

The Rationale and Significance of the Virgin Birth

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INTRODUCTION

The scope of this paper is the rationale and significance of the virgin birth, not the historical evidence for it. But in fact the rationale and significance are as important for the defence of the virgin birth as is the historical evidence. One of the main charges against it has been that it is theologically superfluous, dubious or even heretical. On the other hand, defenders of the virgin birth have usually sought to show not just that it did happen but that it ought to have happened or indeed that it must have happened. Here we need to exercise great caution and wisdom. In theology, as in other realms, there lie the dangers of overkill and the credibility gap. If the apologist gives implausible reasons why the virgin birth must have occurred he will lose the confidence of his client who will see him as a shameless propagandist who is determined to produce any and every argument possible, regardless of its merit. What is needed is a carefully reasoned case that shows the genuine importance and value of the virgin birth without resorting to far-fetched arguments which have the final effect of casting doubts not only on the author's integrity but on the credibility of the virgin birth itself. Some apologists do the most harm to the cause that they are supposed to be defending. The opponents of the virgin birth have been presented by its defenders with a whole line of Aunt Sallies and have delighted themselves with demolishing each in turn.

A deeper question underlies the search for the rationale and significance of the virgin birth. What is the relation between faith and reason? Is the virgin birth a logically necessary doctrine? Can it be proved to be necessary? There are two opposing extreme positions that can be taken, both of which have a superficial attractiveness. First, it has been claimed that the virgin birth was absolutely necessary and that it can be proved that God could not possibly have arranged things in any other way. But there is no obvious biblical warrant for such an approach and Douglas Edwards, a noteworthy defender of the virgin birth, states that 'the Church has never presumed to assert *sans phrase* that the Incarnation of God *demand*s a Virgin Birth'.¹ Furthermore, while it may be exhilarating to make such a claim the task of producing the proof turns out to be daunting and to lead to the dangers described in the previous paragraph. In reaction against this position others have found it safer simply to assert that these things happened because God so chose and that it is ours to believe, not to pry. Human reason must confess its inadequacy when faced with God's revelation, to which faith is the only proper response. Such an attitude of 'fideism' has the appearance of piety but it has unacceptable implications. Underlying it is a deep scepticism as to the possibility of showing Christian doctrine to be reasonable. Reason must be excluded because the Christian faith cannot be shown to be reasonable. There is as much despair as faith in this attitude.

The first position would seem to be that of Gresham Machen. He argues that

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¹ D. Edwards, *The Virgin Birth in History and Faith* (London, 1943), 18f. (his italics).

if the virgin birth is a fact and therefore God's way for Christ to enter the world it follows that it is the best way and that 'any other way would have been *wrong*'.² To him this is 'self-evident' but the relationship implied between faith and reason is not 'self-evident', as has been argued. The position to be taken in this paper lies between the two extremes. I do not believe that human reason can show that the virgin birth was a logical necessity. But I do believe that it can be shown to be reasonable, to cohere with the rest of the Christian faith and to be fitting and plausible in the context of our total picture of Christ. This accords with the position of Augustine who argued that the virgin birth can be seen to be both possible and fitting.³ The aim of this paper is to demonstrate this.

One possible method of approach would be an exegetical study of the New Testament material relating to the virgin birth. Such an approach is clearly important but it is not the one to be adopted here. Instead, this paper will be a critical examination of the significance given to the virgin birth in recent dogmatics. This approach is valid anyway as a partner to the exegetical approach but all the more so with a subject like the virgin birth. Undisputed direct reference to the virgin birth is confined to two brief New Testament passages (Matt. 1: 18-25; Lk. 1: 34f.). It follows therefore that the relation of this doctrine to other doctrines (the task of dogmatics) is at least as important as the exegesis of these two passages.⁴

The search for the significance of the virgin birth will begin in three major areas, apologetics, the Incarnation and the sinlessness of Christ, and will conclude with a number of minor areas.

APOLOGETICS

Hans von Campenhausen points to the twin usage of the virgin birth in the areas of apologetics and dogmatics, tracing these back to Matthew and Luke, respectively.⁵ The apologetic use of the virgin birth has both a positive and a negative side. Negatively, it answers the charge of illegitimacy. Matthew records that Joseph intended to divorce Mary but was persuaded to the contrary by a dream (1: 18-25). The correcting of Joseph's misapprehension is at the same time the answer to those accusing Mary of immorality and Jesus of illegitimacy.⁶ Whether these accusations preceded the Christian teaching about the virgin birth or were produced by them is not certain. But in neither case would we have a rationale for the virgin birth since a normal birth within wedlock would not have given rise to any such accusations.⁷

Positively, the virgin birth is an example of Jesus' fulfilment of the Old Testament. Matthew says that the virgin birth took place in fulfilment of Isaiah 7: 14. Justin Martyr debated this

² J. G. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (London and Edinburgh, 1930), 392 (my italics).

³ Augustine, *De vera religione* 8: 14. Cf. *De Trinitate* 13: 10: 13 for his attitude towards the Incarnation and the Cross.

⁴ J. Barr in his *Fundamentalism* (London, 1977) repeatedly accuses 'fundamentalists' of having no theology. He affirms that they have 'doctrines' but that the perception of the interrelations of these doctrines, which is the peculiar task of theology, is lacking (e.g., 160-2). This will be seen clearly not to be true of the evangelical writers studied in this paper who show if anything an excessive zeal for finding such interrelations.

⁵ H. von Campenhausen, *The Virgin Birth in the Theology of the Ancient Church* (London, 1964), 25f.

⁶ The charge of illegitimacy has been detected in John 8: 41. Such a charge is certainly found from the second century, e.g. in Celsus, writing C.A.D.178 (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1: 28f., 32f.).

⁷ J. A. T. Robinson considers that the accusations arose because of Jesus' actual illegitimacy (*The Human Face of God* (London, 1973), 57-63). The virgin birth then becomes a misguided Christian attempt to deny the charge. This certainly provides a rationale for the virgin birth, but only if one accepts that Jesus actually was illegitimate.

point at length with the Jew Trypho⁸ and many others have since used the same argument. The legitimacy of this use of Isaiah 7 has been fiercely contested but fortunately this need not detain us here. The argument from prophecy cannot be included in the rationale for the virgin birth. God does not prophesy great wonders and then perform them if they are themselves meaningless (it is precisely this point that distinguishes the miracles of the canonical gospels from those of some of the apocryphal gospels). The value of the argument from prophecy is itself dependent upon the virgin birth having some other significance.

