

but the reality of the grace with which Christ is filling it is not so dependent. The worth and content of this symbolical act of Christ as Host at His table *are there* irrespective of the faith of man; for salvation is of God alone. The sacramental gift is not created by the response of human trust; rather, we rest upon Christ as given, for He is the author of the rite and the soul of its present meaning.

H. R. MACKINTOSH.

THE VIRGIN-BIRTH.

THE *Nineteenth Century and After* for January contains an article, the name of the writer of which recalls "battles long ago." *Supernatural Religion* was published in 1874-1877, and is now chiefly remembered on account of the opportunity it afforded to Lightfoot of reassuring, by his massive learning and strong common sense, the righteous who were fearing that the foundations were being cast down.

"Lightfoot showed," says Dr. Salmon (*Introd. N.T.* p. 8), "that this supposed Bishop Thirlwall [to whom the book had been attributed] did not possess even a schoolboy acquaintance with Greek and Latin, and that his references were in some cases borrowed wholesale, in others did not prove the things for which they were cited, and very often appealed to writers whose opinion is of no value."

Dr. Salmon notices the work as illustrating the fundamental principle of the school of Strauss and Renan.

"The author starts with the denial of the supernatural as his fixed principle. . . . This explains their seeming want of candour: . . . why they meet with evasions proofs that seem to be demonstrative. It is because, to their minds, any solution of a difficulty is more probable than one which would concede that a miracle had really occurred."

In the present case Mr. W. R. Cassells does not bring before the public any theory of his own, but merely seeks to point the moral of what he calls "The Ripon Episode."

Under this title he includes "some reported utterances of the Dean of Ripon at a meeting of the Churchmen's Union on the 29th of October, regarding the birth of Christ from a Virgin, the Ascension and the Resurrection," also the subsequent correspondence between the Dean and the Bishop of Ripon, the Bishop's own *Introduction to the Temple Bible*, and finally a work recently published, *Contentio Veritatis*, which consists of lectures by six Oxford clerical tutors.

For our present purposes it is quite immaterial whether Dean Fremantle was correctly reported or not, or whether or not his explanation of his words harmonizes with the Catholic Faith on these cardinal points. The utterances of men in high place commonly have an importance attached to them quite disproportionate to the knowledge and judgment of the speakers.

For us the significance of "The Ripon Episode" and of Mr. Cassells' article lies not in the speakers but in the things spoken, and the publicity of their utterances. For us the question is, Does the Catholic Faith in the twentieth century include a belief in the literal objective truth of the miraculous Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ, or does it not? Do the articles of the Creed, "Conceived by the Holy Ghost; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven," refer to facts which took place, actually, at distinct moments of past time, as really as did the birth and death of Napoleon Bonaparte, or are they merely mystical phrases by which the Christian Church sought to express the greatness of its founder, and so have no more correspondence with external reality than the titles "Son of Heaven," or "Serene Highness"?

This second alternative is thus suggested by one of the contributors to *Contentio Veritatis*, quoted by Mr. Cassells:

"Is it certain that the Christ of the Church is not merely an idealised figure, to whom was attributed (in perfect good faith) all that the

religious consciousness of the age found to be most worthy of a Divine Being?"

It must be remembered that the writer, whose words these are, asserts "that belief in the 'Divinity' of the Historical Christ is still an essential part of Christianity." There is an ambiguity in this word Divinity. Is it *θειότης* or *θεότης*? Divinitas or Deitas? Is Christ only a manifestation of the divine, or is He absolute essential Deity? Is it not possible that we are witnessing an unconscious revival of the Arian heresy? We are warned that

"the only external criterion to which we can appeal is the judgment of the Christian Church as to what it 'behoved' the Son of God to do and suffer, and this is a matter on which human beings cannot speak with authority, and are not likely to agree."

