

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOUR JESUS CHRIST.

It is possible to avoid a clear issue in many enquiries with regard to the exact meaning of Christian teaching that Jesus Christ was a Divine Person. Questions may be raised as to there being a spark of divinity in all of us ; the exact content of His knowledge may be disputed ; a spiritual meaning may be given to His Resurrection, and yet the form of words of the historic creeds may still be used. But here at least the issue is clear-cut. Either He was the son of a human father, whether Joseph or another, or something extra-natural took place and He was "conceived of the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary." If we accept the former hypothesis, we shall not rate His Deity very highly. If the latter, no manifestations of Deity shining through His Humanity will astonish us.

There are some matters touching our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ which the Christian feels instinctively he cannot approach without the utmost reverence and delicacy. The reader need not fear, if we commence by a consideration of what modern science has taught us as to the natural process of conception, that we shall proceed to hazard any impertinent speculations about the Virgin Birth.

Every animal commences its life as a single cell, consisting of protoplasm surrounding a nucleus. The developing embryo is built up, if proper nourishment is supplied, by a repeated division and redivision of the original single cell, and a definite stereotyped process, going through regular stages, is always followed. It is always the nucleus that leads off a cell-division, and in doing so it passes through a constant series of changes called *mitosis*. These changes have been studied in two ways ; by killing the tissue and staining the dead cells with various dyes, and, quite recently, by making a long series of micro-photographs of a cell passing through the process of division, and showing the series, greatly accelerated, in a cinematograph. This gives a wonderfully impressive picture of a cell appearing to undergo a violent boiling inside ; then two halves separate, and may on occasion fly away from one another. Studied by the staining

method, it will be seen that certain V-shaped bodies called chromosomes appear within the nucleus, the number being always a constant for the species. These split into two, and half of each chromosome passes into each of the two daughter-cells. They carry the heredity, and determine the character of the younger cells. In some closely studied forms, such as the banana fly, *Drosophila*, it has been found possible to map out the chromosomes and to discover which of the bodily characters, e.g. the eyes or the wings, is controlled by each chromosome. In certain inherited diseases the controlling chromosome can be recognised in man. The single cell from which the embryo is developed is called the fertilised ovum, and from the moment of fertilisation the heredity of the young animal is fixed. It occasionally happens that the pair of cells produced by the first division, instead of remaining attached, become separated, and there is reason to believe that this is the explanation of the phenomenon of "identical twins," always of the same sex and alike in all respects.

Fertilisation is effected by the union of two cells, the male cell being small and motile, and the female larger and, unless moved about by external forces, stationary. A very remarkable provision of nature attends this process of fertilisation. By various devices, the number of chromosomes in the two parent cells has been halved, so that it is not till they have been united that the proper number of chromosomes for the species is present. Thus the young animal obtains its inherited characters quite equally from each parent.

Why it should be necessary for fertilisation to occur before reproduction can take place is an unsolved mystery. There is really no satisfactory reason known. There must *be* a reason, because the process is so widespread throughout the vegetable and animal kingdoms. And yet it is subject to some very singular exceptions, called "parthenogenesis." Amongst bees for instance, the female cell (ovum) for many generations does not reduce its chromosomes, and forms a new bee without fertilisation; then at rather long intervals there is a generation in which ordinary fertilisation takes place. Some animals, e.g. *Cypris reptans*, appear to be entirely parthenogenetic. Still more curious is the fact that the unfertilised eggs of the sea-urchin can be caused to develop by immersing them in a fluid containing magnesium chloride, and that unfertilised eggs of a

frog will divide and carry on as far as the tadpole stage, if they are merely pricked with a very fine needle.

We do not propose to carry this exposition any further, except to point out the main deductions, that inheritance is equally derived from the father and the mother, and that although amongst vertebrates, man of course included, natural parthenogenesis is contrary to all experience, and artificial parthenogenesis has not been obtained in mammals, yet there is nothing grotesquely impossible about it, and in fact, we do not know for certain why fertilisation is necessary.

