

The Virgin Birth¹ Again

M. E. GIBBS

There still seems to be something more to be said on the subject of the Virgin Birth. In the first place, what is the evidence for the virgin birth as an historical fact? There is a great deal of confusion of mind on questions of this kind among theologians who are not trained historians. It is impossible to prove the historicity of any event as we prove a proposition in mathematics and, whilst certain occurrences in the past rest on such strong evidence that it would be extremely difficult to deny them, there are few occurrences about which no one has ever undertaken to show that the accepted view is mistaken. We must not require stronger proof of the historical facts in the Bible than an historical scholar would require for the facts of secular history. Moreover, certain events are much easier to get reliable evidence about than others. One of the most elusive is what really happens at the conception of a child. This is an event about which only the father and mother of the child know very much, and even they may not be entirely certain. In the case of our Lord's birth we have two obviously independent accounts, that in St. Matthew's gospel told from Joseph's point of view, that in St. Luke's from Mary's. The two accounts agree on the main points: the names of Joseph and Mary, their betrothal, the fact that Mary became pregnant before intercourse had taken place between them, the birth at Bethlehem and the upbringing at Nazareth. But there are considerable differences which it is not altogether easy to reconcile. St. Matthew's gospel says nothing of a previous residence at Nazareth, and St. Luke nothing of the visit of the magi or the flight into Egypt. The story of the coming of the magi is the most difficult to fit in, though it becomes easier if we rid our minds of the traditional expansions of the story and concentrate on what the gospel of St. Matthew actually says about it; but even in St. Matthew the story seems to have gained something in the telling. A recent suggestion that the magi were in fact magicians or fortune-tellers of no very exalted spiritual or intellectual status, and that the story came to be told to show how

¹ A previous article on this subject, by the Rev. J. Nelson, appeared in *The Indian Journal of Theology* for July 1959, and one by Bishop Hollis in April 1959.

the Incarnation had abolished their magic arts, may very well be true. So long as books were written in the form of rolls, writers were pressed for space, and the kind of compression which St. Luke was capable of can be seen by comparing his account of the Ascension in the gospel and in the Acts. The fact, therefore, that St. Luke does not mention the sojourn in Egypt, probably a very short one, cannot be given much importance.

I

In examining the historicity of the story of the Virgin Birth, two points need to be clearly brought out. In the first place, it was not suggested by the passage in Isaiah 7:14. This contains no suggestion of a virgin birth in the Hebrew, where the word used means simply 'young woman'. It is decidedly a less usual word than that which is always used where it is intended to emphasize virginity. Mary and Joseph were Aramaic-speaking Jews of Palestine, Hebrews of the Hebrews; and are unlikely to have been influenced by the Septuagint translation *παρθένος*. There seems to have been no expectation that the Messiah would be born of a virgin, as is shown by Mary's reaction to Gabriel's message (Luke 1:34). The claiming of Isaiah 7:14 as a prophecy of the virgin birth of the Messiah looks like an after-thought, resulting from the belief that every detail of the life of Jesus Christ must have been foretold in the Old Testament.

Secondly, the story is told in a very matter-of-fact manner. This is something that happened in the real world. In this it differs entirely from the common mythological stories in which a mortal woman becomes pregnant by a god. In these stories, the problem of her reputation or of the rearing of the semi-divine child is either ignored altogether or provided for as miraculously as the birth. There is nothing of this in the nativity stories in the gospels. The only departure from the normal course of nature is Mary's pregnancy without intercourse with a man. Joseph's reaction as described in St. Matthew's gospel is exactly what might be expected; and though the removal from Nazareth to Bethlehem would help to make it less evident to all the world that the baby had been 'born too soon', all adverse comment does not seem to have been avoided. The comment in John 8:41 can probably be interpreted as a taunt based on these rumours.

Why should the story of a virgin birth be told at all? There are really only two possible explanations. Either it is true, or the stories are told to cover up an illegitimate birth; at least, pre-marital intercourse between Joseph and Mary. On the evidence, we have not the choice between a virgin birth and a birth in wedlock according to God's holy ordinance. We have the same dilemma as we have about the person of our Lord. He was either God or not a good man. Our Lord was either born of a virgin, or He was born of fornication.

