**THE FUNDAMENTALS: A TESTIMONY TO THE TRUTH**

**VOLUME 2; CHAPTER 11. THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF CHRIST**

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It is well known that the last ten or twenty years have been marked by a determined assault upon the truth of the Virgin birth of Christ. In the year 1892 a great controversy broke out in Germany, owing to the refusal of a pastor named Schrempf to use the Apostles' Creed in baptism because of disbelief in this and other articles. Schrempf was deposed, and an agitation commenced against the doctrine of the Virgin birth which has grown in volume ever since. Other tendencies, especially the rise of an extremely radical school of historical criticism, added force to the negative movement. The attack is not confined, indeed, to the article of the Virgin birth. It affects the whole supernatural estimate of Christ - His life, His claims, His sinlessness, His miracles, His resurrection from the dead. But the Virgin birth is assailed with special vehemence, because it is supposed that the evidence for this miracle is more easily got rid of than the evidence for public facts, such as the resurrection. The result is that in very many quarters the Virgin birth of Christ is openly treated as a fable. Belief in it is scouted as unworthy of the twentieth century intelligence. The methods of the oldest opponents of Christianity are revived, and it is likened to the Greek and Roman stories, coarse and vile, of heroes who had gods for their fathers. A special point is made of the silence of Paul, and of the other writings of the New Testament, on this alleged wonder.

**THE UNHAPPIEST FEATURE**

It is not only, however, in the circles of unbelief that the Virgin birth is discredited; in the church itself the habit is spreading of casting doubt upon the fact, or at least of regarding it as no essential part of Christian faith. This is the unhappiest feature in this unhappy controversy. Till recently no one dreamed of denying that, in the sincere profession of Christianity, this article, which has stood from the beginning in the forefront of all the great creeds of Christendom, was included. Now it is different. The truth and value of the article of the Virgin birth are challenged. The article, it is affirmed, did not belong to the earliest Christian tradition, and the evidence for it is not strong. Therefore, let it drop.

**THE COMPANY IT KEEPS**

From the side of criticism, science, mythology, history and comparative religion, assault is thus made on the article long so dear to the hearts of Christians and rightly deemed by them so vital to their faith. For loud as is the voice of denial, one fact must strike every careful observer of the conflict. Among those who reject the Virgin birth of the Lord few will be found - I do not know any - who take in other respects an adequate view of the Person and work of the Saviour. It is surprising how clearly the line of division here reveals itself. My statement publicly made and printed has never been confuted, that those who accept a full doctrine of the incarnation - that is, of a true entrance of the eternal Son of God into our nature for the purposes of man's salvation - with hardly an exception accept with it the doctrine of the Virgin birth of Christ, while those who repudiate or deny this article of faith either hold a lowered view of Christ's Person, or, more commonly, reject His supernatural claims altogether. It will not be questioned, at any rate, that the great bulk of the opponents of the Virgin birth - those who are conspicuous by writing against it - are in the latter class.

**A CAVIL ANSWERED**

This really is an answer to the cavil often heard that, whether true or not, the Virgin birth is not of essential importance. It is not essential, it is urged, to Christ's sinlessness, for that would have been secured equally though Christ had been born of two parents. And it is not essential to the incarnation. A hazardous thing, surely, for erring mortals to judge of what was and was not essential in so stupendous an event as the bringing in of the "first-begotten" into the world! But the Christian instinct has ever penetrated deeper. Rejection of the Virgin birth seldom, if ever, goes by itself. As the late Prof. A. B. Bruce said, with denial of the Virgin birth is apt to go denial of the virgin life. The incarnation is felt by those who think seriously to involve a miracle in Christ's earthly origin. This will become clearer as we advance.

