

*THE VIRGIN BIRTH.*

THE attacks now made upon the narratives of our Lord's birth, however painful, were inevitable; they might have been predicted with much confidence. And for this reason. We had based our faith, our faith at large, too much upon proof-texts. A certain doctrine was proved by a certain verse; and as long as the verse was uncontroverted the doctrine was beyond attack. From such a point of view, it matters nothing whether a dogma (or a fact) is vouched by two Evangelists or by four. But when the theory of Verbal Inspiration lost its hold upon thoughtful minds, when the advanced critics—whatever else they did—familiarized the public with a way of treating Scripture quite different from anything taught in Sunday schools, when the average Sunday-school teacher found the defence almost as surprising as the attack, and even the Religious Tract Society translated and published a refutation of "the Critics" which gave a long list of contradictions, admitting the probable results of interpolation, codification and other interferences with the text, then the clear light of proof-texts was overclouded. A text—if such there were—quite unlike others, standing alone, proposing like Atlas to bear a world of theology upon its own shoulders, would be much more likely to collapse under the load than to commend its doctrine. Of this state of things we may think what we please; but it is the part of wisdom to recognize that it exists.

On the other hand, there is something remarkable and exhilarating in the ease with which substantial orthodoxy adapted itself, half unconsciously, to this great change.

An average theologian is not now content, for example, to prove the divinity of our Lord by half a dozen texts, removed from their context, and dealt out seriatim. He

will lay much more stress upon the pervading tone of our Lord's own utterances, His self-reliance, His claiming, one after another, all the offices which his own Scriptures ascribed to God, so that He is the Shepherd who divides the sheep from the goats, and even the Bridegroom of the Church. With these he will connect (what Christ Himself relied upon) the readiness of God in the Old Testament, and specifically of the Divine Spirit, to give Himself to humanity, so that, of judges who discharge a divine office, He said, Ye are gods. He will ask whether such a self-impacting, once begun, may not have been carried to perfection in Him whom the Father Himself hath sanctified and sent into the world from elsewhere? Such a controversialist may possibly not accept all the advanced theories concerning the old Testament; but he instinctively throws the weight of his faith upon the splendid and steadily progressive revelation, ethical, religious, theological, which (upon any theory of its origin) makes the Old Testament one great

altar-stair

That slopes through darkness up to God.

And in the New Testament he will take note of many verses beside those which explicitly declare that the Word was God.

This change is altogether wholesome: it is a movement toward a broader, fuller, better harmonized theology, in which the revelation of God co-operates with all the intelligence of man.

But at such a time, it is a grave assertion to make, that our faith in the supernatural birth of Christ rests entirely upon two passages; that it is unknown to the New Testament elsewhere, unhelpful to other scriptures and unhelped by them, a lonely tarn among barren rocks, into which no rivulet trickles, and out of which no stream flows.

When we add to this that similar narratives were common

among the pagan myths, the work of refutation seems to be pretty well advanced. We must not wonder that doubts are expressed, even though it may surprise us to hear the doubters leading their congregations in reciting the creeds.

Once more. The magic word Progress is employed in a remarkable way. We are warned that in the advance of thought and knowledge all around, theology also must advance, or humanity moving forward will forsake her. And that is hinted which needs to be proved, that in theology progress means amputation, and the highest development, unlike all development elsewhere, is toward the bald simplicity of the monad, not from this into complexity and mystery. It is progress, no doubt, to detect falsehood; but the Church has hitherto advanced (for upon the whole she has advanced, and that steadily) rather by comprehending her original deposit better than by tearing out articles from her creed. Every critic who has kept the faith is eager to assure us that his new views endanger nothing which the Church really prizes, and that even as regards inspiration, what is at stake is the method by which the documents took shape for us, and not their authority in the sphere of religion.

Upon all such proposed revisions of belief it is quite reasonable to demand freedom of discussion unchecked by prejudice; but it is unreasonable and a begging of the question to assume that Progress is on the side of negative views.

The belief in the Virgin Birth is said to be explicable by the pagan beliefs in the origin of heroes and demi-gods. But the difference is vast and impressive. It is a moral difference. The demi-gods owe their existence to passion and appetite quite of the human sort; it is because the immortals are capable of sharing these with

man that they are said to have given life to demi-gods; and the last thought which these myths could possibly suggest to any one is that of purity. Much is made of the fabled virginity of Danae. But Perseus is "aurigena," and the impulse which flung Jove in gold into the bosom of Danae is ridiculous to think of, as a conceivable source for the pure story of the birth of Jesus.