Let us turn from this, probably not very useful, consideration of normal physiology, and come to the heart of our subject. It is well known that the Christian doctrine of the Virgin Birth is derived entirely from the earlier chapters of the first and third gospels. If the information they give us had been lost, in all probability we should never have guessed it from a study of the second and fourth gospels and the epistles. This has been used, of course, to discredit the fact. Leaving that for a little, let us first accept the books as written, and try to understand the why and the wherefore. The first three gospels include much matter in common to two, often to all three. Whether this common matter originally existed in written or oral forms does not just now concern us, but it undoubtedly formed the basis of the routine instruction given by the apostles to new converts. Each evangelist has his own way of prefacing his narrative. The first and third begin with two very independent versions of the Virgin Birth. The second opens, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The fourth, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the Only-begotten of the Father." All four evangelists, then, begin by a statement that the subject of their memoirs is a Person at once human and divine, but they each state it in a different way. Clearly, the narrative of the Virgin Birth was *not* part of the more or less stereotyped narrative forming the basis of routine instruction. Here we learn one of our lessons. We do not believe, we are not asked to believe, in the proper Deity and Humanity of Christ because of the Virgin Birth. But being on other grounds convinced of that Deity and Humanity, and asking, all amazed, how can these things be, we are, as it were confidentially, made

aware of the true facts of the one only possible, and luminous, explanation. We are not intending to set forth here the reasons for believing that Jesus Christ was a divine Person. If that is definitely disbelieved what follows is well nigh useless. "The chief ground on which thoughtful Christian believers are ready to accept it (the miraculous birth) is that, believing in the personal indissoluble union between God and man in Jesus Christ, the miraculous birth of Jesus seems to them the only fitting accompaniment of this union, and so to speak the natural expression of it in the order of outward facts."¹

Let us consider, first, the silence of two of the evangelists, and of the epistles. The argument from silence is always weak. Shakespeare never mentions Canterbury, St. Pauls, Winchester or Durham cathedrals; shall we conclude that he never heard of them? If we were dependent on the epistles for an account of the main events of our Lord's life, we should know almost nothing. It seems to be part of the purpose of the writer of the fourth gospel to omit the well-known details of Christ's life, unless he has something new to say about them. St. Mark, on the other hand, purposes to include almost nothing beyond the common evangelical tradition. It seems fair to say, therefore, that it would have been a singular deviation from their usual practice if either St. Mark, or St. John, or the Epistles had told us about the Virgin Birth in any detail.

It also seems fair to say that these writers do refer to it, indirectly. The fourth gospel speaks of Jesus as the "only-begotten Son of the Father." It also says, "When Jesus therefore saw His mother." There seems to be a touch of irony in John vii. 42, that to the crowd it seemed fatal to Christ's claim to be the Messiah, that He had come from Nazareth, not Bethlehem; John would scarcely have reported this, had he not known the Bethlehem story. Who in the circle of the apostles was more likely to know it, than the one to whose care the Lord committed His mother? Some see another reference in John i. 13, where one copy of the Old Latin, three very early Fathers (Justin, Tertullian, Irenæus) and some later, read, "Who was born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a man (husband), but of God," but the textual evidence is too weak to accept this as original. It may be, however, that the unusual expression *Θελήματος ἀνδρός* instead of *ἀνθρώπου* is used, because

¹ Stanton: *The Jewish and the Christian Messiah*, p. 376.

the writer designed a double meaning, the Redeemer as well as the redeemed.

It is probable that Herod's massacre of the innocents is in the mind of the writer in Rev. xii. 4-5, the dragon waiting to devour the manchild as soon as he was born.

Even in the epistles, there are a few passages that would have been a sore puzzle to the readers, had not the miraculous birth of Christ been generally known. Paul says in 1 Cor. xv. 47: "The second man is the Lord from heaven." And again, in Galatians iv. 4: "God sent forth His Son, born of a woman." In 1 Timothy ii. 15: "She shall be saved through the Child-bearing" appears to give the best sense; it is rather a promise of salvation through the Incarnation, than a guarantee that Christian women shall come safely through confinement.

