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*THE MIRACULOUS CONCEPTION AND VIRGIN
BIRTH OF CHRIST.*

THE historical fact of the supernatural birth of Christ is definitely asserted in the Apostles' Creed, which for many centuries has been the baptismal Creed of Western Christendom. That venerable formulary teaches us to profess belief "in Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary."

During the last two years a great controversy has been raised in Protestant Germany about the Apostles' Creed. It has been maintained by Professor Harnack, whose dissertation on the subject has run through thirty editions or more, that many of the Articles of this Creed are of late origin, and some of them distinctly in excess of apostolic teaching. Now it is perfectly true that some of the clauses of the Creed were of comparatively late introduction into the formulary, such as "the descent into hell," and "the communion of saints," though this is no proof that the doctrines implied in these clauses were not held by the ancient Church. But when it is alleged that the doctrine of the miraculous conception and the Virgin birth of Christ does not belong to the earliest Gospel teaching, and was a poetical or mythological invention of the second century of the Christian Church, we are compelled to ask ourselves, Is this true? Are we to surrender our belief in the first fact of the miracle of the Incarnation? Have we been mistaken all along in supposing Jesus to have been born in a way different from other men? Are the first two chapters of the Gospels of S. Matthew and S. Luke historically untrustworthy, filled with fables and poetical imaginings,

or do they record facts? It may be helpful to review the reasons why we are justified in retaining our old inherited belief, and to be put on our guard against the perverse and unwarranted conclusions which have been drawn from the admitted fact that the miraculous conception and Virgin birth of Jesus did not form a prominent part of the earliest Christian teaching.

It is allowed on all hands that the doctrine was an established belief by the middle of the second century. The great Christian writers who flourished in the closing part of that century refer to it as indisputable and universally accepted within the circle of the Church. But it can be shown to have been firmly held at a much earlier period. The writer whose apology or defence of the Christian faith has interested all succeeding generations of Christians by its description of the inner life and customs and teaching of the early Church, Justin Martyr, wrote in the year 148 A.D. Addressing to a heathen emperor a book which was offered to the attention of all educated heathen readers, he plainly and explicitly mentions the miraculous conception, and quotes the passages from the opening chapters of S. Matthew and S. Luke, which announce and record it. He expressly protests against its being regarded as a poetical fiction analogous to the heathen fables about the birth of heroes from the union of gods and men. Writing again to Jews, Justin stoutly maintains the truth of the Virgin birth, and incidentally reveals the fact that the Jews of his time knew that the doctrine was persistently asserted by the Christians, and endeavoured to refute it by declaring that the prophecy of Isaiah quoted in S. Matthew's account of the infancy, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son," was incorrectly interpreted, as the original word for virgin there used meant really a young woman of marriageable age whether married or unmarried. [*νεῆνις*, not necessarily *παρθένος*.]

We go still further back in time, and we find Ignatius, the martyr of Antioch, equally distinct in his assertion of the mystery. "The Prince of this world," he declared in one of his letters (Ephesians, ch. 19), "was ignorant of the virginity of Mary and of her child-bearing. This was one of the mysteries which were wrought in the silence of God, but are now to be proclaimed to the world." To the mind of Ignatius it was as certain a fact as the Crucifixion. He asserts its reality as a proof that Jesus was not, as some heretics alleged, a mere phantom and illusion. There is then adequate evidence that at the beginning of the second century the miraculous conception and the Virgin birth both formed part of the belief of the Church in such great centres of Christian life as Antioch and Ephesus.

Working backwards from the Christian writers of the second century, we come to the books of the New Testament. The Scriptural authorities for the belief are undoubtedly the Gospels of S. Matthew and S. Luke. If the first two chapters of each of these Gospels are trustworthy, controversy is at an end. These early chapters are integral parts of their respective Gospels. They are not found wanting in early MSS. The opening chapters of S. Luke are known to have been omitted with many other portions of the same Gospel by heretical writers (*e.g.* Marcion) with a definite purpose served by the mutilation. Consider more particularly the testimony of S. Luke's Gospel. Impartial and learned critics, balancing all the available evidence, have arrived at the conclusion that the date of the publication of this Gospel cannot be put later than A.D. 80, *i.e.* scarce fifty years from the Crucifixion. The author professes to be writing a grave historical document. He claims attention for it, because he has carefully collected the information of the Christian beliefs and facts from those who had been from the beginning eye-witnesses and ministers of the Word, and he describes himself as "having traced the