Language such as this is natural from those who regard the Catholic Church merely as an association, or a congeries of associations, of human beings, an association merely human in its origin and continued life. But to those who believe the Catholic Church to be essentially a divine society, "the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth," not founded by man, but a new creation of God, and continually guided into all truth by the Spirit of God—to those who have this belief the judgment of the Christian Church of the earliest times as to what it behoved the Son of God to do and suffer is equivalent to a revelation from God Himself. The development of the Church's thought on articles of the faith must be, as Liddon has well said, "a development by explanation, a development which places the intrinsically unchangeable dogma . . . in its true relation to the new intellectual world that grows up around Christianity" in each generation. The doctrine of the Resurrection, for example, may conceivably have wider issues to a Christian of the twentieth century than it had to one of the second, but the clause "the third day He rose again" cannot

possibly admit of a spiritualizing process which would make it equivalent to "the third day He did not rise again," and so of the other dogmas in question.

A system of religion which includes in its factors, elements, or leading ideas, a Jesus Christ, of whatever moral supremacy, who had a human father as well as a human mother and whose human body not only never ascended into heaven, but saw corruption in some unknown grave, a system which in private maintains these facts, while in public, in lectures and books, it throws a luminous haze over them, such a system may possibly sustain, or even produce, individuals of great ethical beauty, but, unquestionably, such a system is not the Catholic Church of Christ, nor is its faith the faith that overcometh the world.

The author of *Supernatural Religion* has, in his recent article, made this fact abundantly clear :

"After allowing," he says, "the solid basis of the doctrines to crumble away, it is curious how confidently a spiritualized semblance of them is made to replace the vanished substance. There seems to be no recognition of a difference of validity between the solid rock upon which the belief was once held to be built and the shifting sand upon which the mystic interpretation is supposed to be solidly erected."

And again, while expressing "sincere respect for the writers" from whom he has quoted, for having "voluntarily stepped forth to help the weaker and more troubled brethren, and provide them with spiritualized views of doctrines regarding which their minds have been of late rudely shaken," he thus proceeds :

"But they have had to make bricks without straw, of which no abiding city can be built. If they have led the doubting into a seeming paradise of rest, it is one, unfortunately, from which they may any day be expelled by the Angel of Truth with two-edged sword, and it seems to me both right and expedient that warning of this should be given."

The warning is a timely one, with whatever expectations it is given, and it is proposed to discuss here the Scriptural evidence for the birth of Christ from a virgin ; not for the

satisfaction of those whose fundamental principle is disbelief in the possibility of miracles, but rather as a help to those students of Scripture and of dogma who, while they find no difficulty in the miracle, are yet perplexed by the nature of the New Testament attestation to it, especially as that attestation is represented in some modern theories of the Synoptic problem.

To one unacquainted with modern New Testament criticism and its varying phases, it might seem that we had in the opening narratives of SS. Matthew and Luke a "solid rock" upon which the Church to-day, as well as the Church of earlier days, may build her belief in the Virgin-birth of Christ. In recent times however it has been sought to depreciate the value of this double attestation by means of a theory about the Synoptic Gospels which is usually associated with the name of Dr. Edwin Abbott.

Mr. Cassells writes as though the theory had been originated by the Bishop of Ripon; but as the question of authorship is here immaterial, it may as well be described in the words of his article:

"Taking the first three Gospels, the Bishop points out that there are certain portions which are common to all three, others which are common to two Gospels, and lastly each Gospel has a portion peculiar to itself. The portions common to all three Gospels he proposes to call the common stock, and he decides that the nearest sources of information about Jesus Christ are to be found in this common-stock Gospel."

He proceeds then to quote the Bishop's own words:

"Now, in the common-stock Gospel, the miraculous accessories connected with the birth and resurrection of Jesus do not find a place. These accessories are found in the group of secondary witnesses. . . Upon these, in the first instance, we have purposely refused to lay stress. Our belief in Jesus Christ must be based upon moral conviction, not upon physical wonder."