II

The problem of our Lord's Davidic descent and the two genealogies falls to be considered next. It is clear that our Lord was generally accepted as being of David's line, as, for example, the cry of Bartimaeus shows (Mark 10:46-48). As any abnormality about His birth was certainly not generally known in His lifetime, whatever rumours might be abroad, this could only arise from His being the reputed son of Joseph; and therefore Joseph's genealogy becomes relevant. The difference between the two genealogies is best explained by adoption. That in Matthew is obviously artificial, the 'fourteen generations' being obtained by the omission of some names. Between Joram and Uzziah, as the book of Kings shows, came Ahaziah, Joash and Amaziah; and Jeconiah was the grandson, not the son, of Josiah. Jeremiah 22:30 suggests that Jeconiah was childless; and if this was so, Shealtiel, the father of Zerubbabel, may have been an adopted son from another branch of the descendants of David, and this may account for the difference between the names in Matthew 1:6-12 and Luke 3:27-31. The destruction wrought by the capture of Jerusalem and the captivity would account for the difficulty of finding any nearer descendants of the seed royal. A further adoption of Joseph, or perhaps his grandfather, Mathan or Mathat, into the elder line of Zerubbabel, would reconcile the later differences.

There are difficulties about the date of the census which took Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem for the birth of our Lord. St. Luke was an accurate recorder of contemporary events and conditions, but this census occurred probably a decade or two before he was born, and this is just the period about which the memories of most of us tend to be most confused; and in those days there were no handy books of reference to settle the question. There seems therefore to be some confusion, which further archaeological discovery may clear up, about its exact date and nature. It seems to have been a revision of land registers rather than what we now know as a census, and it would be natural for Joseph, as a descendant of the house of David, perhaps even, by adoption, its head, to possess land in Bethlehem. This land could not, of course, have been continuously in the possession of the family since before the exile; the destruction wrought by Nebuchadnezzar was too great for that; but when Zerubbabel returned as governor, it seems clear by comparing Ezra 2-4:6 with the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah, that he had thoughts of restoring the rule of the house of David; and it would be natural for him to acquire land in the ancestral town of Bethlehem. The land once acquired, there is no reason why it should not have continued in possession of the family till the time of Joseph. The church historian Eusebius quotes Hegesippus, a second-century Jewish-Christian writer, as describing how Domitian had search made for the descendants of David, who

were also kinsmen of the Lord, and how two grandsons of Jude the Lord's brother were produced, who owned a little land which they cultivated themselves, as was proved by their horny, toil-worn hands. There is, however, no indication of the district in which their land lay, and, the siege of Titus and capture of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 having intervened, it may not have been identical with Joseph's holding.

For some centuries after the return from exile, the Jewish state was narrowly bounded by a twenty mile radius from Jerusalem. But about 100 B.C. under the Hasmonean kings, the richer district of Galilee was conquered. It would be natural for enterprising families to see a future in settling in the new district instead of remaining in poverty-stricken and overcrowded Judea. The residence of Joseph and Mary in Nazareth may well have been the result of a migration of some of the house of David not more than a century before. If so, it would be perhaps natural for them to keep themselves to themselves, and to be anxious not to be too closely identified with the half Gentile population of Galilee; whilst they kept possession of their family land in Bethlehem.

All this explains why our Lord was thought of as a possible Messiah because of His Davidic descent, a fact which He never denied, although He was obviously not anxious to stress it, for fear of the misunderstandings attached to the idea of Messianic kingship. The picture of the good shepherd looks back to such passages as the description of the shepherd king in Ezekiel 34:23, 24; the fulfilment in the triumphal entry of the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9 is certainly a claim to kingship, though to kingship of a special kind; nor did our Lord deny His kingship before Pilate (John 18:33-37). Again, the question about Psalm 110 (Mark 12:35-37), though it is meant to suggest that the Messiah is more than a son of David, certainly suggests that He is at least that.

But our Lord would not be in fact as well as by repute a son of David according to the flesh unless Mary as well as Joseph were of Davidic descent. It is unlikely that St. Paul who states this emphatically (Romans 1:3) was ignorant of the Virgin Birth. The argument from silence is of little historical value, and the wording of Galatians 4:4 definitely suggests that he did know of it. The idea that St. Paul knew little of our Lord's earthly life and that he was not interested in it does not bear scrutiny. As he himself said, 'This hath not been done in a corner' (Acts 26:26). He must have learnt a great deal about it even during his days as a persecutor. Later he had plenty of opportunity for learning more from those who had been 'in Christ before him', as well as from St. Peter, St. John and James the Lord's brother. St. Luke, to whom we owe the nativity stories, was one of His most intimate companions for years. Is it likely that St. Luke only learnt about the virgin birth of our Lord after the death of St. Paul? Or that, if St. Luke knew about it,