**THE CASE STATED**

It is the object of this paper to show that those who take the lines of denial on the Virgin birth just sketched do great injustice to the evidence and importance of the doctrine they reject. The evidence, if not of the same public kind as that for the resurrection, is far stronger than the objector allows, and the fact denied enters far more vitally into the essence of the Christian faith than he supposes. Placed in its right setting among the other truths of the Christian religion, it is not only no stumbling-block to faith, but is felt to fit in with self-evidencing power into the connection of these other truths, and to furnish the very explanation that is needed of Christ's holy and supernatural Person. The ordinary Christian is a witness here. In reading the Gospels, he feels no incongruity in passing from the narratives of the Virgin birth to the wonderful story of Christ's life in the chapters that follow, then from these to the pictures of Christ's divine dignity given in John and Paul. The whole is of one piece: the Virgin birth is as natural at the beginning of the life of such an One - the divine Son - as the resurrection is at the end. And the more closely the matter is considered, the stronger does this impression grow. It is only when the scriptural conception of Christ is parted with that various difficulties and doubts come in.

**A SUPERFICIAL VIEW**

It is, in truth, a very superficial way of speaking or thinking of the Virgin birth to say that nothing depends on this belief for our estimate of Christ. Who that reflects on the subject carefully can fail to see that if Christ was virgin born - if He was truly "conceived," as the creed says, "by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary" - there must of necessity enter a supernatural element into His Person; while, if Christ was sinless, much more, if He was the very Word of God incarnate, there must have been a miracle - the most stupendous miracle in the universe - in His origin? If Christ was, as John and Paul affirm and His church has ever believed, the Son of God made flesh, the second Adam, the new redeeming Head of the race, a miracle was to be expected in His earthly origin; without a miracle such a Person could never have been. Why then cavil at the narratives which declare the fact of such a miracle? Who does not see that the Gospel history would have been incomplete without them? Inspiration here only gives to faith what faith on its own grounds imperatively demands for its perfect satisfaction.

**THE HISTORICAL SETTING**

It is time now to come to the Scripture itself, and to look at the fact of the Virgin birth in its historical setting, and its relation with other truths of the Gospel. As preceding the examination of the historical evidence, a little may be said, first, on the Old Testament preparation. Was there any such preparation? Some would say there was not, but this is not God's way, and we may look with confidence for at least some indications which point in the direction of the New Testament event.

**THE FIRST PROMISE**

One's mind turns first to that oldest of all evangelical promises, that the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent. "I will put enmity," says Jehovah to the serpent-tempter, "between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; he shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15. R.V.). It is a forceless weakening of this first word of Gospel in the Bible to explain it of a lasting feud between the race of men and the brood of serpents. The serpent, as even Dr. Driver attests, is "the representative of the power of evil" - in later Scripture, "he that is called the Devil and Satan" (Rev. 12:9) - and the defeat he sustains from the woman's seed is a moral and spiritual victory. The "seed" who should destroy him is described emphatically as the woman's seed. It was the woman through whom sin had entered the race; by the seed of the woman would salvation come. The early church writers often pressed this analogy between Eve and the Virgin Mary. We may reject any element of over-exaltation of Mary they connected with it, but it remains significant that this peculiar phrase should be chosen to designate the future deliverer. I cannot believe the choice to be of accident. The promise to Abraham was that in his seed the families of the earth would be blessed; there the male is emphasized, but here it is the woman - the woman distinctively. There is, perhaps, as good scholars have thought, an allusion to this promise in 1 Timothy 2:15, where, with allusion to Adam and Eve, it is said, "But she shall be saved through her (or the) child-bearing" (R.V.).

**THE IMMANUEL PROPHECY**

The idea of the Messiah, gradually gathering to itself the attributes of a divine King, reaches one of its clearest expressions in the great Immanuel prophecy, extending from Isaiah 7 to 9:7, and centering in the declaration: "The Lord Himself will give you [the unbelieving Ahaz] a sign; behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isa. 7:14; Cf. 8:8, 10). This is none other than the child of wonder extolled in chapter 9:6, 7: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder; and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, [Father of Eternity], The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom," etc. This is the prophecy quoted as fulfilled in Christ's birth in Matt. 1:23, and it seems also alluded to in the glowing promises to Mary in Luke 1:32, 33. It is pointed out in objection that the term rendered "virgin" in Isaiah does not necessarily bear this meaning; it denotes properly only a young unmarried woman. The context, however, seems clearly to lay an emphasis on the unmarried state, and the translators of the Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) plainly so understood it when they rendered it by parthenos, a word which does mean "virgin." The tendency in many quarters now is to admit this (Dr. Cheyne, etc.), and even to seek an explanation of it in alleged Babylonian beliefs in a virgin-birth. This last, however, is quite illusory. (For the evidence, see my volume on "The Virgin Birth," Lecture VII.) It is, on the other hand, singular that the Jews themselves do not seem to have applied this prophecy at any time to the Messiah - a fact which disproves the theory that it was this text which suggested the story of a Virgin birth to the early disciples.