course of all things accurately from the first" [R.V.]. His object in writing is that Theophilus, and with him all other disciples, might be assured of the certainty of the truths in which they had been orally instructed. There is no exception made for any part of the narrative which follows. It is a historian of accurate research, not a poet or a romancer, who is writing. When we look more closely into his narrative of the events of the infancy of Jesus, we notice a marked difference of style. The preface is an elaborate literary production, such as is natural for Luke, the beloved physician, a highly educated Christian of Gentile or possibly half-Gentile birth. But what immediately follows is all thoroughly Jewish in thought and style and language. It looks like a translation of some Hebrew or Aramæan document or fixed oral tradition. From whom could have been derived the accounts of the birth of John the Baptist, and of the annunciation to the Virgin Mary, and of the salutation of Elizabeth by Mary, and of the incidents of the birth of Jesus, at Bethlehem, the song of the angels, and the visit of the shepherds, the prophetic utterances of Simeon and Anna at the presentation of the infant in the temple, the visit to Jerusalem twelve years later, from whom save from Mary, the mother of the Lord? We know that she lived on after the period of the Resurrection and the Ascension [Acts i. 14], whereas Joseph never appears on the scene after the Lord's ministry had once begun, and had in all probability died in the interval. "A cycle of narratives must have formed itself around Mary in the retreat in which she ended her career. In the record as given by S. Luke, she certainly assumes the principal part. It is she who receives the visit of the angel, to her is communicated the name of the child, her private feelings are brought out in the narrative; it is she who is prominent in the address of Simeon, and in the history of the search for the child." ¹ There is certainly a strong presumption

¹ Godet, *Commentary on St. Luke*, vol. i. p. 162.

that S. Luke had obtained in his researches access to this source of information. Is it altogether fanciful to suppose that the original source is hinted at in the narrative itself? What is the natural inference from these two verses—“Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart” (ii. 19); “His mother kept all these sayings in her heart” (ii. 51)?

An attempt has been made to invalidate the historical veracity of S. Luke's narrative by saying that it is utterly inconsistent with that of S. Matthew. In S. Matthew it is to Joseph that an angel appears announcing the coming birth and allaying his scruples. There is no mention there of Elizabeth and Simeon and Anna, no story of angels singing in the sky, and shepherds adoring the infant Saviour. From aught that appears there it would seem that the holy family had no connexion with Nazareth before they went down there after their return from Egypt. This discussion is too long to enter upon in any detail, but I venture to say that it has been proved satisfactorily that there is no inconsistency between the two Evangelists, only entire independence. Their narratives must be derived from different sources. What more probable than that S. Matthew's came from Joseph, the reputed father of Jesus, some of whose family were living in the earliest days of the Church, one of them, James, being president or (as later phrase would say) bishop of the Church at Jerusalem? S. Matthew's primary object in his first two chapters was obviously not to give a full history of all the particulars of the infancy and childhood of Jesus, but to notice specially those incidents thereof which might be regarded as fulfillments of ancient prophecy, and so tended to prove that Jesus was no other than the promised Jewish Messiah.

It has been objected that two of the Gospels, S. Mark's and S. John's, omit all mention of the miraculous conception, and therefore it cannot have been true. But it is