It is unnecessary to quote further. It is only fair to say that the Bishop of Ripon subsequently implies that he

himself believes in the Virgin-birth of Christ as well as in His resurrection. But it is unfortunate, to say the least, to find a Christian chief pastor using language which can be easily interpreted into a concession that the scriptural evidence for what he calls the "physical marvels at the opening and close of Christ's career" is insufficient, and that in any case they are of very secondary importance.

The fallacy underlying this argument, based on the so-called common-stock Gospel, was exposed long ago by Dr. Salmon when dealing with it in its original form as presented by Dr. Edwin Abbott. What Dr. Boyd Carpenter calls the common-stock Gospel, Dr. E. Abbott styles the triple tradition. But as Dr. Salmon points out (*Introd. N.T.* p. 135),

"'Triple tradition' does not mean 'triple attested tradition,' but singly attested tradition. If you compare the history of the early Church, as told by three modern historians, you will find several places where they relate a story in nearly identical words. In such a case an intelligent critic would recognise at once that we had, not a story attested by three independent authorities, but one resting on the credit of a single primary authority, coming through different channels. When we come further down in the history, and Eusebius is no longer the unique source of information, exactly as authorities become numerous, verbal agreement between the histories ceases, and our 'triple tradition' comes to an end. Thus, instead of its being true that the 'triple tradition' is the most numerous attested portion of the Gospel narrative, we may conclude that this is just the part for which we have a single primary authority. For example the triplicity of our tradition fails us when we come to the history of the Passion and Resurrection . . . But the cause of this variety is simply that we have the testimony of independent witnesses."

With respect then to the belief of the Apostolic Church in the Virgin-birth of Christ we have the testimony of independent witnesses.

"The narrative of the Conception in the first Gospel is absolutely independent of the narrative in the third. They are not simply distinct accounts proceeding from two independent observers, but

they cover almost entirely different ground . . . It is natural to conjecture that S. Matthew's story originated with Joseph, as S. Luke's with the mother of the Lord" (Swete, *Apostle's Creed*, pp. 50, 51).

We may add that if these two Gospels represent respectively the Hebraic and the Hellenic side of the Apostolic Church, their agreement in the main fact possesses an additional cogency.

But we are told :

"Outside these first two chapters of S. Matthew and the first two chapters of S. Luke, the Virgin-birth is absolutely non-existent in the New Testament. The natural inference is that it was unknown to the writers of the New Testament, except to those who penned those four chapters" (Times' Report of Dean Fremantle's speech).

In reply, it must of course be granted that nowhere else in the New Testament is there a specific statement of the fact; but is there not involved in the objection something of an anachronism, and a misapprehension of the nature and historical setting of the writings which compose the New Testament?

From the very nature of the case the miraculous birth of Jesus was a topic which could not find expression except in the intimate circles of a community that was living in an unquestioning belief of His Messiahship and resurrection from the dead.

Bishop Butler mentions the incarnation of Christ as an example of what he calls "invisible miracles,"—miracles, that is, "which being secret cannot be alleged as a proof of a Divine mission, but require themselves to be proved by visible miracles." This logical necessity is illustrated by the words of St. Paul in the beginning of the Epistle to the Romans, where he says that Jesus Christ "was declared to be the Son of God with power . . . by the resurrection of the dead."

The whole energy of the Church in early Apostolic times was devoted, as far as controversy was concerned, to

the proving that Jesus was the Christ. And even supposing that Virgin-birth were a note of the Messiah, it would have been inconceivable folly to have alleged it of Him until His resurrection from the dead and the logical consequences of His resurrection had been completely realized. As a matter of fact it would seem as though the controversy with the Jews as to the Messiahship of Jesus was, almost from the first, complicated by the practical consequences that were felt to be involved in the admission that He was the Christ. The abolition of the Mosaic law, the loss of special privileges by the Jews, the admission of the Gentiles, and other profound changes, must have rendered it almost impossible to discuss the personality of Jesus purely as a question of abstract theology. Now almost all, certainly the most important, of the Epistles in the New Testament not only reflect this disturbed state of religious thought, but are actually expressions of it, pamphlets on one side of the question, so to speak. It is only in works written after the fall of Jerusalem that the normal inner quiet home life of the Church begins to find expression. When we realize the circumstances under which the Epistles were written the marvel is not that they are silent about the Virgin-birth of Jesus, but that from scattered phrases in them the Church has been able to construct a systematic Christology of any kind.

