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## THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF OUR LORD

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There was recently an organized movement to put the Christmas story and the Christmas songs out of the public schools of New York City. Our whole country became interested and even excited. There is another movement which may well cause us deeper concern, though it is being carried on so quietly that we scarcely notice it. It is a movement to put the Christmas story out of the Bible itself. The whole trend of modern, radical criticism is to deny the Virgin Birth of our Lord, and practically all of the incidents which go to make up the beautiful story of his birth. One quotation will suffice to show to what lengths some of these critical scholars go. It is from Soltan's "Birth of Jesus Christ." "An evangelical Christian, that is to say a Christian holding fast in his religious convictions to the gospel of the Apostles and the Apostolic school, is no longer able to believe in the supernatural origin of Jesus. \* \* \* Whoever makes the further demand that an evangelical Christian shall believe in the words, 'Conceived of the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary' wittingly constitutes himself sharer in a sin against the Holy Spirit of the true gospel as transmitted to us by the Apostles and their school in the Apostolic Age."

Nor is this denial of the Virgin Birth confined to the critical schools of Germany. It is creeping into the modern pulpit. The City Temple in London is one of the great pulpits of the world, and in the days of Dr. Joseph Parker the pure gospel was preached there in great power. Dr. R. J. Campbell, a minister of wonderful gifts and of wonderful personal mag-

netism, now stands in that pulpit. Here is what he has to say in his recent book, "The New Theology," which is made up largely of material which he has preached to his people: "Popular theology has it that Jesus, the only begotten Eternal Son of God, took human flesh and a human nature, was conceived by the Holy Ghost in the womb of a virgin, and was born into the world in a wholly miraculous way—a way which stamps him as different from all that were ever born of woman before or since. It seems strange that belief in the Virgin Birth of Jesus should ever have been held to be a cardinal article of Christian faith, but it is so even to-day. There is not much need to combat it, for most reputable theologians have now given it up. \* \* \* The only two gospels in which the Virgin Birth is alluded to are Matthew and Luke. But the two gospels are mutually contradictory in their accounts of the circumstances attending the miraculous birth. \* \* \* These accounts do not tally, and no ingenuity can reconcile them. The nativity stories belong to the poetry of religion, not to history. To regard them as narrations of actual fact is to misunderstand them. The simple and natural conclusion is that Jesus was the child of Joseph and Mary and had an uneventful childhood." There are ten pages of stuff just like this. Perhaps Principal Fairbairn was a bit severe when he called this book a "farrago of nonsense," but he was in the neighborhood of truth. There are other pulpits in the world where this same kind of gospel is being preached. I do not know of any in our own Church, I am glad to say, but I do know a few laymen who do not hesitate to deny the Virgin Birth of Jesus.

I have studied this question as carefully as the work of a busy pastorate would allow, and by request I will now put down in order some of the things which I have learned and some which have come to me. I will endeavor to give the chief objections which are urged against the Virgin Birth and indicate what seem to me to be satisfactory answers to these objections.

1. It is simply incredible. There was never anything like it before, there has never been anything like it since. It is an isolated phenomenon. Not only so, but it is directly contrary to all that we know of the laws of nature. Of course there are

stories in heathen mythology which are somewhat similar to this, but nobody ever took them seriously or believed in them. It is contrary to reason and to all our human observations, and that is all there is about it.

To me there is a very convincing answer to this objection lying very close at hand. Certainly there was never anything like this before, nor do we expect to hear of the like again, but the Eternal Son of God was never born into the world before and never will be again. We should expect something absolutely unique about such a birth. Grant that he was divine and there is nothing incredible about such a wonderful birth. Even if one hesitates about his divinity, he must confess that Jesus was a very unique person. There has never been another like him upon this earth. He was sinless. Is it strange if the birth of such a one was unique? Here is a sentence from Prof. A. B. Bruce which is worthy of all consideration: "A sinless man is as much a miracle in the moral world as a Virgin Birth is a miracle in the physical world."

If one feels that the birth of Jesus is incredible from a scientific point of view, let him ponder these words from Prof. Huxley, who certainly had no bias in favor of the supernatural: "The mysteries of the Church are child's play compared with the mysteries of Nature. The doctrine of the Trinity is not more puzzling than the necessary antinomies of physical speculation; Virgin procreation and resuscitation from apparent death are ordinary phenomena for the naturalist."

2. It is an unnecessary and an unimportant doctrine. Belief in the Incarnation does not depend in any way upon the story of the Virgin Birth. Instead of being an aid to faith it is a positive dead weight. There are a dozen other ways in which the Incarnation might have been accomplished.