an unwarranted assumption that whatever is not recorded by all four Gospels is necessarily unhistorical. The Gospels are not four repetitions of exactly the same facts and discourses. It is easy to see why S. Mark does not refer to the Virgin birth. His Gospel is a record only of the public ministerial life of Jesus, "beginning from the baptism of John till the day that Jesus was taken up into heaven" (Acts i. 22), and therefore omits all description of the first thirty years after His birth. S. John wrote after the three other Gospels had been published, and it was sufficient for him to presuppose among the Christians for whom he first wrote a knowledge of the history recorded in those earlier documents. It was his mission to write a spiritual rather than a fleshly gospel, explaining how Jesus had a divine pre-existence as the Son of God, who in the fulness of the time became flesh. He too begins his historical narrative with the ministry of John the Baptist, and passes over the infancy and childhood of Jesus. But again and again he records those mysterious discourses in which Jesus spoke of Himself as the only begotten Son of God sent into the world, as having God for His Father in a pre-eminent sense, as the bread which came down from heaven, as about to ascend up where He was before. If he tells us that the Jewish people said, "Is not this Jesus, the Son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" he tells us also how Jesus, without formally disclaiming this description, speaks immediately of His heavenly Father God: "No man can come to Me except the Father which hath sent Me draw him." He tells them of the living Father by whom He Himself lives (John vi. 57).

Again, it has been urged as a very strong objection to this article of our faith that S. Paul knew nothing of it: he never makes any reference to it in his writings: he never counts it among the primary truths which he has been commissioned to preach: he never founds

any argument upon it. In estimating the worth of objections based upon these considerations, we are bound to remember the peculiar position of S. Paul.

He was not an original Apostle. He had not been, like the twelve, an eye-witness and an ear-witness of what Jesus had done and said. Partly from special revelation, and partly from the testimony of the original Apostles, he had received the knowledge of the great facts of the Crucifixion and Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ. We do not know for certain whether he had ever seen a written Gospel, most probably not, or even any written document which had subsequently been incorporated with the written Gospel. We may remember that there is no reference in any of his letters to any of the special miracles of healing recorded in the Gospels. S. Paul's chief mission was to preach Christ crucified and Christ risen, and therefore these two critical facts in the life of Christ were those on which he most insisted as the basis of Christian hope and faith, and upon which he rested the grand theological doctrines of atonement, regeneration, justification, sanctification, and future glory. The proclamation of the Virgin birth of Jesus in and by itself, without any reference to the holy life and sacrificial death and the triumphant resurrection of Christ, would not have been a fit argument to address in the first instance to the heathen world nor to the unbelieving Jew. It might have led to gross misrepresentation or even to atrocious calumny, as it did before the end of the second century. But because this doctrine was not a suitable argument at the first preaching of the Gospel, it by no means follows that it was unknown to the first preachers of the Gospel. In regard to S. Paul particularly, it is hard to think that he who held so firmly the belief in the sinlessness of Jesus, and yet taught that every descendant of Adam by natural generation was involved in inherited sinfulness, could have been ignorant of the truth that Jesus was ex-

empted from this congenital fault of nature by being born a Man in a way different from other men, and therefore supernatural. It may be unsafe to lay stress, as some have done, on such a passage as that in the Galatian letter, "God sent forth His Son *made of a woman*," as referring to the miraculous conception: this need not mean more than the assumption of human nature. But when, writing to the Corinthians, S. Paul draws a contrast between the first man Adam as being of the earth—earthy, and the second Man Christ, as the Lord from heaven, we have language which presupposes as its foundation not an ordinary parentage as of Joseph and Mary, but an extraordinary phenomenon, such as is expressed in our Apostles' Creed, "conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary," and in our Nicene Creed, the Lord Jesus Christ "was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary."

We may observe that the Gospels, when describing *the ministry* of our Lord, make no reference to the miraculous conception. They do not record that either Jesus Himself or His disciples corrected the false impression of His birth when the people spoke of Him as the Son of Joseph, though we may do well to remember that this popular language is only quoted three times in all the four Gospels, if we exclude from calculation the chapters recording the events of the infancy. But the real facts of the birth could have been known only to Mary and to Joseph, and Joseph as before observed, almost certainly was dead before the ministry of Jesus began. And we reverently ask, Was it likely that Jesus Himself would tell the fact of His miraculous birth to those who saw Him for the first time? Was there nothing more cogent to teach those who were just yielding to His influence? As has been thoughtfully asked by the Swiss theologian already quoted (Godet), "Who cannot understand why Jesus should allow the words of the people to pass without announcing such a fact as this to the cavil-

