

with him, "one supreme aim of the Revelation of St. John is reached. To the interpretation of this picture the efforts of every student of the book ought to be chiefly directed. *Until we understand it all our labours in other directions will prove vain.*"

R. And now, my dear Mason, let me congratulate you on the attack which you have delivered upon a theory which still has considerable vogue and which you have dealt with on its merits. You have quite taken the argument out of my hands, and yet you have only filled them with another, though so far, perhaps, only of a negative kind; for in assailing Milligan's view you have, I think, come round to see that the only interpretation of Babylon is that it is a city, and that the only city which satisfies the conditions is Rome. This was the contention with which I began my observations to you to-day, and when we next meet, all being well, I will venture to supply, to the best of my power, the positive reasons in favour of that view. I am certain that they are conclusive, but you and I know that a man's certainty were but a breath in the balance when set against Truth.

E. C. SELWYN.

## STUDIES IN THE "INNER LIFE" OF JESUS.

### II. THE VIRGIN-BIRTH.

1. THE virgin-birth presents two closely related problems, the one critical, the other theological. Criticism must estimate the value of the evidence and decide whether we are dealing with fable or fact. Theology must investigate the significance for Christian faith of the fact, if it is proved to be a fact; but, if fable, theology need not concern itself with the matter any further, but may leave to criticism the task of showing to what local

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and temporary influences, mental, moral, or religious, the fable owes its origin. These two questions cannot, however, as is often taken for granted, be dealt with separately. We cannot leave to criticism the settlement of the question of fact or fable, altogether regardless of the light which theology may be able to throw upon the subject. An important factor in the settlement of even the critical question must be the theological interpretation of the character and consciousness, function and influence of the person, to whom this miraculous mode of birth is assigned. An experience or an action which in relation to one person might seem altogether incredible, may in regard to another seem quite intelligible. If a miraculous mode of birth were narrated of a person who had in no way been distinguished from his fellows, it would require very full and very clear evidence to convince us that the story was true, whereas the evidence which should be regarded as sufficient to prove an ordinary fact should satisfy us of the reality of an extraordinary event related of an extraordinary person. It is reasonable to believe about Jesus what there would be room for doubting about any other man. If, however, it must be conceded, an extraordinary event narrated of Him could not be brought into any intelligible relation to His life and work, but appeared as a foreign element without any meaning or worth for our understanding of Him, the probability of the truth of the record would be very much lessened. But if, on the contrary, the fact recorded helped in any way to explain what otherwise would appear more inexplicable, this probability would be greatly strengthened. What this study will attempt is to show that the virgin-birth, accepted as a fact, helps us to understand better than otherwise we could the "inner life" of Jesus. In this way it may enable some to decide the question who feel that the evidence for and against is for them indecisive.

2. It is not the writer's intention to discuss at all the critical problem, as so much has already been written on both sides that to treat the question again would be but a thrashing over of straw, out of which the grain has already been beaten. Suffice it to say that he himself is quite convinced, after candid and unprejudiced investigation, that the difficulties of accounting for the fable are greater than the difficulties of accepting the fact, making due allowance for the consideration already insisted on, that the person of whom this witness is given is Jesus. In reaching this conclusion he is sure that he cannot be justly charged with *reasoning in a circle*, for he has not first treated the virgin-birth as a proof of divinity, and then dealt with the divinity as a reason for the virgin-birth. A personal confession in this connexion may be pardoned; for him the virgin-birth was a burden and not a help to faith long after all doubt and difficulty about the divinity of Jesus had been removed. It is his belief in the divinity which renders credible, and his interpretation of the divinity which makes intelligible, the fact of the virgin-birth.

3. If the virgin-birth is to be accounted for as a fable, then the critic who undertakes to explain its origin must necessarily confine himself to the contemporary modes of thought and life which may have given rise to it, such as the mythological impulse to ascribe a divine descent to heroes, or the ascetic tendency to depreciate marriage and to exalt celibacy, although it may be remarked in passing that the undoubtedly Jewish origin of both narratives of the infancy seems to exclude both of these influences; he has no right to bring into the discussion any considerations drawn from a later age or a distant land. If, on the other hand, it is fact with which we are dealing, then the explanation which one age may give does not limit the freedom of a following age to discover, if possible, a more adequate

interpretation. The progress of human knowledge should enable us to understand the person of Jesus better than any previous age has done. Accordingly we may on the one hand frankly reject older explanations which seem defective, and on the other avail ourselves in our interpretation of any help which modern thought may afford.

