!"

Still, I confess that if this were all the answer I had to give to the objection founded on the silence on the subject of the Synoptic Gospels save at the outset of two

of them, it would not quite satisfy my own mind, much less any one troubled on the subject. But I think I can set the question at rest by what I have now to say.

It is a mistake, I think, to suppose that men's convictions of the sinlessness of our Lord should in the first instance be grounded on the manner of His birth, or any otherwise than on the patent facts of His life, and teaching, and works; so that when at length it came to be known in what manner He came into the world, they should see in this only the proper explanation, the all-sufficient key to what would otherwise have defied explanation—how He, who to outward appearance was like other sinful men, could throw out the challenge, "Which of you convicteth Me of sin?" (John viii. 45), and at the very close of His ministry say, "The prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in Me" (xiv. 30). The Gospels are simply the records of those facts of His life which prove Him to be this. They were not written to prove this, or prove anything. They are not preaching histories, but an unvarnished relation of facts. And hence it is, that in narrating the events of His public life they never go back to the peculiar manner of His birth, as furnishing a basis for such a life.

So much for the Synoptic Gospels; but the fourth Gospel must be dealt with on another principle. For so usually does it comment upon the incidents it records, and the dialogues and discourses which it repeats (insomuch that it has been called the reflecting Gospel) that it would seem that there at least some hint of the miraculous conception, if such there was, and known to the writer, could hardly have failed to appear. To this it is, I think, a complete answer, that by the admission of the ablest and best critics of even the extreme wing of the negative school—by Hilgenfeld as well as Hengstenberg, by Baur no less than Luthardt, by Keim as well as Godet—that the Synoptic Gospels were known to the writer of the fourth Gospel;

and as he omits much of what had been before the public for years in the other Gospels, so He had no need to depend upon the Virgin as to the manner in which "the Word was made flesh." Since, then, the manner of the fact was, ere he wrote, well known, it was enough for him to close his sublime Introduction with the august announcement, "The Word was made flesh . . . and we beheld His glory." His object was different from that of the Synoptists. Theirs was simply to relate the facts; his was to show how the glory of the Only-begotten of the Father had been so unveiled in our flesh that he who had seen Him had seen the Father. I will even go further, and say that since he makes his Lord, in a subsequent chapter, say to Nicodemus, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh," I cannot but feel (with Neander) that in saying, "The Word was made flesh," this beloved disciple must have meant to indicate "that He was made *flesh*" in another way than in every other case, and even consciously leaned upon the Synoptic explanation of the manner of it.

Advancing now to another stage of the New Testament records—

2. *How is it, we are asked, that in all the proclamations of the Gospel message, there is not a single allusion to the miraculous conception?*

My answer to this is short:—it was no part of the message. Observe how very precisely the limits of that message are defined by the Apostle Peter, just before the Day of Pentecost, when the preaching of it began—"beginning from the baptism of John unto the day that He was received up from us" (Acts i. 22). Now if the message was not to begin till long after the event referred to—addressed, as it would have to have been to persons ill-prepared to receive it—the preachers would feel that there was offence enough in the cross itself, without obtruding on them another stumbling-block.

But the last difficulty may by some be thought the greatest of all.

3. *Since the Apostolic Epistles contain, we must suppose, all necessary instruction in doctrine for the building up of the Churches in their most holy faith, how is it that even there we find no express mention of the miraculous conception?*

Meyer holds this inexplicable if the event in question was a historical fact. Paul, he says, often speaks of God sending His Son, and of His human nature as sinless, yet nowhere does he write as if he presupposed anything miraculous in His birth. But Meyer himself admits, as Schleiermacher had done before him, that there must have been in that birth some mysterious operation upon the parents, else—being born like all other descendants of Adam—He must have come into the world with that hereditary taint of sin which, he rightly holds, would have vitiated His whole redemptive work. But about any such mysterious operation the Epistles are just as silent as about the miraculous conception. If, then, the absence of any allusion to such a conception as the first and third Gospels announce as a fact is fatal to its being a fact at all, is it not clear that the absence of any allusion to this “mysterious operation” is equally fatal to it? And what can be more fantastic—not to say unworthy of so exact an exegete as Meyer—than first to reject the testimony of two of the Gospels to the stupendous way in which the Son of God took flesh, and then—finding that the indispensable sinlessness of the Redeemer must have some explanation—to invent a solution of his own, which he neither pretends to explain nor can furnish a shred of evidence for believing? This is one of those freaks of criticism which critical students of the New Testament should be on their guard against. Attempting to steer between faith and unbelief usually creates more difficulties than it removes. Old views are rejected or explained away in the hope of propitiating those