St. Paul did not ? But there is a more definite indication than this in the account of the annunciation. The angel Gabriel speaks of the Lord God giving to Mary's son 'the throne of His father David'. Now this very passage makes it clear that a virgin birth is to be expected, and Mary, at this time only betrothed and not married to Joseph, could not be certain that he would not repudiate her, as St. Matthew's gospel shows he very nearly did. In this context, therefore, this phrase can only point to Mary's being also of the house of David. There is nothing unlikely in this. Marriages between near cousins were and are common among Jews, and would be the more probable in a group of orthodox families living in what must have seemed to them the semi-pagan atmosphere of Galilee. That Mary's cousin Elisabeth was of a priestly family is no objection to this. Nothing like a caste division was involved, and there are other examples in the Bible of intermarriage between royal and priestly families.

III

What is the spiritual value of the virgin birth, and why was it so entirely fitting that our Lord should be born of a virgin ? It is surely not to be found where Barth places it, in the fact that it was entirely God's doing, without the necessity of the co-operation of human wills. Mary was clearly free to accept or reject the great vocation to which she was called, otherwise her words in 5:38, 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to Thy will', would have no force. Moreover, Joseph's will was also involved, quite as much as if he had been the actual father. He had to accept the situation and fulfil his vocation of foster-father, though his acceptance might bring discredit on him as well as on Mary. There is here no overriding of human freedom.

What happens at a human conception ? In the first place, something purely physical, analogous to breeding in animal and even in plant life. The condition of this is the coming together of male and female, sperm and ovum. But, strangely enough, at the human level, every act of copulation does not result in conception. Something more, some special exertion of the creative power of God, is evidently needed. The virgin birth involves the belief that, just once in human history, conception took place without copulation. It was therefore strictly a new creation, that which normally comes from the male being supplied by the creative power of the Holy Spirit which 'moved over the waters' at the time of the original act of creation. Our Lord was the second Adam, the new man. This does not involve a strictly biological inheritance of original sin which had to be broken ; for original sin could equally be inherited through Mary's human nature. (The late and quite unhistorical doctrine of the immaculate conception of Mary is intended to solve this difficulty). Our Lord had to identify Himself completely with

sinful man, otherwise He could not 'become sin' for us and offered on behalf of all mankind the one acceptable sacrifice. The human nature which He assumed had to be a full and complete human nature.

But a human conception differs from similar events in the lower creation because it involves the coming into existence of a new personality, a new spiritual being. Where does this new soul come from? Is it inherited like the physical characteristics, or is something more required? If so, then this something more can only be the creative activity of God, though it seems strange that this creative act is so often performed when the intercourse has been the result of adultery or rape. This is part of God's dangerous gift of freedom to man.¹ But, in the conception of our Lord, alone among human conceptions, there could be no question of the creation of a new soul. The pre-existent Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, was to become man.² This was an utterly different matter from an ordinary human conception. The withholding of the creation of a soul after fertile intercourse had taken place would be as great an exception to the ordinary course of nature as a virgin birth would be.

The incarnation involved the complete union of the divine and human natures in the person of our Lord. It was neither the birth of a demi-god, half-human, half-divine, as in many pagan mythologies; nor the deifying of an ordinary human being; nor was it in any sense illusory. 'The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.' In the nature of things, the purely historical evidence that this happened by means of a virgin birth is inconclusive, but it is sufficient for those who see in Jesus Christ the incarnate Son of God. It involves neither an overriding of the freewill with which God has endowed man, nor the exaltation of virginity in itself over marriage according to God's holy ordinance. It does involve the possibility of a new beginning for sinful and now redeemed humanity.

¹ God acts by respecting and concurring with the secondary causality with which He has endowed His creatures, not (except in strictly miraculous interventions) by suppressing it or superseding it. We might indeed sometimes find ourselves reflecting, if the thought might be allowed without irreverence, that it would be a good thing if God interfered a little more in the process of human conception than He does; certainly His concurrence in the process might seem sometimes to involve a remarkable connivance with human acts which are positively against His will. This is, of course, only a special case of a very pervasive problem, the problem of God's extreme forbearance with human perversity and His extreme respect for human freedom; it does not differ in essence from the question why God did not strike Hitler dead or why He doesn't 'stop the atom bomb' (Mascall: *Christian Theology and Natural Science*, pp. 282-3).

² There is discontinuity because something happened in the Incarnation which had never happened before; he who became man was *God* (op. cit., p. 310).