4. Without any hesitation or reservation does the writer reject the accretions which in course of time have been added to the simple fact recorded in the Gospels, the immaculate conception of the virgin herself ("ab omni originalis culpae labe praeservatam immunem"), her miraculous parturition as well as conception of Jesus ("partus clauso utero"), and her perpetual virginity. The Gospel narratives, taken in the plain sense, teach that Jesus was the firstborn of Mary, that she and Joseph afterwards lived together in wedlock, and that there were other children in their home. There is no reason why we should seek to force an unnatural sense on their language. These narratives give no hint that the intention of the virgin-birth was to discredit marriage, or to commend celibacy, although there can be no doubt that the ascetic, monastic tendency in the Church afterwards sought and found encouragement in the fact. Still less can we regard the virgin-birth as affording any justification for the monstrous theory of Augustine, "that children possess original sin because their parents have procreated them in lust," and that "Christ has sinlessness because He was not born of marriage" (Harnack's *History of Dogma*, v. 211, 212). This view is due not only to his Manichaeism, of which he never entirely got rid, but still more to the effects left on his mind by the sensual bondage in which he so long lived before his conversion. It is blasphemy against God, who is responsible for the existence of sex, and the continuation of life by the union of the sexes. It is a libel on man, in whom the sexual impulse does not need to

sink to sensual passion, but may soar to moral love. For any such pernicious inferences the Gospels are in no way responsible, and Jesus' own teaching on the indissoluble union in marriage, on parental affection and filial obligation, clearly condemns such a view. It is necessary so emphatically to repudiate these superstitions in dealing with this subject, as it is to be feared many are prejudiced against the simple fact, because it has so often been presented along with these parasitic growths.

5. The starting point of our interpretation of the fact must be the moral character and conscience and the religious consciousness of Jesus. It is admitted by very many, who doubt and deny the virgin-birth, that He was sinless and perfect. No accusation could be proved against Him, and He never made any confession of guilt. In Him all the virtues of moral holiness, and all the truths of moral wisdom were combined. He was conscious of Himself as the beloved and approved Son of God His Father. Yet He was "in all points tempted even as we are," and He ever lived by faith in God's grace. He was the subject of a moral and religious development, which must have been from the very beginning without fault or flaw. Had there been any defect, even in his childhood, before the moral conscience and the religious consciousness were awakened, a record of it would have remained in His character and convictions. The perfect development presupposes a perfect origin. Every personality is the resultant of three factors—the individuality, in which lies the possibility of an original, independent development, the heredity, and the environment. When this individual possibility begins to be realized in consciousness and volition, it has already been in some degree determined in its direction and tendency by hereditary impulses and environing influences. The relation between the individual endowments and the hereditary bequests is as yet an unsolved problem; but this at least is certain, that no human

personality presents itself which has not been affected by inherited tendencies. But we may go one step further. It is also certain that there is no other human personality, except Jesus, in which a hereditary tendency to sin and distrust has not appeared. It is a fact beyond question that all children are born members of a sinful race, and have been tainted from their source. A sinless and godly development appears impossible for all who are completely, by natural generation, incorporated in the human race. While we must deny that it is the mode of connexion through two parents, which is the reason for the sinful inheritance, for in that case sex itself would need to be essentially evil, yet we must admit the fact. What made Jesus so absolutely unique ?

6. We do not solve the problem by a simple affirmation of His divinity, as that was revealed and realized in a humanity which was its adequate organ. The question we must attempt to answer is, What made the human soul of Jesus a fit tabernacle for the Divine Word, so that He lived a perfect life without sin in faith on God? While it would be rash and bold dogmatism to affirm that, had Jesus been born naturally, He must needs have displayed the inherited defects of the race, as we can conjecture that Divine grace might have acted prior to thought and will so as to suppress all hostile elements to a perfect moral and religious development; yet as a supernatural mode of birth is ascribed to Him in records, the witness of which to His words and works secures our credit and commands our respect, it is not a vain imagination, but a good reason to connect these characteristics of His personality with this unique feature of His birth. It seems to the writer unfortunate that the term virgin-birth throws so great an emphasis on the absence of the paternal function, as though the maternal function, under normal conditions, were not as liable to be the channel of hereditary taint, or as though it were the union of the two

functions, that caused the transmission of evil. What it seems desirable to throw into prominence is this, that the supernatural mode of birth makes the Divine activity initial and regulative, and the human receptivity dependent and submissive. It was surely fit that He who was not an offering of mankind to God, but came as a gift from God to man, should not be born by the will of man, but should be sent in the fulness of the times from God. We shall, however, miss the full significance of the fact, if we are content to marvel at a physical miracle of the Divine omnipotence; we must seek to apprehend and appreciate the spiritual conditions in dependence on, and subordination to, which the physical miracle took place. As in the miracles of Jesus, Divine grace claimed and called forth human faith, so in His miraculous conception His mother's faith received and responded to God's grace. The revelation of God's purpose came to Mary not only as promise claiming trust, but also as command asking obedience. God's gift brought both a task and a trial. She was "not disobedient to the heavenly vision," distrustful of the heavenly voice. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it to me according to Thy word." It is an inadequate conclusion that the faith and surrender of the mother was only the preliminary condition of the Divine miracle, and that once secured, the conception was afterwards altogether unaffected by the spiritual condition thus inspired by God's revelation. We only do full justice (it seems to the writer at least) to all the narrative suggests and the whole problem demands, when we recognize that the mother of Jesus was in her maternal function, by God's Spirit dwelling and working in her, so isolated from the sin of the race, and so elevated by faith in, and surrender to, God, that Jesus, as true man as well as very God, did not need to be totally exempted from heredity, but inherited from his mother, not sin, but faith in, and surrender to, God, as the dominant tendency of His life. But as Mary's faith

and surrender had a history, the history of Divine revelation and human religion in previous ages, which had become her inheritance, Jesus through His mother is thus connected with the believers and saints of old.