But from the time of D. F. Strauss there are those who have argued that the doctrine of the virgin birth arose because of Isaiah 7: 14—i.e. that Christians

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assumed that it must have happened because it was prophesied.⁹ But this theory is implausible. Luke also teaches the virgin birth, clearly independently of Matthew,¹⁰ and yet without explicit reference to Isaiah 7.¹¹ It is unlikely that Isaiah 7 would have been taken to refer to the virgin birth of the Messiah except by those who already held such a belief. The use of Isaiah 7 arose from the belief in the virgin birth, not vice versa.

INCARNATION

In the popular mind the virgin birth is often confused with the Incarnation. This has led to the belief that Jesus is the Son of God because God was His Father *instead of* Joseph. In one recent popular book we are told that the 'crowning evidence' for the virgin birth is Mary's behaviour at the cross. Jesus was being crucified for claiming to be the Son of God and Mary could have saved Him by crying out 'Wait, oh wait; He is not telling the truth, I will tell you who His father is; he is...'¹² But this involves a fallacious view of the virgin birth as a biological explanation of the Incarnation. Jesus is seen as human on his mother's side and divine on his Father's side. A position similar to this has been given scholarly expression recently by J. Stafford Wright in a paper entitled, significantly, 'The Virgin Birth as a Biological Necessity'.¹³ He argues that one set of chromosomes was provided by Mary while the other set was created 'to be the vehicle of the divine personality'. Thus we have 'a single person, both human and divine'. He 'was both human through his mother's chromosomes, and could be divine through the newly-formed chromosomes'.¹⁴ Among other objections, one

⁸ Justin, *Dialogue* 43, 66-71, 77f.

⁹ T. Boslooper, *The Virgin Birth* (London, 1962), 97f., cf. 202-4. Psalm 2: 7 is often seen as the other parent of the doctrine.

¹⁰ J. G. Machen, *op. cit.*, 188-209 argues for the independence of the Matthaean and Lucan infancy narratives. This point is widely accepted.

¹¹ Some argue that Luke is referring to Isaiah 7 (e.g., H. Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium* I (Freiburg, Basel, Wien, 1969), 42, 46f., 50, 56, 58-63). Whether or not this is correct the reference to Isaiah is certainly not explicit.

¹² L. Nelson Bell in H. A. Hanke, *The Validity of the Virgin Birth* (Grand Rapids, 1964), 107. Throughout this book Hanke argues for the virgin birth from the unexamined premise that the deity of Christ proves his virgin birth.

¹³ J. S. Wright, 'The Virgin Birth as a Biological Necessity' in *Faith and Thought* 95: 3, 1967, 24f., 27. This approach is also followed by E. K. V. Pearce, *Who was Adam?*² (Exeter, 1976), 138-40.

¹⁴ To be fair, it should be noted that Wright later states in qualification that the chromosomes formed by God were the vehicle whereby the Son could become incarnate but that they did not compel him to become incarnate (*ibid.*, 29). If these chromosomes were only the vehicle for the Incarnation, why could not a normally conceived humanity also be such a vehicle? Wright's whole case depends on the assumption that a normal conception leads to Nestorianism. This point is considered below.

can note that this approach really makes Jesus half-man, half-God, a sort of *tertium quid* of the type that the early fathers so rightly fought to exclude. Brunner rejected the virgin birth partly because he saw it as just such an attempt at a biological explanation of the Incarnation¹⁵ and Barth rightly retorted that such an explanation is not part of the orthodox doctrine of the virgin birth.¹⁶ Despite this, Pannenberg has resurrected the charge and portrays the virgin birth as an aetiological legend—an attempt to explain how Jesus is the Son of God and to assert that his sonship is to be traced to his conception rather than to his baptism or resurrection.¹⁷ He bases this charge on Luke 1: 35: 'therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God'. But there are two weak links in Pannenberg's chain of argument. The first concerns the meaning of 'Son of God' in this context. In the light of 3: 38, where Adam is called God's son, it may be that Luke is not basing as much on the virgin birth as Pannenberg assumes. Secondly, even if 'Son of God' here implies full deity, Jesus' sonship is attributed to the coming upon Mary of the Holy Spirit, to the overshadowing of the power of the Most High. Clearly the Incarnation of the Son of God requires a special intervention of God and this can be seen in the operation of the Holy Spirit described by Luke. But it is hard to see how Mary's virginity, the absence of a human father, can contribute to Jesus' deity. It has only been thought to do so because of confusion between the doctrines of the virgin birth and the Incarnation.

It is essential clearly to grasp the distinction between the Incarnation and the virgin birth. The virgin birth concerns the origins of the *humanity* of Christ. It states that Jesus, as man, had no human father. It does not state that God was his human father. The virgin birth is not like the stories of pagan gods mating with beautiful women. The miracle of the virgin birth is that of birth *without a*

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father, not of the mating of God and Mary. The doctrine of the Incarnation, on the other hand, concerns the deity of Christ. It states that this man Jesus was in fact God himself, the Logos, the Son of God come in the flesh. Jesus was divine not because he had no human father but because he is God become man. He is the Son of God (in the Trinitarian sense) not because of his human parentage (or lack of) but because he is the *eternal* Son of the Father, 'begotten from the Father before all ages'. To summarise the distinction, the Incarnation means that Jesus is the Son of God become flesh, the virgin birth means that he had no human father. It is not hard to see how the two have come to be confused. The one states that God is his Father, the other that Joseph was not. It has been fatally easy to put these two together and to conclude that God was his father *instead of* Joseph, *because* Joseph was not.¹⁸ But this is a

¹⁵ E. Brunner, *The Mediator* (Philadelphia, n.d.), 324f. Cf. O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (London, 1973), 294f.

¹⁶ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I. 2 (Edinburgh, 1970), 183f.

¹⁷ W. Pannenberg, *Jesus God and Man* (London, 1968), 142f., 149; *The Apostle's Creed* (London, 1972), 73-5.

¹⁸ Tertullian confused the question of human and divine fatherhood (*Adversus Marcionem* 4: 10, cited in H. von Campenhausen, *op. cit.*, 46f.). Barth (*op. cit.*, 200) and Pannenberg (*Jesus God and Man*, 148) both show the fallacy of this sort of argument. But some would object that God is his 'human father' in that God provided the paternal element in his conception. Here two points should be noted: (1) This argument makes God his father only in the sense of being his creator (i.e. of his humanity). If we are to call God his father in this sense then we must also call God the father and mother of Adam. (2) When Christians today call Jesus the Son of God they intend more than was true of Adam. Therefore to insist that the absence of a human father makes God his father is doubly unfortunate—it causes confusion as to the meaning of 'Son of God' and it encourages still further the unfortunate confusion between virgin birth and Incarnation. The idea that the virgin birth makes God the Holy Spirit the human father of Jesus is rejected by the early fathers (e.g., Augustine, *Enchiridion* 38), the 11th

serious confusion. God is his Father at the level of his eternal existence as God, not at the biological level. It was at the latter level that Joseph failed to be his father. When it is stated that Jesus did not need a human father because God was his Father the two levels are being confused. Such thinking, if pursued consistently, will lead to a grossly perverted form of either the virgin birth or the Incarnation or both.