who wince at them, while extreme positions on the other hand are eschewed because fatal to what they themselves count dear. The *mediation* (or compromise) theology (*Ver-mittelungs Theologie*) surrenders to the enemy this or that outwork of the Faith, as tending to encumber the defence of the citadel, in the hope of being better able, by a change of front, to hold the fort. But the outworks being the key of the position, those who surrender them render the breach of the wall, the irruption of the enemy, and the final capture of the citadel only a question of time. There is no real consistency in this style of criticism. The supernaturalism of the New Testament I know, and anti-supernaturalism, pure and simple, I know, but who are ye? I may well ask, with the indignant demons of the Acts of the Apostles against the pretended ones.

As to the silence of the Epistles about the miraculous conception, I pray the reader to observe that even Meyer cannot deny that such statements as the following:—"Him who knew no sin He made to be sin for us"; "God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin"; "the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot unto God"; "the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot"—would be emptied of all their meaning if understood only of the *actions* of Christ, and there were no background of a sinless *nature*. And if the absence of such sinlessness of nature would be fatal to the redemption on which our hopes are built, are we to hang our belief of it on the poor thread of a *conjectural* sinlessness of birth, in place of the doubly attested way of it in the history itself?

It is a fact worthy of notice that the first attack against the purity of Christ's mother of which we read was that of Celsus, in the second century, in his bitter work against Christianity itself. That work is lost, but happily Origen, who in the third century replied to Celsus, and who indig-

nantly repels this charge against the Virgin, has reproduced the substance of all that Celsus had to say against Christianity. Of course, if even the Synoptic Gospels did not appear till about the middle of the second century, as the negative critics affirm, the charge against the purity of the Virgin could not have been sooner made. But those who believe that the Gospels were published before the end of the first century may naturally wonder why no trace of any such charge having been made by Jewish rejecters of Christ, even long after His death, to justify their unbelief, and that it should be left to a bitter heathen enemy to make it at a later period. I can only explain this by supposing that there had grown up so general a conviction that whatever might be thought of His claims, His life was such as never man before had led, and though unprepared to accept the testimony to the miraculous way of His birth, they could not bring themselves to vilify it. Nor was the subject reopened in any production worth notice from that time onwards—the whole Church for successive centuries adoring the mystery, until by giving to the blessed Virgin a place in men's regard which the New Testament does not give her, they came to pass on the wonder to herself, whereby heretical opinions were generated, tending to bring the whole subject into contempt.

The faith of the pre-Reformation Church in the true doctrine of the Incarnation was taken reverently up by the Reformers, and held by all orthodox Protestant Churches until, late in the last and early in the present century, rationalistic scepticism in Germany so overspread the Protestant Church there, that several of the most eminent men in the literary world—Schlegel and Count Stolberg for example—were fain to go over to the Church of Rome, that they might be able to breathe the air of a firm faith in the great verities of Divine Revelation; nor, I will venture to affirm, will there arise in any of our Churches the least

disposition to call in question the great cardinal truth of our Lord's supernatural birth, save in a tainted atmosphere—an atmosphere infected by a sceptical disposition to call in question everything within the range of revealed truth.