**ECHOES IN OTHER SCRIPTURES**

It was, indeed, when one thinks of it, only on the supposition that there was to be something exceptional and extraordinary in the birth of this child called Immanuel that it could have afforded to Ahaz a sign of the perpetuity of the throne of David on the scale of magnitude proposed ("Ask it either in the depth, or in the height above." Ver. 10). We look, therefore, with interest to see if there are any echoes or suggestions of the idea of this passage in other prophetic scriptures. They are naturally not many, but they do not seem to be altogether wanting. There is, first, the remarkable Bethlehem prophecy in Micah 5:2, 3 - also quoted as fulfilled in the nativity (Matt. 2:5, 6) - connected with the saying: "Therefore will he give them up, until the time that she who travaileth hath brought forth" ("The King from Bethlehem," says Delitzsch, "who has a nameless one as mother, and of whose father there is no mention"). Micah was Isaiah's contemporary, and when the close relation between the two is considered (Cf. Isa. 2:2-4, with Micah 4:1-3), it is difficult not to recognize in his oracle an expansion of Isaiah's. In the same line would seem to lie the enigmatic utterance in Jer. 31:22: "For Jehovah hath created a new thing in the earth: a woman shall encompass a man" (thus Delitzsch, etc.).

**TESTIMONY OF THE GOSPEL**

The germs now indicated in prophetic scriptures had apparently borne no fruit in Jewish expectations of the Messiah, when the event took place which to Christian minds made them luminous with predictive import. In Bethlehem of Judea, as Micah had foretold, was born of a virgin mother He whose "goings forth" were "from of old, from everlasting" (Micah 5:2; Matt. 2:6). Matthew, who quotes the first part of the verse, can hardly have been ignorant of the hint of pre-existence it contained. This brings us to the testimony to the miraculous birth of Christ in our first and third Gospels - the only Gospels which record the circumstances of Christ's birth at all. By general consent the narratives in Matthew (chapters 1, 2) and in Luke (chapters 1, 2) are independent- that is, they are not derived one from the other- yet they both affirm, in detailed story, that Jesus, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, was born of a pure virgin, Mary of Nazareth, espoused to Joseph, whose wife she afterwards became. The birth took place at Bethlehem, whither Joseph and Mary had gone for enrolment in a census that was being taken. The announcement was made to Mary beforehand by an angel, and the birth was preceded, attended, and followed by remarkable events that are narrated (birth of the Baptist, with annunciations, angelic vision to the shepherds, visit of wise men from the east, etc.). The narratives should be carefully read at length to understand the comments that follow.

**THE TESTIMONY TESTED**

There is no doubt; therefore, about the testimony to the Virgin birth, and the question which now arises is - What is the value of these parts 0f the Gospels as evidence? Are they genuine parts of the Gospels? Or are they late and untrustworthy additions? From what sources may they be presumed to be derived? lt is on the truth of the narratives that our belief in the Virgin birth depends. Can they be trusted? Or are they mere fables, inventions, legends, to which no credit can be attached?

The answer to several of these questions can be given in very brief form. The narratives 0f the nativity in Matthew and Luke are undoubtedly genuine parts of their respective Gospels. They have been there since ever the Gospels themselves had an existence. The proof of this is convincing. The chapters in question are found in every manuscript and version of the Gospels known to exist. There are hundreds of manuscripts, some of them very old, belonging to different parts of the world, and many versions in different languages (Latin, Syriac, Egyptian, etc.), but these narratives of the Virgin birth are found in all. We know, indeed, that a section of the early Jewish Christians - the Ebionites, as they are commonly called - possessed a Gospel based on Matthew from which the chapters on the nativity were absent. But this was not the real Gospel of Matthew: it was at best a mutilated and corrupted form of it. The genuine Gospel, as the manuscripts attest, always had these chapters.