7. This interpretation of the fact seems to offer us several advantages. First of all, it disposes of the objection that it is materialism to explain the sinlessness of Jesus by a physical miracle, as the virgin-birth is shown to involve a great deal more than a physical miracle, and spiritual conditions are assumed for its spiritual effects. Secondly, it enables us to regard Jesus as a member of the race, incorporated in its history by His moral and spiritual inheritance, and not as a stranger among men, isolated from their development. God's previous preparation is not ignored or denied, but is recognized in His mother's dependence on, and submission to, God, which she imparted to Him as well as the substance of her body. Thirdly, it is more honouring to her, to whom God showed so great favour, for we regard her not as the passive instrument of a physical process, but as an obedient and trusted agent in a Divine purpose, communicated in grace and accepted in faith. Fourthly, it is more in accord with God's general methods of working, as He uses as far as possible natural forces and human efforts, even when His purpose demands the exercise of His supernatural divine power along with and through these subordinate means.

8. There is one serious objection to the view of the sinless nature of Jesus here advocated, which claims fuller attention. It may be said that, if Jesus' moral nature was, by a supernatural act of God, exempt from all sinful tendency, then His sinless moral development loses for us its significance and value as example and encouragement. Firstly, it may be said in explanation that there was moral struggle, although there was no sinful tendency. As morally free, and not merely as naturally sinful, is man exposed to



temptation. Moral perfection has to be attained by struggle. Thus the reality of Jesus' moral development is in no way lessened by its sinless beginning unless we are prepared to affirm that sin is a necessity to moral development. Secondly, it ought not to be forgotten that His moral development was not simply exemplary, that is, to give us immediate guidance in our present moral difficulties, but it was typical, as according to the Divine intention for man, in which sin has no place. Thirdly, it cannot be supposed that He would understand our difficulties better, and sympathize more tenderly with our failures, if He were Himself conscious of sinful tendency. It is a common mistake to assume that sin begets insight and pity, whereas sin only darkens the mind, and hardens the heart. Only the sinless knows clearly all that sin means, and feels fully all that sin costs. He who has not saved himself from sin cannot save others, Fourthly, let it be remembered that we are not required alone and at once to reproduce the perfection of Jesus in our lives. God knows all the moral hindrances which are in our natures, and He lays upon us not the moral task of the sinless, but of the sinful becoming by His grace sinless.

9. The interpretation of the virgin-birth here offered does not pretend to be an exhaustive or adequate explanation of the moral and religious perfection of Jesus. His personality is, to use Harnack's words, "His secret, and no psychology will fathom it"; and yet it is both our right and duty to go as far as our data will allow in trying to discover the meaning as well as the worth of His person. That His divinity and God's creative act, even in His humanity, must be taken into account in any complete statement about His character and consciousness, is not here ignored or denied, in calling attention to, and laying emphasis on, a factor in the problem which is generally disregarded when its solution is attempted. An interesting confirmation of the view of the Virgin here offered is afforded by Dante's description of her

as an example of humility, grace which blends faith and surrender.

The angel (who came down to earth  
 With tidings of the peace so many years  
 Wept for in vain, that oped the heavenly gates  
 From their long interdict) before us seemed,  
 In the sweet act, so sculptured to the life,  
 He looked no silent image. One had sworn  
 He had said "Hail!" for she was imaged there,  
 By whom the key did open to God's love,  
 And in her act as sensibly imprest  
 That word, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord,"  
 As figure sealed on wax.

ALFRED E. GARVIE.

THE NEW TESTAMENT AND JEWISH  
 LITERATURE.<sup>1</sup>

PART II.

TURNING to the question of the authorship of the books of the Old Testament—this was a subject in which the inspired authors of the New took little interest. Apart from the numerous phrases embedded in the text, there are about 286 express quotations from the Old Testament, only in about 51 cases, less than a fifth, is a personal name connected with a quotation.<sup>2</sup> *James* and *1 Peter* contain several, but never give the author's name; *Jude* is chiefly made up of references to the Old Testament, and to apocalyptic literature, but the only quotation it connects with a personal name is a passage from the Book of Enoch as spoken by Enoch. Often, especially in *Hebrews*, passages are quoted simply as the utterance of God or of the Spirit—"He saith," "the Holy Ghost saith"—the name of the human author is immaterial.

<sup>1</sup> The inaugural lecture at New Coll., London, October, 1901.

<sup>2</sup> Hühn, *A. T. Citate*, p. 269; the "about" is necessitated by uncertainties as to text, etc.