Before we come to our more positive witnesses, we must devote a little space to the prophecy in Isaiah vii. 14: "Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel—God with us." What did the prophet mean? First, is he correctly translated as using the word "virgin"? There are two Hebrew words meaning nearly but not quite the same, עלמה (almah) and בתולה (bethulah). Unquestionably בתולה means exactly our English virgin (virgo intacta). The word used here is עלמה, which is perhaps most nearly rendered "maiden," that is, it implies virginity but without stressing it. In the Carthaginian, according to Jerome, *alma* signified "virgin." The other occurrences are Gen. xxiv. 43; Exod. ii. 8; Prov. xxx. 19; Cant. i. 3, vi. 8; Ps. lxxviii. 25; and these seem to bear this out. Anyhow, we have no right to say it *does not* mean "virgin," when it is so translated by the Septuagint παρθένος, many years before Christ came (we do not know exactly when Isaiah was translated into Greek; probably later than the Pentateuch, and not so well). In Matthew's gospel, the word παρθένος is used again. It is noteworthy that later translations of Isaiah into Greek (Theodotion, Aquila, Symmachus) render νεάνις (young woman), but that is after the issue was clouded by controversy between Jews and Christians.

But was Isaiah referring to Christ at all? Taken by themselves, the succeeding words, "Before the child shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings thou abhorrest shall be forsaken" (meaning the northern kingdom of Israel with Syria, both of which were desolated and deserted

a few years after), would naturally lead to expectation of fulfilment within a short time. But there was no child born in those days who fits the prophecy. No Immanuel came. The prophet's own child was given a very different name, a name of disaster. And quite soon after, Isaiah was given more light, and enlarged on the theme. Immanuel is to be lord of Judah (Is. viii. 8). And again, later, "Unto us a child is born; unto us a son is given; and his name shall be called the mighty God . . . the Prince of Peace . . . of the increase of His government there shall be no end." This, without question, is a Messianic prophecy. It appears that in Isaiah's own day the Virgin-born was expected, or at any rate some very remarkable birth, for Micah (v. 2-3) says, "Thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto Me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting. Therefore will He give them up, until the time that *she which travaileth hath brought forth.*" Evidence is entirely lacking, however, that Rabbinical Judaism expected the Messiah to be virgin-born. The expectation of the Jews did not give rise to the Christian story.

Now at length we turn to the two evangelic records. Our attention is soon arrested by their coincidences, and their differences. Joseph and Mary were betrothed and lived at Nazareth "before they came together"; there was a period when Mary rested under cruel suspicion; later Joseph knew the truth; the birth took place at Bethlehem; eventually they returned to Nazareth. That which was conceived in her was of the Holy Ghost. So much is common to both narratives. For the rest, all is diversity. Yet there is no serious difficulty in welding the two into a consistent story.

It is useless to maintain that these chapters are not by the same hand as the rest of the gospel. The evidence of the manuscripts and the versions is decisive here. The earliest of the Fathers, Ignatius (about 110 A.D.), Aristides, Justin Martyr, Tatian, know all about it. "Everything we know of the dogmatics of the early part of the second century agrees with the belief that at that period the virginity of Mary was a part of the formulated Christian belief." (Rendel Harris on *Apol. Aristides*, 25.) The distinctive style of each evangelist is found in these chapters as typically as in those that follow. Whoever wrote the introduction wrote the body of the book. Whence did the two writers

derive their facts? In the nature of the case, there were and could be only two persons who knew the whole truth, Mary, and Joseph. Luke tells us, pointedly, that he "traced the course of all things accurately *from the very first*." No one can read his narrative without seeing that it is written entirely from Mary's point of view. Her kinship with Elisabeth makes it easy to trace the source of the evangelist's information about the birth of John the Baptist. Whether Luke had the story from Mary herself, or whether through an intermediary, we cannot tell, but the vividness of the narrative suggests the former. Luke was in Palestine in A.D. 58 or thereabouts; Mary might be about eighty then. Another thing seems plain—the canticles incorporated in the story are genuine memories of the original. Hope beat high in the breasts of Zechariah, Elisabeth and Mary. Their triumphant songs would surely have been pitched in a more minor key, if they had been composed when everybody knew that both the Forerunner and the Christ had been rejected and murdered, and that Israel had not been delivered from the Romans. It is worthy of comment that St. Luke has been adversely criticised so often as a historian and further evidence has so consistently proved him to be right, even in the vexed matter of the taxing in the days of Cyrenius, that it is riding for a fall to challenge him here. Until recently the only census known was when Quirinius was governor of Syria in A.D. 6 and 7. An inscription found at Antioch in 1912 proves that he was twice in authority in Syria, the first time as commander of the forces, about 7 B.C., and so superior to Saturninus, the civil governor. This explains what has always been a puzzle, why Tertullian says that this census was taken under Saturninus, thus appearing to contradict Luke. Papyri discovered in Egypt show that the census was taken every fourteen years, so Luke specifies when it was *first* taken. The census papers for A.D. 20 and 48 have been found. A decree of the time of Trajan orders all persons to go to their own districts for the enrolling, as though it were the custom.¹