Next, as to the Gospels themselves, they were not of late and non-apostolic origin; but were written by apostolic men, and were from the first accepted and circulated in the church as trustworthy embodiments of sound apostolic tradition. Luke's Gospel was from Luke's own pen - its genuineness has recently received a powerful vindication from Prof. Harnack, of Berlin - and Matthew's Gospel, while some dubiety still rests on its original language (Aramaic or Greek), passed without challenge in the early church as the genuine Gospel of the Apostle Matthew. Criticism has more recently raised the question whether it is only the "groundwork" of the discourses (the "Logia") that comes directly from, Matthew. However this may be settled, it is certain that the Gospel in its Greek form always passed as Matthew's. It must, therefore, if not written by him, have had his immediate authority. The narratives come to us, accordingly, with high apostolic sanction.

**SOURCES OF THE NARRATIVES**

As to the sources of the narratives, not a little can be gleaned from the study of their internal character. Here two facts reveal themselves. The first is that the narrative of Luke is based on some old, archaic, highly original Aramaic writing. Its Aramaic character gleams through its every part. In style, tone, conception, it is highly primitive - emanates, apparently, from that circle of devout people in Jerusalem to whom its own pages introduce us (Luke 2:25, 36-38). It has, therefore, the highest claim to credit. The second fact is even more important. A perusal of the narratives shows clearly - what might have been expected - that the information they convey was derived from no lower source than Joseph and Mary themselves. This is a marked feature of contrast in the narratives - that Matthew's narrative is all told from Joseph's point of view, and Luke's is all told from Mary's. The signs of this are unmistakable. Matthew tells about Joseph's difficulties and action, and says little or nothing about Mary's thoughts and feelings. Luke tells much about Mary - even her inmost thoughts - but says next to nothing directly about Joseph. The narratives, in short, are not, as some would have it, contradictory, but are independent and complementary. The one supplements and completes the other. Both together are needed to give the whole story. They bear in themselves the stamp of truth, honesty, and purity, and are worthy of all acceptation, as they were evidently held to be in the early church.

**UNFOUNDED OBJECTIONS**

Against the acceptance of these early, well-attested narratives, what, now, have the objectors to allege? I pass by the attempts to show, by critical elimination (expurging Luke 1:35, and some other clauses), that Luke's narrative was not a narrative of a Virgin birth at all. This is a vain attempt in face of the testimony of manuscript authorities. Neither need I dwell on the alleged "discrepancies" in the genealogies and narratives. These are not serious, when the independence and different standpoints of the narratives are acknowledged. The genealogies, tracing the descent of Christ from David along different lines, present problems which exercise the minds of scholars, but they do not touch the central fact of the belief of both Evangelists in the birth of Jesus from a virgin. Even in a Syriac manuscript which contains the certainly wrong reading, "Joseph begat Jesus," the narrative goes on,

as usual, to recount the Virgin birth. It is not a contradiction, if Matthew is silent on the earlier residence in Nazareth, which Luke's object led him fully to describe.

**SILENCE OF MARK AND JOHN**

The objection on which most stress is laid (apart from what is called the evidently "mythical" character of the narratives) is the silence on the Virgin birth in the remaining Gospels, and other parts of the New Testament. This, it is held, conclusively proves that the Virgin birth was not known in the earliest Christian circles, and was a legend of later origin. As respects the Gospels - Mark and John - the objection would only apply if it was the design of these Gospels to narrate, as the others do, the circumstances of the nativity. But this was evidently not their design. Both Mark and John knew that Jesus had a human birth - an infancy and early life - and that His mother was called Mary, but of deliberate purpose they tell us nothing about it. Mark begins his Gospel with Christ's entrance on His public ministry, and says nothing of the period before, especially of how Jesus came to be called "the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). John traces the divine descent of Jesus, and tells us that the "Word became flesh" (John 1:14); but how this miracle of becoming flesh was wrought he does not say. It did not lie within his plan. He knew the church tradition on the subject: he had the Gospels narrating the birth of Jesus from the Virgin in his hands: and he takes the knowledge of their teaching for granted. To speak of contradiction in a case like this is out of the question.