Justin Martyr, it is urged, declared the Christian story to be "nothing different from what you believe concerning those whom you regard as Sons of Jupiter"; and specially mentioned Perseus (*Apol.* i. 21). Now it was reasonable enough to urge that men who received the pagan stories should not reject ours as incredible. But the immediate context proves that Justin Martyr was quite conscious of the gulf between the two, for he declares, with a biting irony, that these tales, which he is reluctant to repeat, were written "for the benefit and incitement of youthful students, since all men count it honourable to imitate their gods." He pronounced their enormities to be the work of "wicked demons"—and from this it is gravely inferred that his belief in them shows the source whence the Christian myth evolved itself. But it is certain that a believer in such deities would find the narrative in St. Luke inconceivable; and conversely, that if once the spirit of St. Luke's narrative could have touched the pagan conception of deity, all such myths would have shrivelled up and disappeared.

But there is more to say. It is our turn to appeal to what we are so constantly reminded of, the two sources in which we find the story. The first Gospel is thoroughly Hebrew in its tendencies. Still more so is the very primitive source of St. Luke's account of the infancy: it resounds with Old Testament quotations and allusions; its whole structure is Aramaic. Therefore it would not be enough to prove (what has just been refuted) that pagan myths

could, in the abstract, have suggested the story. We want to be shown how pagan myths could have suggested this story to the heart and brain of devout and somewhat provincial Hebrews, and to them only—a point of which we are entitled to make at least as much as others do.

But there is another, and a very different aspect of this appeal to Gentile myths. Not only in Greece with her demigods but in India with the Buddha, and not only in the dim shades where walk the figures of hoary old mythologies, but in the full blaze of history with Alexander the Great and Plato, it is seen how easily man believes in the supernatural origin of whatever he, rightly or wrongly, believes to be supernatural itself. Destroy the supernatural, and the discussion is at an end. Give to the supernatural a grudging and reluctant assent; and it will be your instinct to clip and cramp it on this side and on that. But grant the supernatural frankly; and it will be easy to accept the position that the germ is as marvellous as the fruit. Grant the supernatural man, and the possibility and even probability of his supernatural origin follows not far behind. And this is the true significance of these myths: they are due to the consciousness of man that water cannot rise above its level, and what we believe to be divine we cannot suppose to have sprung from common seed. That this intuition was misapplied—that Alexander was no more than man—cannot abolish the profound significance of the intuition itself for us who adore Christ.

At all events, when we are told how strictly isolated are the two narratives in Scripture, it is worth remembering that they are an expression—but a unique expression, far above all precedent and parallel—an expression and interpretation of a world-wide intuition of the race.

The argument from the silence of other writers is easy to press too far; it is, in fact, hazardous in the last degree. For what is the scope and tenour of the other Gospels?

The Gospel of St. Mark is a record of the public life and death of Christ: "the beginning" of it is the proclamation of the herald. Its silence is only that of St. Luke himself when once he has passed away from the story of the infancy. As to St. John, it is his manner to pass over what has been recorded already—the parables, all such miracles except one which he related for the sake of the discourse it led to, the institution of the Supper, and the Agony in the Garden. St. Paul expressly declares that his Gospel, like St. Mark's, was that Christ died for our sins and rose again and was seen of sufficient witnesses. If it were not for the excesses of Corinth, he would not have mentioned, so far as we are concerned, the institution of the Supper. If it were not for one anonymous writer, the New Testament could have been said to ignore utterly the priesthood of our Lord; and if it were not for the Apocalypse the same could be said of the priesthood of the Church. We have no writing which professes to record all from the first except St. Luke; and he, supported by St. Matthew, records this.

Is there not something quite whimsical, when one considers it, in rejecting, simply because the others have not got it, what was avowedly written because the author had new things to tell—and new things upon this very subject, accurate information from the very first.

But is it true that they are utterly unsupported, uncorroborated by any other? Support is derived not only from assertions but from a whole manner of thinking and speaking, from inferences, from all that underlies direct assertion. What, then, is the New Testament manner of thinking about the body, the physical part of man? Is it only the spiritual part that matters? Can we say that all is well, as soon as our volitions and affections turn to God? Or is there in the flesh and blood of the race a centre of evil influence? And if so, how may this be overcome? Is it simply to be

overmastered by the spirit, aided from above? Or is there a renewal of flesh and blood, given from a new source, from One who thus becomes the Father of a renewed race of men? To ask this is to answer it.