But while it may be granted that the virgin birth and the Incarnation are clearly distinct it may be that they are inextricably bound together in that one necessarily implies the other. Some would argue that while the virgin birth is not a biological explanation of the Incarnation it was nonetheless the indispensable means of the Incarnation. It is said that without the virgin birth there would be no Incarnation or even that the virgin birth guarantees the Incarnation. But, to take the latter point first, the virgin birth guarantees very little. As P. T. Forsyth has pointed out, the product of a virgin birth need not even be preexistent, let alone divine.¹⁹ That the virgin birth does not guarantee either the Incarnation or the deity of Christ can be seen from the fact that it has traditionally been held by both Arians (who deny the deity of Christ) and Adoptionists (who deny the Incarnation), to say nothing of Muslims who also hold it.²⁰ Indeed Edwards notes, perhaps over charitably, that no reputable Christian writer has ever dreamed of asserting that the virgin birth of Jesus is that which makes him divine.²¹ Conversely, it is hard to see how the Incarnation necessitates the virgin birth. Many have argued that the birth of a supernatural being must have been a supernatural birth. This can readily be admitted, but we are still two steps from showing the necessity of the virgin birth. In the first place, the very fact that the baby born was God incarnate is itself a miracle. The Incarnation would have been supernatural and miraculous even if the incarnate one had had an otherwise normal birth. His preexistence and his divinity would have been supernatural even if his humanity had had a purely natural origin. Secondly, even if it be granted that the Incarnation necessitates an *otherwise* supernatural birth, need this be a *virgin* birth? Other forms of supernatural birth are possible as can be seen from the account of Eve's origin in Genesis 2: 21-23.²² These two points can be expressed differently. The Incarnation teaches Jesus' preexistence, his divine origin. The virgin birth teaches that the origin of his *humanity* was also supernatural. We cannot prove the virgin birth by arguing that the birth of a supernatural being must be supernatural. It is necessary to show that the miracle of the Incarnation needs to be supplemented with a *further*, distinct miracle in the origin of his humanity. Even if it is felt that the Incarnation demands an abnormal origin for his *humanity* it takes a further

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step to prove that this need be a virgin birth. To summarise the argument thus far, the divine fatherhood of God and the absence of a human father are not to be confused with one another. The absence of a human father does not prove the Incarnation and it is hard to prove that it was absolutely necessary for the Incarnation. That the baby born of Mary was God incarnate is an unprecedented miracle and it is facile to pretend that the absence of a human father

Council of Toledo in A.D. 675 (Denzinger-Schönmetzer 533) and by contemporary theologians (e.g., E. L. Mascall, *Christian Theology and Natural Science* (London-New York-Toronto, 1957), 310).

¹⁹ P. T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ* (London, 1946), 261. Cf. E. Brunner, *op. cit.*, 322f.

²⁰ Traditionally the Koran has been understood to teach the virgin birth but some Muslims question this today (G. Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (London, 1976), 67-74).

²¹ D. Edwards, *op. cit.*, 13.

²² Anselm considered the possibility of a motherless origin and concluded that as God had already done this in the case of Eve it was more fitting for Him to adopt a new method, to demonstrate His power (*Cur Deus Homo* 2: 8). Thomas Aquinas used the same argument (*Summa Theologica* 3: 31: 4).

brings us any nearer to understanding how it happened. To add the virgin birth to the Incarnation is not to show how the Incarnation took place but rather to increase the miraculous element. Not only was this baby God incarnate but even his humanity had a miraculous origin.

Some have argued that a normal conception would imply Nestorianism or Adoptionism while the doctrine of the virgin birth avoids this error.²³ But does the virgin birth safeguard against Adoptionism? Only if it is taken in an Apollinarian sense, to imply that the Logos assumed an incomplete humanity. It is significant that Stafford Wright, who raises this point, himself seems to be in danger of the Eutychian error of making Christ a *tertium quid*, part man, part God. How Christ became a fully human being without assuming an already existing person is a mystery that is not significantly lessened by the doctrine of the virgin birth.

But what is the alternative to the virgin birth? The aim of this paper is not to prove that an alternative is possible, let alone to produce one or to suggest that there is a better alternative. But failure to prove that there is an alternative is no proof that one could not exist. So far we have not found any clear argument why some other form of supernatural birth would have been impossible or even why a normal conception (i.e. with two parents) is precluded. If no such argument exists we should admit as much in the interests of honesty. To fabricate inadequate arguments is pointless and imprudent in that it presents the opponents of the virgin birth with easy targets.

A completely different interpretation of the virgin birth is offered by Pannenberg.²⁴ He argues that the virgin birth was originally an *alternative* to the doctrine of the preexistence of Christ. The two doctrines are different attempts to safeguard the truth that Jesus was the Son of God from his birth, not from his baptism, say. But Pannenberg argues that these two approaches stand in 'irreconcilable contradiction' to one another. The virgin birth implies that Jesus became the Son of God for the first time through Mary's conception, rather than being preexistent. But this contradiction exists only if we are misled into seeing the virgin birth as a biological explanation of the Incarnation. Once this idea is abandoned the problem disappears. The Incarnation and the virgin birth are referring to different things because they are answering different questions. The Incarnation affirms Jesus' divine origin, the virgin birth the miraculous origin of his humanity. There is no reason why these should be seen as contradictory. Indeed J. A. T. Robinson, who agrees with Pannenberg that the virgin birth and preexistence were originally alternative ideas in different writers, chides Pannenberg for his reference to 'irreconcilable contradiction'.²⁵ He observes that they have been so well harmonised that most people are unaware of any contradiction. In fact there is no contradiction.

In the early church the doctrine of the virgin birth was used especially in opposition to docetism²⁶ and some have argued that it still has this value today.²⁷ But

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²³ J. S. Wright, *art. cit.*, 23, 27. E. L. Mascall, *op. cit.*, 311, notes that Adoptionism encourages a denial of the virgin birth.

²⁴ W. Pannenberg, *Jesus God and Man*, 143; The Apostles' Creed, 75f. This idea is older than Pannenberg and was opposed by J. Orr, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (London, 1907), 208-12.

²⁵ J. A. T. Robinson, *op. cit.*, 144f.

²⁶ H. von Campenhausen, *op. cit.*, 30, 34f., 47.

