

Davidic Descent and the Virgin Birth

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This note sets out to state a question, not to answer it. I hope that it will lead to further discussion. I myself do not know what the answer is.

So far as I can see from a hurried examination of early creeds and credal statements, nowhere is there any mention of the descent from David but everywhere it is asserted that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary. That is true both of the Eastern and of the Western traditions. But, when we turn back to the New Testament, we find a different situation. The emphasis laid upon the fact that Jesus is of the seed of David is at least as great as is the stress upon His birth from a Virgin.

Both the First and the Third Gospels say that the birth of Jesus was without human paternity. Whatever may have been true of the various sources which they used, they both assert this as a fact. The Christian communities from within which these gospels were written and within which they became current held this belief. But it is less clear that it was from the beginning a belief of all Christians. Mark says nothing about the birth of Jesus and this may well mean that there was no mention of the miraculous birth in the preaching which he knew. It is not explicitly mentioned in the Fourth Gospel but personally I find it impossible to interpret a number of passages in that Gospel except on the view that the writer both knew and accepted as a fact the miraculous birth of Jesus at Bethlehem.

Yet, on the other side, there is no clear proof in any other part of the New Testament of the existence of such a belief. Not only is it not mentioned. It plays no part in the theological thinking of any New Testament writer. It is not just a question of the miraculous. The resurrection is no less miraculous. But the resurrection constantly is implied in every book of the New Testament. It is woven into the whole pattern of theological thinking. Without the resurrection as a fact of history the whole New Testament becomes unintelligible. That is simply not so with the virgin birth.

But, when we turn to the New Testament from the ancient credal statements, we find that there is another belief which is

in fact extremely important for almost every writer and that is the belief that Jesus was the descendant of David foretold in the Old Testament. Even the two gospels which tell of the virgin birth also insist on the Davidic descent. It appears in Paul, in Hebrews and in the Revelation. And in every place it is plainly important, as it is also in the sermons in Acts. It is essential to the Gospel, as understood by the New Testament writers, that it be an historical fact. Jesus is the Messiah and the Messiah is the Son of David.

The question that needs an answer better than any which I have yet met with is this: how can Jesus be both born of the Virgin Mary and Son of David? The obvious answer is that Mary was descended from David. But this is just what neither of the two genealogies in the gospels, divergent as they are, even suggests. They are genealogies of descent through Joseph. The only indication, and that a very slight one, of Mary's tribe is the statement that her cousin was Elisabeth, a Levite. It is often asserted that descent was reckoned through a legal paternity even if it were not actual and, in the course of normal life, that would obviously be true. But it is legitimate to ask whether the stress of the New Testament writers, with their use of the very physical word 'seed', is really adequately recognized by anything less than an actual birth within the lineage of David. It is difficult to see how 'of the fruit of his loins' (Acts 2:30) is thought of as fulfilled in anything less than a real descent from David. It is clear from their form that both the Matthean and the Lukan genealogies are older than the gospels in which they now appear and probable that they existed once within circles that held the Davidic descent to be of primary importance, traced it through Joseph in a normal sense, and knew nothing of the story of a virgin birth. It is significant that neither the First nor the Third Gospel makes any serious attempt to explain how the genealogies stand in relation to their independent accounts of the birth of Jesus without the paternity of Joseph.

This is not to deny that 'Matthew' and 'Luke' accept both beliefs as true and important. It is to say that they do nothing to show how both can be true. I believe that the Fourth Gospel also holds both these beliefs but, once again, it does not indicate how they can both be true, in the realm of historical fact.

Some people say that they are two ways of describing the indescribable unique divine act. They are inclined to look upon the stress on the descent from David as necessary in any approach to Jews and also as a category within which Jews would easily state their faith in the divine saving act to which they had looked forward. Its almost complete disappearance, as seen in the absence of any mention of it in any creed, is then explained by the Hellenization of Christian thinking as the Gospel moves into the Gentile world. But it has to be said that the story of the birth of Jesus comes in the First no less than in the Third Gospel and that even in Luke the birth sections are strongly Hebraic. It would be

rash to maintain that the belief that Jesus was born of a virgin sprang up among Christians only after the Gospel had moved away from its original Aramaic speaking background into the Hellenic world. We find the clearest statements about the virgin birth alongside the belief in the descent from David. It may be added that recent interpretations of the Fourth Gospel would find in it, too, a very powerful Old Testament and Jewish background of thought.

At least for those who are convinced that the Christian Gospel is essentially and vitally bound up with history this attempt to represent the virgin birth and the Davidic descent as two alternative 'myths', legitimate in their place, pointing to the uniqueness of the divine act in Jesus, but not necessarily true as history, is, I think, unsatisfactory. But, to do justice to the New Testament, it is important to see that there the Davidic descent matters more, if we take the whole New Testament literature into account, and plays a much greater part in the New Testament theological thinking, than does the virgin birth. There is a real change between the New Testament and the creeds.

I will finish by restating my questions :

1. How is it possible to believe, consistently with the New Testament evidence, both that Jesus was born of a virgin and that He was the Son of David ?

2. If there is no satisfactory answer and we have to choose one or the other as historically true, is it not a fact that the New Testament evidence for the truth and importance of the Davidic descent is stronger than that for the virgin birth ?