It is wonderful how strongly this argument is urged. There are several things which can be said in reply to this objection. If it is of no importance, why are some of the greatest scholars of Germany and England so busy trying to disprove it? But it is of importance and it is necessary that we stand for the truthfulness of the Christmas story, for the veracity of the whole gospels of Matthew and Luke hangs upon this point.

If this story is not true, we have no assurance that anything else they say is true. It is not so much a question of doctrine as it is of fact. Certainly the Incarnation might have been accomplished in other ways, but as a matter of fact, how was it accomplished? Columbus might have discovered America in one of a dozen different ways, but that does not cast the slightest doubt upon the truthfulness of the story in our histories as to how he actually did discover it.

We go further. It is not only important as a matter of fact, but it is important as a doctrine. The Incarnation and the Virgin Birth are so inseparably connected and intertwined that they stand or fall together. So far as I have been able to find there is only one great scholar who denies the Virgin Birth and yet believes that Jesus Christ is the Eternal Son of God in the fullest metaphysical sense, and that is Meyer, the New Testament Commentator. As for the necessity and importance of the doctrine, it may have bearings upon other plans and doctrines of God of which we have never dreamed.

3. The story had its origin in heathen myths. The records of all the nations have been searched and similar stories are quoted from the myths and legends of Babylon, Egypt, Greece, Rome, India, China, and many other nations. These stories as they are paraded in the beautiful dress of modern literary style look very plausible.

There are several things to say to this. One is that out of the vast array of myths there is not reported a single real Virgin Birth. In every case the father appeared upon the earth in human form, or in the form of some monster. But the most effective and crushing answer is to read the original of the myths without their modern dress. That will be sufficient. They are crude and vile beyond degree. What a contrast they are by the side of the chaste and heavenly story of the New Testament.

But there is another thing. Grant that there are heathen stories that resemble the New Testament story, the Hebrews were not open to such heathen influence before the days of Jesus. Indeed, they never have been open to them. David Smith in his book, "The Days of His Flesh," has this to say: "The mere

fact that the infancy story arose on Jewish soil is a singular attestation to the truthfulness of the evangelistic story."

4. The story of the Virgin Birth was invented to make the New Testament fall into line with the Old Testament prophecy. The Jews had been led by the Old Testament prophets to expect a certain kind of Messiah. The New Testament writers are trying to convince them that these expectations are met in Jesus. This led Matthew and Luke to do some inventing. Especial stress is laid upon the Immanuel passage in Isaiah 7: 14.

Of course we who believe in the inspiration of the Scriptures are horrified at such a line of argument. But I feel that there is no need to be alarmed. There are several convincing answers. As a matter of fact, we know that Jesus was not the kind of Messiah that the Jews were expecting. That is the very reason they crucified him. It is very certain that the Jews were not expecting a Virgin Birth in connection with their Messiah. Edersheim, himself a Jew, has in his book, "Jesus, the Messiah," given 456 passages of Scripture which were Messianically interpreted by the Jews, but the Immanuel passage in Isaiah 7: 14 is not included in this exhaustive list. The truth of the matter is that it took the inspired minds and prophetic eyes of the Apostles to discover the true Messianic passages in the prophets of the Old Testament. The Apostles quoted many passages which the Jews had never even remotely connected with their expected Messiah.

If any one will study carefully all the Old Testament passages quoted by Matthew and Luke in connection with the birth of Jesus he will finish his study in sympathy at least with this sentence from David Smith—who I think goes rather too far: "The history was not adapted to the prophecy, but on the contrary the prophecy was adapted to the history."

5. The account of the Virgin Birth is given by only Matthew and Luke, and is unsupported by the other New Testament writers. Mark says nothing of it, John does not mention it, Paul makes no sort of reference to it, and the other writers do not seem to have heard of it. Jesus never referred to it. His contemporaries evidently believed that he was the son of Joseph.

In fact, Matthew and Luke make no further reference to it after their first two chapters. Some go to even greater lengths and assert that the chapters relating to the birth of Jesus were not a part of the original gospels of Matthew and Luke, and that they have been added by a later hand. This line of objection can be made to appear rather formidable when presented in a strong light. Let us see if there is answer.

There is not the slightest ground for rejecting these chapters. They are in all the ancient manuscripts. If Matthew and Luke wrote any part of the gospels that bear their names they wrote these chapters.