The method of St. John, we said, was to omit what had been written already. But it needs to be added that he commonly substitutes something parallel, something which forbids us to doubt the harmony between his story and the others. Instead of the sacraments, the Lord's assertions that we must be born of water and the Spirit, and must eat His flesh and drink His blood. Instead of the Agony that earlier day when His soul was troubled, and He considered whether He should say "Father, save Me from this hour." Instead of the story of the Supernatural Birth, the words, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit," words uttered expressly as the reason why Nicodemus should not marvel at being told "ye must be born again."

Did He Himself, then, need to be born again? And if not, what was His birth? was He born of the flesh? For upon this, upon the inheritance of the flesh, all His argument depends.

That it does so depend is yet more manifest when we compare it with the teaching of the sixth chapter. "The Bread of God" is "that which cometh down out of heaven." "The Bread which I will give is my Flesh for the life of the world" (*vv.* 33, 51). Is this no confirmation of the doctrine of the supernatural origin of His Flesh?

This is also the doctrine of St. Paul. It is of the flesh, of the resurrection of the body, that he wrote in the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians. He said, "There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body." He declared it to be the destiny of spiritual men to attain spirituality even of the body. And the reason he gave for this expectation was that a new type of humanity—a second manhood—was actually in

existence: that the first man was "of the earth" and therefore earthy; but "the Second Man is from heaven." This Second Man is, moreover, a Second Adam, which means the progenitor of a new race. And let it be repeated again and again, that it is of the body and its destiny that St. Paul is thinking when he says, "The Second Man is from heaven."

Again, what are we to think about the Eucharist? Behind all the dreary controversies which have done so much to spoil for us the dearest gift of Christ, behind much that is sceptical on one side, and more that is sordidly materialistic on the other, lies the vast incontrovertible fact that Christ in the Eucharist offers Himself to man. But what is conveyed in that ambiguous word "Himself"? Does it mean that since He is divine He will bestow on us divine influences to uplift and inspire us, that, as Ezekiel foretold, He would put His Spirit within us, and cause us to walk in His statutes? This is implied, but this is quite certainly inadequate to express the specific and differentiating grace offered to us in the Supper. For Christ did not use the vague word "Himself," still less did He speak of His Spirit, but of His Body and Blood, even as, in the discourse in John, He asserted that His Flesh was meat indeed, and His Blood drink indeed. Such expressions are incomprehensible—and so is St. Paul's declaration that the race began again in Christ as a Second Adam, and Giver of a Spiritual body—unless we believe that His Body was unique, a new thing, mysterious, primitive, the well-head of a river of new life.

One knows well enough what will be said of an argument like this. It will be set down as "mystical," and the tone in which that dreadful word is uttered will imply it to be refutation enough for anything. But for the moment this is not the question at all. We are not now considering whether to believe St. Paul, St. John, or even the Founder



of the Lord's Supper or not. The question is this: Whether the early portions of Matthew and Luke should be rejected on the specific ground that they are unsupported by others, or whether St. Paul, and St. John, and the Founder of the Eucharist taught such doctrine concerning the Body of Christ, His Flesh and Blood, that any one who believes them will find these narratives to be the simplest commentary upon their words, and easier to accept than to reject.

And it will be some consolation to find "mystical" considerations ranging themselves on the side of a doctrine which is apt to be decried as "carnal."

Again, the story has behind it the witness of another chapter in another Revelation and Book of God. That book is science, and the title of the chapter is Heredity. And it is surely providential that just when the scriptural doctrine is being impugned, the scientific doctrine should become so prominent. Prominent but not new. For it is little more than a restatement of our Lord's words, that what is born of flesh is flesh, what is born of Spirit is Spirit, and a really new life has a new kind of birth for its postulate and condition.

Thus, at last, a question which is sometimes regarded as purely academic and unpractical has led us up to the greatest and most urgent truth of our religion, which is not the depravity of man, but that his depravity is counter-weighted by this in the other scale, that human nature has truly and actually begun again, that we cannot plead in excuse for our misdeeds that we are "poor fallen creatures," nor weakly suppose that "flesh and blood cannot" resist a provocation, nor crucify a lust,—since Christ offers us, most solemnly and sacramentally, His own Flesh and Blood, and His people are born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but [born] of God—

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endowed with a nature which He has to give because it was His own from the beginning, and not only fresh and pure, but full of the pulse-throb of a strange and new vitality, and such that, whereas the first Adam was only a living soul, He, the second Adam, is a life-imparting Spirit.

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