²⁷ J. Orr, *op. cit.*, 27f.; J. G. Machen, *op. cit.*, 394.

there is a sleight of hand involved in this argument. It is the fact of Jesus' birth that was used against docetism, not the miraculous element in it. The virgin birth refutes the docetism of a Marcionite Christ who suddenly appears in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar (Lk. 3: 1). The virgin birth implies that Jesus was born, in opposition to those who deny this. But this truth would be protected as well, if not better, by a doctrine of a normal birth. A normal conception would, for example, preclude the error of the Valentinian Gnostics who accepted the virgin birth but argued that Mary was only Jesus' host mother, not his biological mother.²⁸ As Irenaeus put it, they taught that Jesus passed through Mary like water through a tube.²⁹ This approach gives Jesus no continuity with the human race and the fathers rightly condemned it as heretical. But many today would not simply state that the virgin birth can coexist with such error. John Robinson, for instance,³⁰ goes further and argues that the virgin birth must *inevitably* prejudice the genuineness of Jesus' humanity and His solidarity with us. This claim can take two forms. First, it could be argued that the very fact of a virgin birth in itself removes Jesus from the arena of humanity. This charge is well answered by R. F. Aldwinckle who argues that 'it is not the method by which a human being comes to be such which is decisive but the end product itself, namely a human being'.³¹ There is no ground for dogmatically asserting that the product of a virgin birth could not be fully human. Secondly, it could be argued that the virgin birth leads to *further* statements about Jesus which are incompatible with His genuine humanity. One example of this can be seen in the claim of Hilary of Poitiers that Jesus' body did not share our weakness and infirmity, because of the virgin birth.³² This is plainly in contradiction with the gospels. The New Testament teaches both Jesus' uniqueness as the Logos incarnate and his solidarity with us. Where his uniqueness is affirmed, as with the virgin birth and his sinlessness, we must accept this. Where it is not affirmed we must accept his solidarity with us. The answer to errors such as Hilary's is not to overreact by denying his uniqueness, including the virgin birth, but to give due weight to both his uniqueness and his solidarity with us.

So far it would not appear that the virgin birth is absolutely necessary for the Incarnation. But necessity is not the only possible relation between the virgin birth and the Incarnation. Vincent Taylor comments that the long debate over the virgin birth has led its defenders to appeal to its congruity with the Incarnation rather than its necessity.³³ It is here that we are to see the relation between the virgin birth and the Incarnation. The virgin birth is congruous with the Incarnation as a sign pointing to it. While it may not have been absolutely necessary for the Incarnate One to have been born of a virgin it is fitting for him to have a special birth. But it is important to be clear as to *why* it is fitting. It is not because there is anything degrading or unworthy about normal birth. To argue like that would be to shrink from the scandal of the Incarnation, the fact that God entered into our human existence.³⁴ A normal birth would not be unfitting in itself, let alone degrading, as it would point to the genuineness of his humanity. But on the other hand an abnormal birth is fitting and appropriate as a pointer

²⁸ H. von Campenhausen, *op. cit.*, 25.

²⁹ Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 3: 11: 3.

³⁰ J. A. T. Robinson, *op. cit.*, 52-5; cf. W. Pannenberg, *The Apostles' Creed*, 72.

³¹ R. F. Aldwinckle, *More Than Man* (Grand Rapids, 1976), 207f. This argument needs to be qualified in that no human parent would seem to imply a lack of racial solidarity.

³² Hilary, *De Trinitate* 10: 35: 44 (cited in A. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition* 2 (London, 1975), 397). Hilary was of course by no means alone among the fathers in having such a view of Christ's humanity.

³³ V. Taylor, *The Person of Christ in New Testament Teaching* (London, 1958), 219, 221. A good example of the argument for congruity is found in E. L. Mascall, *op. cit.*, 310.

³⁴ E. Brunner brands as docetic the argument that a natural birth would have been unworthy of God (*op. cit.*, 325).

to the deity of Christ. Elsewhere in Scripture great and important figures have unusual births. This was true of both Isaac and John the Baptist. Their births were miraculous in that their mothers had hitherto been barren. If figures like Isaac and John the Baptist had miraculous births as signs pointing to their signifi-

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cance, how much more appropriate it is that the Son of God should have a miraculous birth. With Jesus of course the miracle is far greater in that a parent is dispensed with rather than simply made fertile, but the same principle applies: a miraculous birth as a sign or pointer to the significance of the child. It is therefore fitting and appropriate for the Son of God to have a miraculous birth and the virgin birth is the form that this took. Whether or not other forms of miraculous birth would have been possible is a matter of speculation and we have no grounds for deciding either way. But as a point of fact God chose the virgin birth. If we can accept that a miraculous birth is fitting there need be no objection to the idea of a virgin birth.³⁵

The virgin birth, seen as a random event, is implausible, but as a part of the total picture of Christ, with his Incarnation and resurrection, it is both fitting and plausible.³⁶ As Raymond Brown argues, the virgin birth is not essential for the Incarnation but it is the Incarnation that makes the virgin birth credible.³⁷ The virgin birth is credible and appropriate because it is the sign of the Incarnation. Barth argues that the virgin birth points to the Incarnation in the same way as the empty tomb points to the resurrection.³⁸ In each case the sign is less than the thing signified but points to it. The relation between them is that between sign and thing signified, not between cause and effect. The virgin birth did not cause the Incarnation any more than the empty tomb caused the resurrection.³⁹ Thus the virgin birth is to be seen not as the cause or the means of the Incarnation but rather as a sign pointing to it. The virgin birth, as a supernatural birth, is a sign of the importance and supernatural character of the One born. It is also a sign to us of God's initiative in the Incarnation.

There is a variant reading of John 1: 13 which replaces the plural by a singular and affirms that *Christ* was born 'not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God'. It is all but universally agreed that this is not the original reading⁴⁰ but the verse remains relevant to the virgin birth. The variant reading draws our attention to the parallel between the virgin birth and the spiritual rebirth of the Christian.⁴¹ Many would maintain that John wrote with a knowledge of the Synoptics, implying that he knew of the doctrine of the

³⁵ The arguments of James Orr (*op. cit.*, 217-19); B. B. Warfield (*Biblical Foundations* (London, 1958), 121-3); J. G. Machen (*op. cit.*, 266-8) reduce largely to the need for a supernatural birth. Orr notes that we cannot show *a priori* that this had to be a virgin birth but once we accept the idea of a supernatural birth there is no room for any *a priori* objection to a virgin birth (*op. cit.*, 217-9).

³⁶ H. R. Mackintosh, *The Person of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh, 1931), 527; J. G. Machen, *op. cit.*, 380-2; K. Barth, *op. cit.*, 176.

³⁷ R. E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (London, 1974), 42.

³⁸ K. Barth (*op. cit.*, 178f., 181-4, 187, 189, 202) argues for the significance of the virgin birth as a sign. W. Pannenberg objects to the comparison between the virgin birth and the resurrection, arguing that the latter is central to the Gospel while the former is not (*Jesus God and Man*, 149; *The Apostles' Creed*, 73f.).