Perhaps it will be asked, How is this subject dealt with in the pulpit, when the Lord Jesus is held up before the people as the Lamb "without blemish and without spot," who being "in the likeness of sinful flesh" was yet "without spot"? In order to explain how He could throw out the challenge, "Which of you convicteth Me of sin?" and say, at the end, "The prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in Me":—do the preachers explain to them about the miraculous conception? No, assuredly they do not. Yet on the basis of a firm conviction in their Bible-taught people as well as themselves of the manner of His birth, they show an instinctive sense of the supreme delicacy of the subject, which will not suffer them to touch it with rude hands—an instinct shared in by those who hear them read the record of it in the lesson of the day, and, when preaching an Advent sermon, they simply refer to it. In fact, those who most profoundly believe and adore the mystery of it are those who least want it to be needlessly approached and gratuitously dwelt on.

This finishes what I have to say on this most sacred subject. I have shirked no feature of the subject which, so far as I am aware, has any claim to notice in the way of objection. And if I have succeeded in placing this doctrine on the firm basis of indisputable historical fact, I have done something more than refute groundless objections, however plausible and though advanced by critics of the greatest name: I have further shown how learning may be more than wasted—may be employed even to undermine the faith even of some of those critics themselves.

Since the substance of this paper was thought out and

put in type some years ago, I have noticed some observations on the subject of it in Dean Plumptre's valuable Boyle Lectures for 1866 (entitled *Christ and Christendom*), which seem to call for remark. They will be found in the Appendix, Note G, on "The History of the Infancy."

"The history [says the Dean] meets us already with regard to many thinkers, whom we are reluctant to condemn, and will probably be forced upon us by the progress of thought in many directions. How are we to judge of those who, while they receive the substance of the rest of the Gospel history, admit the Divine work and supernatural power of Jesus, and hold more or less clearly the central truth of the Nicene Creed, are yet unable to overcome the difficulties, critical and historical, which the history of the Nativity presents to them? The answer is, I believe, in silence, and in not judging. Maintaining, as we must maintain, that such men's thoughts do not come within the limits of any creed which Christendom has ever held, that they cannot rightly occupy a position as teachers in any Church which has inherited those creeds, it is yet right to remember that so far as the difficulties are critical and historical only, not the growth of a scoffing and impure spirit, they may leave men at least with the belief which thousands had in the first ages of the Church, when they heard the words of Christ or His apostles. There may be a confession that Jesus is 'the Christ, the Son of the living God,' a loving devotion to His will, a true obedience to His commands, even in the absence of power to receive the history which records how it was that the Son of God 'took man's nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin, of her substance.' Of those who make that confession truly we may well think as being 'not far from the kingdom of God,' and believe that if they seek to do His will they shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God" (pp. 366, 367).

On this I remark—(1) That when discussing views of revealed truth which "do not come within the limits of any creed which Christendom has ever held," it is scarcely fitting to speculate on how near their advocates may be to the kingdom of God. With such questions, I submit, we have nothing to do when examining their positions. To their own Master they stand or fall. For myself, I have not thought it either pertinent to my subject or proper in itself to say a word on such a point. But if we *are* to do so, let us not write so apologetically as to lead our readers

to think lightly of views which even this accomplished writer admits to be outside of any creed of Christendom. And all the less in those who, while holding and publicly advocating them, minister within Churches which hold as vital what they impugn, and in the public services of the Church repeat as their own faith what they deny and attempt to refute. (2) It is surprising that those who in our day impugn that most sacred truth which is the subject of this paper, should be held up as at least believing as much as "thousands did in the first ages of the Church, when they heard the words of Christ and His apostles." For it is one thing *not to know* a truth, never having had it proclaimed to them, and quite another thing to have had that truth before them all their lives in the Evangelical Records, and yet deliberately reject and try to disprove it. I have nothing to do with the state of mind which leads to that rejection, nor allow a thought about it to enter my own mind. What I affirm is, that there is no analogy between the innocent simplicity and child-like faith of the earliest Christians and the faith, in this ripe age of the New Testament and Christianity, of those who, it is admitted, cannot occupy a position as teachers in any Church which has inherited those creeds of Christendom, yet do occupy such a position. And viewing the matter in this light, I am not able to adopt the strain of the learned Dean.

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