ling, mocking Jews? Jesus testifies before all what He has seen with His Father by the inward sense, and not outward facts which He had from the lips of others. Above all, He knew well that it was not faith in His miraculous birth that would produce faith in His Person. On the contrary, that it was only faith in His Person that would induce any one to admit the miracle of His birth. He saw that to put out before a hostile and profane people an assertion like this, which He could not possibly prove, would only draw forth a flood of coarse ridicule which would fall directly on that revered person who was more concerned in this history than Himself, and that without the least advantage to the faith of any one. Certainly this was a case for the application of the precept, "Cast not your pearls before swine, if you would not have them turn again and rend you." A very similar reply has been given by an eminent English theologian. "It has often been asked why, if our Lord could have referred to His supernatural origin, if His mother could have borne witness to it, if He were really the Son of David born under miraculous circumstances at Bethlehem, He should have allowed, as He more than once did in the course of the history, objections to remain unanswered, which would at once have been removed by an establishment of these facts? The answer may well be, that the facts, from their essentially private and delicate character, could never have been established to the satisfaction of persons who were not predisposed to believe them by the conviction, based on other grounds, of our Lord's divine, or at least superhuman character. The calumnies afterwards circulated on the subject are alone sufficient justification of the reticence which our Lord observed on this subject in the presence of hostile or unbelieving crowds. On such a topic the principle is eminently applicable. "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead." If men

rejected His moral and spiritual claims, He refused to show them signs from heaven; and still more sacred considerations must have debarred Him from appealing to His mother to answer their cavils.¹

With regard to the special question which has been occupying our attention, we shall not be in the right attitude for meeting the objections urged against the old faith of Catholic Christendom, unless we recognise that there is a due order in which the preaching of the Gospel must present the facts of the life of Christ. Naturally in the Creeds the chronological historical order is followed. They begin with the birth, they end with the Resurrection and Ascension. But in evangelical teaching we begin with the Resurrection, as did the Apostles. They were first and above all things witnesses of the Resurrection: that admitted was a proof of the unique superhuman character of Jesus: that led back to the immediately preceding fact of His death by crucifixion, and the revelation therein of human guilt and Divine love and reconciliation between God and man. Then the life of heavenly teaching and beneficent activity would corroborate the impression of the stupendous facts in which it had culminated, and so the starting point of the Divine Incarnation taught by the Church would naturally be found in an unique birth, a new beginning of the human race, from which was to germinate the new creation of man. The miraculous conception, the miraculous Resurrection, are seen as perfectly harmonious parts of the Divine intervention for man's regeneration. When voices around us urge us to adopt the simplest form of Christianity, which would reduce Christ to human proportions, ascribe to Him an ordinary birth, and construe His resurrection as a spiritual metaphor, we reply, This is not a simple explanation of the facts: it is unintelligible, irrational. It does not account for the history of Christ

¹ Dr. Wace: *The Gospel and its Witnesses*, p. 56.

or of Christianity. A supernatural and a miraculous Christianity is the only rational Christianity. The central truth of the Gospel is "The Word was made flesh." It will be wise for us in presence of this deep mystery to imitate Mary, the meek and submissive Virgin mother, by keeping all these things and pondering them in our hearts.

WILLIAM INCE.

THE "CURSING OF THE GROUND," AND THE
"REVEALING OF THE SONS OF GOD," IN
RELATION TO NATURAL FACTS.

THE subject treated in the following pages cannot claim the charm of novelty. It is one of the oldest topics of theological discussion, it is more or less noticed in every commentary on Genesis, and in some of those on the Epistle to the Romans and on the Book of Revelation, and it has been a subject of special treatises, some of them of great value, as, for example, McDonald's *Creation and the Fall*, and Ellicott's sermons on the *Destiny of the Creature*. It has also been treated of by several writers on the relations of religion and science, and recently it has been ably discussed by Dr. Phillips in the *Expository Times*,¹ and in one of its aspects by Dr. Agar Beet in the *EXPOSITOR*.² It might seem, therefore, to require no further treatment. It appears, however, to the writer that many misconceptions still exist as to the relations between the teaching of the Bible and the natural phenomena open to our observation; and it is from this point of view or "in relation to natural facts," as at present known to us, that I would venture to present it to your readers. In doing so I shall take the liberty of assuming as a working hypothesis

¹ April, June and August, 1894.

² December, 1894.