³⁹ The use of the empty tomb can obscure the comparison because it can be argued that the empty tomb was essential for the resurrection. If we replace the empty tomb by the grave-clothes (John 20: 6f.) the concept of a sign is perhaps better preserved.

⁴⁰ Edwards defends the singular reading (*op. cit.*, 131-42).

⁴¹ Cf. J. Orr, *op. cit.*, 111f.; K. Barth, *op. cit.*, 199f.; Von Campenhausen (*op. cit.*, 16) and Pannenberg (*Jesus God and Man*, 142; *The Apostles' Creed*, 72f.) claim that John 1: 13 is in fact polemic against the virgin birth, affirming that natural parentage does not determine spiritual nature.

virgin birth. If that is so it is reasonable to suppose that he is here consciously drawing a parallel between the virgin birth and regeneration. The point of comparison is the divine initiative and sovereignty in conversion (cf. 3: 8). So also the virgin birth shows us God's initiative and sovereignty in the Incarnation. It is not sufficient to say that the Christ was born when God sovereignly gave fruitfulness to Joseph and Mary (as with Isaac and John the Baptist). Instead Mary's conception is traced to God's positive initiative, not just to his sovereign overruling. Even if we admit that Mary's 'fiat' ('let it be to me according to your word' (Lk. 1: 38)) shows the importance of a genuine human response the point about God's sovereignty and initiative remains.

SINLESSNESS OF CHRIST

In the early Church it was maintained that Christ's sinlessness was guaranteed by the virgin birth. There are numerous references, at least from the fourth century, to his being born holy because he came from a pure virgin, undefiled by the taint of sexual intercourse.⁴² In the West this idea was further developed.⁴³ It was taught that original sin is passed on through the sexual lust involved in procreation.

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As Christ was conceived without sexual intercourse it follows that he was without original sin. The classic exponent of this view, though by no means its originator, was Augustine. 'Whenever it comes to the actual process of generation, the very embrace which is lawful and honourable cannot be effected without the ardour of lust, so as to be able to accomplish that which appertains to the use of reason and not of lust... This is the carnal concupiscence which, while it is no longer accounted sin in the regenerate, yet in no case happens to nature except from sin... Now from this concupiscence whatever comes into being by natural birth is bound by original sin, unless indeed it be born again in Him whom the Virgin conceived without this concupiscence. Wherefore, when He vouchsafed to be born in the flesh, He alone was born without sin.'⁴⁴ This teaching is clearly influenced by Greek philosophy in general and Augustine's Neo-Platonism in particular.⁴⁵ Sin is seen as a turning from the eternal and rational to the temporal and material. Passion and sensuality are wrong because they are temporal and this-worldly. But passion is nowhere stronger than in sexual desire, which is therefore the supreme, though not the only, form of the *concupiscentia* or lust following the Fall (a conclusion which was in harmony with the attitude to sex of the ancient world). Sex itself is good, because ordained by God (a formal admission to avoid the Gnostic or Manichean impugning of the goodness of creation). But since the Fall it is inseparable from sinful lust and thus can in practice be treated as sinful. The Pelagian controversy included a debate over the purity of marriage, Julian of Eclanum arguing for it and Augustine against.⁴⁶ As the Augustinian approach became orthodoxy it was naturally impossible to conceive of Christ being the product of sexual intercourse. The virgin birth thus became necessary for his sinlessness.

⁴² E.g., Athanasius, *De incarnatione*, 8.

⁴³ H. von Campenhausen, *op. cit.*, 79-86.

⁴⁴ Augustine, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 1: 24: 27 (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* V, Ed. P. Schaff (Grand Rapids, 1971), 275).

⁴⁵ T. J. Bigham and A. T. Mollegen, 'The Christian Ethic' in *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine*, Ed. R. W. Battenhouse (New York, 1969), 382-6.

⁴⁶ P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (London, 1969), 387-91.

Such a view of sex is certainly discredited today, and not only among Protestants. But the idea persists that the virgin birth is necessary to maintain the sinlessness of Christ. How is this argued? Usually it reduces to the single argument that a natural birth would produce a natural man, partaking in human sinfulness.⁴⁷ But this argument is not adequate. If we believe in the Incarnation there is no question of a purely natural birth. The Incarnation teaches that the one born was God incarnate and this surely provides an adequate basis for his sinlessness. Why should the absence of a human father also be necessary? The early Church had an answer to this question—original sin is transmitted through sexual intercourse. But this answer is unacceptable to most of those today insisting on the need for the virgin birth. They are therefore vulnerable to the counter-charge that we also need a sinless mother to explain the sinless child.⁴⁸ This easily leads to the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception.⁴⁹ The virgin birth only contributes to our understanding of Christ's sinlessness if it can be shown that original sin is transmitted either by sexual intercourse (as the Church fathers maintained) or through the male line. This latter view is propounded by Louis Berkhof, who somewhat inaccurately attributes it to Barth.⁵⁰ It is an ingenious theory which escapes the problem of a sinful mother. But there does not seem to be any biblical (or other) basis for the idea.

For Karl Barth the virgin birth is not the proof or explanation of Jesus' sinlessness but rather a sign pointing towards it, as with the Incarnation.⁵¹ It does not cause his sinlessness any more than Jesus' healing the paralytic caused his power to forgive sins (Mk. 2: 1-12). But at the same time Barth can state that the virgin

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birth 'declares that if Christ were the son of a male He would be a sinner like all the rest, and that therefore He cannot be the son of any male'.⁵² This theory is based on dubious premises, as will be shown in the following section.

Mackintosh argues that the sinlessness of Christ means that a unique birth is likely but that this need not have been a virgin birth and that a virgin birth does not in itself guarantee sinlessness.⁵³ This would seem to be a very fair summary of the evidence. Jesus' sinlessness certainly gives us no proof of the necessity of the virgin birth. While it may be felt to point to the appropriateness of a virgin birth it does so with far less clarity than the doctrine of the Incarnation.

OTHER GROUNDS

Apologetics, the Incarnation and the sinlessness of Christ are the areas where the rationale of the virgin birth is most often sought. But its significance has also been seen in other areas, which will now be considered.

⁴⁷ J. Orr, *op. cit.*, 188-201; B. B. Warfield, *op. cit.*, 125f.; J. G. Machen, *op. cit.*, 395. Orr quotes Luke 1: 35 but it is not certain that ἄγιον here means 'sinless' rather than 'set apart'. Even if it does, it is the Holy Spirit who makes him holy, not the absence of Joseph.

⁴⁸ E. Brunner, *op. cit.*, 325f.

⁴⁹ W. Pannenberg, *Jesus God and Man*, 148f.