The silence of the early Epistles on this subject, if the non-introduction of irrelevant matter can be fairly called silence, is paralleled by the absence of a narrative of the infancy of Jesus from the Gospel according to S. Mark. It is generally acknowledged now that that Gospel is the best representative of the very earliest Apostolic teaching about our Lord, and the scope of that teaching, as we learn from the words of S. Peter, as recorded by S. Luke in the first chapter of the Acts, deliberately limited the Apostolic testimony to what the Apostles themselves had

seen and heard between the baptism of John and the Ascension.

The narrative of S. Matthew might seem a sufficient indication of what the Apostles believed as to the miraculous incarnation of their Master; but for argument's sake we will not press this point; though in truth the chief reason why some modern critics deny that Matthew the Apostle compiled the first Gospel is because the Church has always attributed it to him. It is not however generally recognized that the story of St. Luke almost compels us to acknowledge that S. Paul believed in the Virgin-birth of Christ. It is not meant that S. Paul had actually seen and sanctioned the third Gospel as we now have it; but we know that S. Luke was a constant and intimate companion of S. Paul, and it is inconceivable that S. Luke could have placed in the forefront of his history a statement in which he knew his great teacher did not believe. As we have seen already, the subject of the Virgin-birth of Christ was even less likely to be prominently mentioned in public discourses then than now. But, on the other hand, it was more likely then than now to be inquired into and emphasized in the inner and more advanced Church teaching, since an unequivocal answer to the question, *Whose Son is He?* was the most important factor in the determination of the problem, *What think ye of the Christ?*

And indeed the terms in which S. Paul speaks of Christ in his Epistles cannot be explained if, in the background of his thoughts, there lay the knowledge or even a suspicion that He had come into the world as other men do. Too much weight cannot perhaps be laid on the expression "*born of a woman*" (Gal. iv. 4), or the reference to the consecration of motherhood in the Incarnation in 1 Timothy ii. 15, "*She shall be saved through the child-bearing.*" It is not however too much to say that S.

Paul's whole doctrine of sin, the universal sinfulness of mankind, and the sinlessness of Christ, in virtue of which He has broken the entail of sin transmitted from the first Adam, who "was of the earth, earthy," and so becomes a second Adam, the first parent of a new creation, "a life-giving spirit,"—all this would be absolutely meaningless and baseless if, as a matter of fact, Jesus Christ did not differ in His human origin from other men. And herein lies the place or function in the Divine economy of salvation of the article "Conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary."

"When the theologian," says a contributor to *Contentio Veritatis*, "puts historical propositions into his creed, he does so because he is convinced that there are important truths, in the spiritual order, which are dependent on, or inseparable from, those events in the past."

We have only touched the fringe of the subject. All the indications in the Lord's own words of His consciousness of a unique relationship to God, all the testimony from the Gospels, and indeed the whole New Testament, to His Divine pre-existence point in the same direction. Enough has been said. Not enough perhaps to convince those whose attitude towards the mysteries of Christianity is that "contempt prior to examination," which, as Paley has said, "will account for the inefficacy of any argument or any evidence whatever." More than enough perhaps for believers who feel that the subject is too sacred for public discussion. But there is "a time to speak" as well as "a time to keep silence," and such a time assuredly comes when "the faith once for all committed to the saints" is attacked, not by avowed opponents, but by the "shadow'd hints" of some who profess and call themselves Christians.

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