It is true that many of the contemporaries of Jesus supposed that Jesus was the son of Joseph. It is probable that the story of his birth was not widely circulated during his life on earth. The very nature of the case made it a subject that was too delicate and too sacred to be talked of promiscuously. It is also true that Jesus said nothing of the nature of his birth. There was no reason why he should say anything. He did not try to convince the people of his Messiahship in that way. He let them form their estimate from what they saw with their own eyes and heard with their own ears. He often requested that nothing should be said of some great miracle he performed.

We may as well confess that Mark, and John, and Paul say nothing directly of the Virgin Birth of Jesus. But that is no reason for saying that they did not know anything about it. I have been preaching for ten years, but I have no recollection of ever saying anything directly on this subject. I have been hearing sermons all my life and I have no recollection of ever hearing a minister preach on the subject or refer to it directly. Does our silence mean that we know nothing about it? Before me is a volume of sermons by Dr. Warfield, that great defender of the faith once delivered to the fathers, yet in the whole volume I can not find one direct reference to the Virgin Birth, although there is one sermon on the Incarnation. Is it possible that Dr. Warfield has never heard of the miraculous birth of our Lord? To such absurdities do the arguments from silence lead us.

But Paul and John are not altogether silent. Even a casual reader can see a reference to it in many passages of their writings. The whole of the introduction to John's gospel assumes the doctrine. How else did the eternal Word become flesh and dwell among us?

But grant that we have only the testimony of Matthew and Luke. Two reliable witnesses are enough to establish a fact in any court of law. The writings of Matthew and Luke have been thoroughly sifted, they have been examined microscopically, but no man has been able to find a real flaw in them. If you want to see the gospel of Luke put through a searching analysis and examination, read Sir William Ramsay's book, "Was Jesus Born at Bethlehem?" and yet it comes out without the smell of fire on it. If Matthew and Luke are reliable on all other points, why should their testimony be rejected on this point?

Luke seems to have gotten his story from the mother of Jesus. It is told from a woman's point of view. Matthew evidently got his story through Joseph or some one who stood close to him. It gives Joseph's point of view. Probably the story was confined to an inner circle until after Jesus ascended, and then it was given to the Church at large. We can hardly conceive of Paul's not knowing it after having Luke as his bosom friend and companion for several years. Indeed, many references in Paul's epistles would not be intelligible without supposing that he was thoroughly acquainted with the story of the Lord's birth. When we look at these objections in this light they seem to me to vanish entirely.

6. But there are irreconcilable differences between the accounts of Matthew and Luke. R. J. Campbell says that no amount of ingenuity can reconcile them. Matthew leaves us under the impression that Bethlehem is the home of Mary and Joseph. He says not a word about Nazareth until after their return from Egypt, and they go to Nazareth then not because it is their home, but because they fear Archelaus. Matthew knows nothing of the enrollment under Quirinius, or of the journey to Jerusalem, or the inn, or the manger, or the shepherds. Not only so, but the genealogy of Jesus given by Mat-

thew is hopelessly different from the genealogy given by Luke. These objections can be largely elaborated.

However, I feel confident that if a man will approach these two records with an open heart and open mind he will not find them contradictory, but supplementary. Certainly Matthew's account is very different from that of Luke, and I am glad that it is. This difference gives us a guarantee that there was no collusion, but that each wrote independently. These differences are not contradictory, but corroborative. Neither one told all that he knew about Jesus. That was impossible in a short gospel. We may well believe that they were guided by the Spirit to tell the story from different points of view.

As to the genealogy, anybody can see that there are marked differences. I will confess that I have never seen any explanation of these differences which is perfectly satisfactory. There are two explanations which are reasonable; one is, that Matthew is giving the genealogy of Joseph; and Luke the genealogy of Mary; the other is, that Matthew is giving the royal lineage of Joseph, while Luke is giving his actual lineage. The latter is elaborated very fully by Lord Hervey, both in his book on the subject and in his article in Smith's Bible Dictionary. While these explanations are not entirely satisfactory, they are reasonable, and so long as there are two reasonable explanations no man can affirm that there are hopeless contradictions.

These are the main objections urged against the Virgin Birth of our Lord. No one writer urges them all. Just here is a point that has struck me very forcibly as I have studied the subject. These critics answer each other's objections very effectively and sometimes crushingly. For example, the latest theory is the Babylonian theory put forward by Prof. Cheyne, but in trying to establish his own theory he effectually cuts the props from under all the other objections which have been raised.

My conclusion is that we need not grow excited or alarmed. These little systems will have their day and cease to be. We may go on telling the beautiful Christmas story to our children and to our children's children with the full assurance that it is true, and that it will stand until time shall be no more, because it is true.