⁵⁰ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London, 1971), 336. This approach is rejected by R. F. Aldwinckle (*op. cit.*, 196).

⁵¹ K. Barth, *op. cit.*, 189f.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 194.

⁵³ H. R. Mackintosh, *op. cit.*, 531f.

(1) *Grace*. Karl Barth saw in the virgin birth the expression of a wider truth that is fundamental to his theology.⁵⁴ It shows that 'human nature possesses no capacity for becoming the human nature of Jesus Christ, the place of divine revelation'.⁵⁵ While it does become his nature, this is not because of any attributes that it already possesses but rather because of what it suffers and receives at the hand of God. The virgin birth, therefore, is a further denial of man's natural capacity for God, a favourite theme with Barth. It contains a judgement upon man, not because he is a creature but because he is a disobedient creature.

For Barth the distinctive point about the virgin birth is what is lacking. This is not primarily the sex act, nor even the sinful element in it, but rather man's *active* participation. 'Man' is involved, but only as a 'non-willing, non-achieving, non-creative, non-sovereign, merely ready, merely receptive, virgin human being'.⁵⁶ Even after this it must be stressed that Mary has not brought something of her own to God for him to use: 'it is not as if virginity as a human possibility constitutes the point of connexion for divine grace'.⁵⁷ Barth argues that it is men, rather than women, who are the active agents in the history of the world. Therefore, if there is to be a sign of the Incarnation which is to be a countersign opposed to 'willing, achieving, creative, sovereign man' the male must be set aside.⁵⁸

Barth shows how the virgin birth can be used to illustrate his own distinctive theological tents. But a number of objections can be raised. First, Barth's view of the relation between the sexes is over-simplified and would today be considered by many to be 'sexist'. Secondly, not all will agree with Barth's highly negative attitude towards human potential. There are echoes in the above of his famous debate with Brunner⁵⁹ (e.g., 'point of connexion') and those who do not side with Barth in that debate will be less impressed by his argument here. This leads to the third and most basic objection. Barth's concept of sin is at fault. As Pannenberg rightly retorts, 'that man, whether male or female, is equally dependent upon God's grace can be upheld only if one sees all men ... [as] fallen into God's judgement upon sin, no less in their receptivity than in their creative activity'.⁶⁰ Barth does appear to be in danger of teaching the total depravity of all males, but not females.

While Barth's use of the virgin birth at this point is open to objection, he was not mistaken in applying the doctrine to the realm of grace. Warrant for this can be seen in John 1: 13, as has been argued above. The virgin birth points to

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God's initiative and sovereignty in conversion. To recognise this is not to sanction the distinctly radical manner in which Barth develops the point.

(2) *Soteriology*. Irenaeus' main contribution to soteriology was his teaching on Christ as the Second Adam.⁶¹ Whereas the First Adam started a disobedient and doomed humanity Christ

⁵⁴ K. Barth, *op. cit.*, 188-92.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 192-6.

⁵⁹ E. Brunner and K. Barth, *Natural Theology* (London, 1946).

⁶⁰ W. Pannenberg, *Jesus God and Man*, 148.

⁶¹ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*⁴ (London, 1968), 170-4.

has come as the Second Adam to inaugurate a new redeemed humanity. He 'recapitulates' the life of the First Adam, passing through the same stages and triumphing where the latter was defeated. To illustrate this theme Irenaeus draws out parallels between Adam and Christ. As the whole human race was corrupted by the sinful disobedience of one man, so their restoration comes through the obedience of another. As the Fall occurred through contact with a tree, so our salvation was won by Christ's death on a tree. As Adam was made from virgin earth, so Christ came through a virgin birth.⁶² Thus for Irenaeus the virgin birth is important as it preserves the analogy between Christ and Adam as regards their origins.

Today the search for such parallels is not so popular, but the virgin birth is still linked with Christ's role as the Second Adam. James Orr argues that in order to be the Second Adam Christ must have had a supernatural birth.⁶³ But, as has been argued above in connection with the Incarnation, a supernatural birth need not be a virgin birth. Conversely, as Barth argues, it is not the virgin birth that makes Christ the Second Adam. Instead, the virgin birth is a sign pointing to Jesus' role as Second Adam.⁶⁴ The concept of 'Second Adam' implies both continuity and discontinuity. It is essential that Christ be one of the human race, of the seed of Adam, and at the same time the need is for a new start in the creation of a new humanity. This combination of continuity and discontinuity is found in the virgin birth. Jesus is descended from Adam and yet he is also brought into being by the power of the Most High. Thus the virgin birth is a sign pointing to Jesus' role as the Second Adam.

(3) *Mariology*. Irenaeus did not restrict his parallels to Adam and Christ. He also contrasted Eve and Mary, following Justin Martyr.⁶⁵ Both were betrothed virgins. But whereas Eve disobeyed and ate of the forbidden fruit, Mary was found obedient: 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word' (Lk. 1: 38). 'And thus also it was that the knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith.'⁶⁶ Eve was deceived by an evil angel while Mary received the word of the angel and was obedient. 'And thus, as the human race fell into bondage to death by means of a virgin, so is it rescued by a virgin; virginal disobedience having been balanced in the opposite scale by virginal obedience.'⁶⁷ With Irenaeus this is probably the innocent search for parallels.⁶⁸ But it does not require much imagination to see how this can be developed to the point where Mary is today seen as Co-Redemptrix with Christ and her 'fiat' (Lk. 1: 38) is seen as a vital part of the salvation of man.⁶⁹ Thus the virgin birth has served, in R.C. theology, to pave the way to Mariology. Those who cannot accept the mariological doctrine will naturally not consider this to be part of the genuine significance of the virgin birth.

(4) *Virginity*. In traditional Catholic teaching the doctrine of the virgin birth has often been used to commend the celibate state.⁷⁰ But the gospel accounts do not exalt Mary's virginity.

⁶² Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 3: 21: 10; cf. 3: 18: 7.

⁶³ J. Orr, *op. cit.*, 201-7.

⁶⁴ K. Barth, *op. cit.*, 190. Cf. *The Faith of the Church* (London, 1964), 71f.)

⁶⁵ Justin, *Dialogue*, 100.

⁶⁶ Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 3: 22: 4 (*Ante-Nicene Fathers* I, Ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Grand Rapids, 1973), 455).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 5: 19: 1 (*Ante-Nicene Fathers* I, 547).

⁶⁸ H. von Campenhausen, *op. cit.*, 37-46.

⁶⁹ Vatican II, *De ecclesia* 8: 55f. This comes in a section entitled 'The Role of the Blessed Virgin in the Economy of Salvation'.

⁷⁰ H. von Campenhausen, *op. cit.*, 53-70.