**SILENCE OF PAUL**

How far Paul was acquainted with the facts of Christ's earthly origin it is not easy to say. To a certain extent these facts would always be regarded as among the privacies of the innermost Christian circles - so long at least as Mary lived - and the details may not have been fully known till the Gospels were published. Paul admittedly did not base his preaching of his Gospel on these private, interior matters, but on the broad, public facts of Christ's ministry, death, and resurrection. It would be going too far, however, to infer from this that Paul had no knowledge of the miracle of Christ's birth. Luke was Paul's companion, and doubtless shared with Paul all the knowledge which he himself had gathered on this and other subjects. One thing certain is, that Paul could not have believed in the divine dignity, the pre-existence, the sinless perfection, and redeeming headship, of Jesus as he did, and not have been convinced that His entrance into humanity was no ordinary event of nature, but implied an unparalleled miracle of some kind. This Son of God, who "emptied" Himself, who was "born of a woman, born under the law," who "knew no sin" (Phil. 2:7, 8; Gal. 4:4; 2 Cor. 5:21), was not, and could not be, a simple product of nature. God must have wrought creatively in His human origin. The Virgin birth would be to Paul the most reasonable and credible of events. So also to John, who held the same high view of Christ's dignity and holiness.

**CHRIST'S SINLESSNESS A PROOF**

It is sometimes argued that a Virgin birth is no aid to the explanation of Christ's sinlessness. Mary being herself sinful in nature, it is held the taint of corruption would be conveyed by one parent as really as by two. It is overlooked that the whole fact is not expressed by saying that Jesus was born of a virgin mother. There is the other factor - "conceived by the Holy Ghost." What happened was a divine, creative miracle wrought in the production of this new humanity which secured, from its earliest germinal beginnings, freedom from the slightest taint of sin. Paternal generation in such an origin is superfluous. The birth of Jesus was not, as in ordinary births, the creation of a new personality. It was a divine Person- already existing - entering on this new mode of existence. Miracle could alone effect such a wonder. Because His human nature had this miraculous origin Christ was the "holy" One from the commencement (Luke 1:35). Sinless He was, as His whole life demonstrated; but when, in all time, did natural generation give birth to a sinless personality?

**THE EARLY CHURCH A WITNESS**

The history of the early church is occasionally appealed to in witness that the doctrine of the Virgin birth was not primitive. No assertion could be more futile. The early church, so far as we can trace it back, in all its branches, held this doctrine. No Christian sect is known that denied it, save the Jewish Ebionites formerly alluded to. The general body of the Jewish Christians - the Nazarenes as they are called - accepted it. Even the greater Gnostic sects in their own way admitted it. Those Gnostics who denied it were repelled with all the force of the church's greatest teachers. The Apostle John is related to have vehemently opposed Cerinthus, the earliest teacher with whom this denial is connected.

**DISCREDITED VAGARIES**

What more remains to be said? It would be waste of space to follow the objectors into their various theories of a mythical origin of this belief. One by one the speculations advanced have broken down, and given place to others - all equally baseless. The newest of the theories seeks an origin of the belief in ancient Babylonia, and supposes the Jews to have possessed the notion in pre-Christian times. This is not only opposed to all real evidence, but is the giving up of the contention that the idea had its origin in late Christian circles, and was unknown to earlier apostles.

**THE REAL CHRIST**

Doctrinally, it must be repeated that the belief in the Virgin birth of Christ is of the highest value for the right apprehension of Christ's unique and sinless personality. Here is One, as Paul brings out in Romans 5:12 ff., who, free from sin Himself, and not involved in the Adamic liabilities of the race, reverses the curse of sin and death brought in by the first Adam, and establishes the reign of righteousness and life. Had Christ been naturally born, not one of these things could be affirmed of Him. As one of Adam's race, not an entrant from a higher sphere, He would have shared in Adam's corruption and doom - would Himself have required to be redeemed. Through God's infinite mercy, He came from above, inherited no guilt, needed no regeneration or sanctification, but became Himself the Redeemer, Regenerator, Sanctifier, for all who receive Him. "Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift" (2 Cor. 9:15).