Turning now to the Matthew record, it seems equally plain that it represents Joseph's version. The opinions and purposes are his; he is four times warned by an angel; he always takes the initiative in action. Although Joseph disappears so early and so

¹ Sir Wm. M. Ramsay: *Was Jesus born at Bethlehem?* and *Bearing of Recent Discovery on the New Testament*.

completely from the evangelical records that we are inclined to the view that he died before the public ministry began, he, being evidently a man of character and resource, would surely leave either a written or more probably a verbal account with some confidential friend.

It is worthy of notice that during the period of our Lord's public ministry, there does not appear to have been any scandal attached to His birth. He was universally supposed to be the son of Joseph. When He preached in Nazareth, they said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" (Luke iv. 22). After the feeding of the five thousand, the Jews of Galilee said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" (John vi. 42).

What may the objector reply to all this? There are, perhaps three main arguments.

(i.) *Such a thing has never happened within human experience.* But it is a canon of science that if you have to account for a very unusual phenomenon, you must seek a very unusual cause, and there was never anyone like our Lord Jesus Christ. Biology assures us that new life never comes into the world apart from pre-existing living matter. But it must have come, once at least, though not within human experience.

(ii.) *The whole theory rests on the bare word of Joseph and Mary.* Not at all. They are never quoted as an authority. The evangelists, under God, take responsibility, and the same supernatural guidance which foretold the event through Isaiah, both led them to a knowledge of the facts, and supervised the narration.

(iii.) *Similar stories were common in antiquity.* Amongst the Jews, most certainly not. Amongst Gentiles, yes, and in a very foul form. But does anyone seriously maintain that men like the authors of the two gospels, after Christian opinion and information had begun to take shape, would or could separately and independently derive the two stories of the Nativity from filthy heathen legends, and get the Church to believe them? "The conjecture that the idea of a birth from a virgin is a heathen myth which was received by Christians contradicts the entire earliest developments of Christian tradition" (Harnack).

But let us cease controversy, and touch on two further topics, though briefly, ere we close. One is the deep human and emotional interest of the story.¹ Try cautiously, reverently,

¹ See a notable sermon amongst Dr. Alexander Whyte's *Bible Characters* on Joseph and Mary.

to enter into the feelings of the espoused pair—the joy of betrothal—Joseph made aware of the conception and refusing to believe—putting, as was natural, the worst possible construction on it—minded to put her away “privily,” but what can be done privily in a country village? Mary, deeply spiritual, a poetess, finding black looks everywhere, goes eighty miles to Elisabeth, and has the joy of being believed even before she tells her news. Joseph, also deeply distressed, enlightened by the Heavenly Visitor, suddenly realises that Isaiah *meant what he said*, and that the honoured virgin is his own betrothed. Did he travel post-haste to fetch her back? Was there ever a lovers’ meeting like it? Then another blow—the unwelcome forced visit to Bethlehem and the crowded inn, but soon compensated for by the adoration of the shepherds and the Magi, and the blessing of aged Simeon.

Lastly, a quotation to connote the import of the Virgin Birth to Theology.

“For the right Faith is that we believe and confess; that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man;

God of the Substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and Man, of the Substance of His Mother, born in the world;

Perfect God, and Perfect Man; of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting;

Equal to the Father, as touching His Godhead; and inferior to the Father, as touching His Manhood;

Who although He be God and Man, yet He is not two, but one Christ;

One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the Manhood into God;

One altogether, not by confusion of Substance, but by unity of Person.”

A. RENDLE SHORT.

Bristol.