Indeed, as Raymond Brown observes, Mary was engaged and had chosen marriage, not celibacy.⁷¹ Mary's virginity is stressed as

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evidence that Jesus had no earthly father, not as an ideal in itself. The same cannot be said of all later accounts of the virgin birth. An early example is the apocryphal *Protoevangelium of James*, from the middle of the second century, where all the emphasis is upon Mary and her virginity.⁷² Jesus himself is hardly mentioned. Another ascetic application of the virgin birth is found in the *Fragments on the Resurrection* of Justin Martyr or his contemporary:⁷³ 'Our Lord Jesus Christ was born of a virgin for no other reason than that He might destroy the begetting by lawless desire and might show to the ruler [i.e. Satan] that the formation of man was possible to God without human intervention'.⁷⁴ The writer continues that Jesus accepted necessary desires, like hunger and thirst. But 'lawless desire' is unnecessary and he did not submit to it but rather pointed forward to the future world where there will be no marriage. This ascetic teaching is based on the doctrine of the virgin birth. Such teaching became common in the following centuries. It is not surprising that this development occurred. The Gospel came to a world where the physical and sensual were despised and where asceticism was exalted. It was natural for such ideas to take root within the Church. It was also natural that the virgin birth should be used to support them. Here we have to acknowledge the truth of Barth's comment that it might have been better for the Christian doctrine of marriage had there been no virgin birth.⁷⁵ This does not mean that the virgin birth is untrue; it simply means that, like most doctrines, it is open to abuse.

The virgin birth does not really exalt celibacy unless it is supplemented with the further doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity. This doctrine is found already in the second century and was well established by the third century.⁷⁶ It is interesting to note that Calvin refused to commit himself on this matter while the marginal notes of the Puritan Geneva Bible of 1560 defended Mary's perpetual virginity.⁷⁷

One further extension of Mary's virginity must be considered. Thus far we have referred to the virgin birth, bowing to the pressure of common usage. Strictly speaking we have been referring to the virginal conception of Christ. It is true that Matthew states that Mary remained a virgin until the birth of Christ (1: 25) and thus that she was a virgin when he was born. But 'virgin birth' can mean much more than this. The doctrine arose that Mary's virginity was preserved physically inviolate during the actual birth—i.e. that the hymen was not broken. The idea is found as early as the *Protevangelium of James*, where full physical details are given.⁷⁸ It came to be widely held and is taught in Leo's *Tome*, which was accepted as authoritative by the Council of Chalcedon.⁷⁹ Through Gnostic influences there also arose the idea that Mary gave birth to Christ without any of the normal pains and without the need for a

⁷¹ R. Brown, *op. cit.*, 38-40.

⁷² E. Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha* I (London, 1973), 370-88. For a survey of other such apocryphal and pseudepigraphal literature, cf. T. Boslooper, *op. cit.*, 55-80.

⁷³ On its authorship, cf. B. Altaner and A. Stuiber, *Patrologie*⁷ (Freiburg-Basel-Wien, 1966), 68.

⁷⁴ (Pseudo-)Justin, *On the Resurrection* 3 (*Ante-Nicene Fathers* I, 295).

⁷⁵ K. Barth, *op. cit.*, 190f.

⁷⁶ J. B. Lightfoot, 'The Brethren of the Lord' in *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (London, 1876), 252-91.

⁷⁷ J. Calvin, *Commentary on Matthew* 1: 25; Geneva Bible Notes on Matthew 1: 25, 12: 46.

⁷⁸ *Protevangelium of James*, 19: 3-20: 4.

⁷⁹ Leo, *Tome*, 2.

midwife.⁸⁰ These ideas have been widely accepted within the R.C. Church but they are rejected today by at least some R.C. scholars.⁸¹

(5) *Myth*. In recent years some have given the virgin birth a very different significance. They argue that the doctrine is true but not in a literal, physical, historical sense. Raymond Brown, a Roman Catholic scholar, considers this issue. He surveys recent Catholic thought and concludes that it is an open question whether or not the virgin birth is physical and literal.⁸² He examines the authoritative pronouncements of the Church over the centuries and concludes that this particular question has not been answered.⁸³ After considering the theological, historical and scriptural arguments for and against the literal interpretation he

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concludes that the scientifically controllable evidence is insufficient for a clear answer to be given. While Brown does not commit himself either way, Thomas Boslooper has argued forcefully for a non-literal understanding of the virgin birth.⁸⁴ He writes with a 'firm conviction in the utmost importance of the virgin birth' but considers that traditional Roman Catholic and Protestant theology have been mistaken in treating it as literal history. Roman Catholic theology erred in that it 'produced a Docetic theology of Mary, questioned the sanctity of sex, and idealized virginity'. Protestant theology used the virgin birth 'to prove the deity of Christ and to set forth a moral idealism attached solely to the person of Jesus'. Both lost 'the original message that moral order is to be established within the marriage bond'. Boslooper argues that in the New Testament the virgin birth 'attests the humanity of Jesus and makes a strong plea for the sanctity of sex and marriage'. The last point is clearly important to him for he insists that the Church should stand 'firm on its conviction of the sanctity of sex, fidelity in marriage, and the imperative of the moral life'. 'If the church continues to deny, neglect, or misinterpret the virgin birth, it will continue to fail to employ one of its chief tools for building a well-ordered and moral society.'⁸⁵

Boslooper's interpretation of the virgin birth is not convincing. It is hard to see how the *virgin* birth conveys the Church's 'insistence on sexual purity and its belief in the sanctity of *marriage*'.⁸⁶ Von Campenhausen was surely closer to the mark when he affirmed that any moral interpretation of the virgin birth 'could, indeed, only have been ascetic'.⁸⁷ Boslooper accuses Catholicism of drawing false ascetic conclusions from the doctrine. But the ethical conclusions that he draws from the doctrine are far less plausible than the Catholic ascetic conclusions. How does a virgin birth exalt sex within marriage? At this point he becomes unhelpfully vague. He asserts that in New Testament times '“virgin” had a more general and less specific connotation than it had later on' but does not define this more precisely. He implies, rather than states, that the word could cover a woman who has had sexual

⁸⁰ H. von Campenhausen, *op. cit.*, 54f.

⁸¹ Cf. K. Rahner 'Virginitas in Partu' in *Theological Investigations* IV (London and New York, 1974), 134-62 surveys the history of these ideas and argues that they cannot be shown to be 'certain and universally binding'.

⁸² R. Brown, *op. cit.*, 22-30. Most noteworthy of his examples is the famous 'Dutch Catechism' which while not denying the literal nature of the virgin birth certainly did not clearly affirm it. A Commission of Cardinals insisted on various modifications. (*A New Catechism with Supplement* (London, 1974), 73-6; *Supplement*, 24-6.)

⁸³ R. Brown, *op. cit.*, 31-8.

⁸⁴ T. Boslooper, *op. cit.* Most of his book is a historical study. His own position is found on pp. 19-23 and 227-37.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 21-3.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 234 (my italics).

⁸⁷ H. von Campenhausen, *op. cit.*, 53.

intercourse. He states that Christ was born within the marriage bond and that the story of Jesus' conception teaches that two factors were at work in His origin: the divine and the human. 'Originally the emphasis was on God and Mary, the betrothed *woman*.' It was 'because of the magnificence of his character and personality [that] his conception had to be described in terms of divine conception'.⁸⁸ It is hard to believe that Boslooper is thinking of the gospel accounts. Leaving aside the question of the meaning of *παρθενος*, Luke affirms that Mary 'knew no man' (1: 34) and that Joseph was the father (as was supposed) of Jesus (3: 23). Matthew twice clearly states that intercourse had not occurred (1: 18, 25) and his account becomes pointless if Joseph was the father of Jesus. To deduce from this that the gospel narratives teach 'the sanctity of marriage' is merely wishful thinking. These ethical doctrines, clearly dear to Boslooper's heart,⁸⁹ would better be served by an account that clearly and unambiguously stated that Jesus was the child of Joseph, born within wedlock. But that is precisely what the gospel accounts, especially Matthew's, deny.

Boslooper's claim that the virgin birth points to Jesus' humanity⁹⁰ is also strange, even though the early fathers made use of the doctrine in their fight against docetism. If Jesus was in fact born in wedlock and if the aim of the narrative was to affirm his humanity, this aim would be much better served by a literal historical account of his origin as the son of Joseph. Boslooper's case for a non-literal

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interpretation of the virgin birth is weak because 'the truth and beauty which stream from the infancy narratives' (according to his interpretation) would flow much more forcefully from an account of a normal conception.⁹¹ If the virgin birth teaches anything it is that Jesus is in some way *different* from us and that he was not conceived within normal wedlock. It is strange, therefore, that Boslooper sees it as teaching the opposite: that Jesus is human and that marriage is sacred.

While Boslooper's account of the truths taught by the virgin birth may be untenable, it has not yet been shown that his arguments against its literal historicity are inadequate. He argues that it is ' "myth", in the highest and best sense of the word'.⁹² It 'represents in mythical form two of Christendom's principal logical propositions: that God acted in history and that monogamous marriage is civilization's most important social institution'.⁹³ Boslooper claims that 'Protestant Fundamentalists' have perverted the former proposition by insisting on the 'so-called "historicity" ' of the virgin birth.⁹⁴ This is a remarkable claim. It is not obvious how claiming that the virgin birth is a historical event is a perversion of the truth that God acts in history. The charge is related to Boslooper's view of the relation between history and myth. The virgin birth is a myth, 'an expression of Christology which formulates for the popular, primitive mind worthy and edifying Christian doctrine'. It presents 'in primitive concrete form what New Testament authors record elsewhere in philosophical and abstract modes of

⁸⁸ T. Boslooper, *op. cit.*, 228f.

⁸⁹ 'Christ proposed the necessity of one marriage for life.... The atmosphere is charged with the ethical purity and moral vigor.... The story of his origin presents the most sensitive suggestion of the necessity and beauty of the sanctity of sex and morality in marriage' (*Ibid.*, 235-my italics).

⁹⁰ Cf. also *ibid.*, 233f.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 236.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 234f.

thought'. Those who recognize it as myth show that they are thinking historically and have their faith rooted in history. Those who insist on treating it as literal history show that they are thinking mythically.⁹⁵ Logically, Boslooper ought to have concluded that the 'Protestant Fundamentalists' deny not that God has acted in history, which they vigorously assert, but that Scripture is a historically conditioned document. But even this charge falls to the ground unless it be established that the virgin birth was not historical. It is up to Boslooper to produce a better case for taking it as myth before indulging in such polemics against 'Protestant Fundamentalists' (who presumably include Barth, Mascall and other defenders of the historicity of the virgin birth).

The argument of this paper has been that the virgin birth cannot be shown to have been an absolute necessity and that it functions mainly as a sign. Does this not support the mythical approach of Boslooper? Is it any more necessary for the virgin birth to have been a historical event than it is, say, for the Good Samaritan to have existed? There are two reasons why it is important for the virgin birth to be historical. The Matthaean narrative is especially inhospitable to a mythical interpretation. Matthew's aim is apologetic—to answer the charge of illegitimacy and to point to the fulfilment of prophecy. Neither of these concerns would be satisfied by a mythical, non-historical virgin birth. The appearance of a child before the consummation of marriage cannot be explained by a mythical sign. As Robinson argues, the alternative to the virgin birth is not conception within wedlock 'for which there is no evidence at all', but illegitimacy.⁹⁶ Secondly, the role of the virgin birth as a sign goes if it did not happen. This is perhaps best illustrated by an example. Suppose I state that a bottle containing radioactive material has on it a symbol inscribed as a sign or warning of the contents. If there really is an inscription on the bottle then there really is a sign or warning. But if the inscription is mythical rather than literal and historical we no longer have a sign. Instead, my reference to the inscription is a mythical and symbolic way of saying

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that the bottle is dangerous. If I have already said that the bottle is dangerous, my reference to the inscription is simply a symbolic and more obscure repetition of the same warning. Such a poetic repetition need not be valueless or superfluous but it is no longer strictly accurate to call the inscription a sign. Thus Boslooper would appear to be inconsistent in approving of Barth's designation of the virgin birth as a sign.⁹⁷ We must not fall into the trap of assuming that everything in Scripture must be taken literally and historically. But with the virgin birth the evidence would seem to demand a literal historical understanding.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH

Why did the virgin birth occur? There is no clear ground for seeing it as an absolute necessity. Nonetheless it has a real part to play in our total picture of Christ. It is fitting and congruous with the rest of Christology in its role as a sign. It points to God's initiative in the birth of Christ and to the importance of the child born. It also points to the new start involved in the Second Adam, the originator of a new humanity.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁹⁶ J. A. T. Robinson, *op. cit.*, 57.

⁹⁷ T. Boslooper, *op. cit.*, 227f.

If the virgin birth is a fitting sign rather than an absolute necessity does this mean that it is unimportant? It is true that the doctrine of the virgin birth is not as central as the Incarnation, the cross or the resurrection. It appears with these doctrines in the creeds, but it cannot be assumed that all of the doctrines of the creeds are of equal significance. The descent into hell is clearly less significant than the resurrection. That the virgin birth is less central is supported by the paucity of reference to it in the New Testament and by the fact that very little theological use is made of it there. But less central is not to be confused with unimportant. Its inclusion in the creeds clearly implies that it was felt to be important. The Church should proclaim the virgin birth because it happened, because it is scriptural and because it is a pointer to Christ and to his work.

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