

THE PROBLEM OF THE

Virgin Birth

AND APOLOGETIC FOR IT

Manfred E. Kober, Th.D.

THE PROBLEM OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH AND APOLOGETIC FOR IT

Topic Outline

- 1A. Introduction.
- 2A. The Argument from Silence.
 - 1b. The Gospels of Mark and John.
 - 2b. The Writings of Paul.
- 3A. The Argument from the Early Church.
 - 1b. The Jewish Christians.
 - 2b. The Sects.
- 4A. The Argument from the Old Testament Predictions.
 - 1b. The Contribution of Genesis 3:15.
 - 2b. The Contribution of Isaiah 7:14.
- 5A. The Argument from the Gospel Narratives.
 - 1b. Their Genuineness.
 - 2b. Their Credibility.
- 6A. Conclusion.

1A. Introduction:

The opposition launched against the virgin birth of Christ is almost coextensive with the preaching of the gospel itself. The pagan philosopher Celsus (178 A. D.) opens his polemic against the Christians by charging that Jesus, whom they worship, was not born of a virgin but was the son of a human father. From that time on, the supernatural conception of Jesus has suffered intermittent criticisms which have varied in degrees or scope and intensity. Then, starting with the closing of the 19th century, there has been an all-out assault upon the truth of the virgin birth of our Lord.¹ The attack, however, is not confined to the virgin birth but affects the whole supernatural estimate of Christ. But it is thought that this miracle is more easily got rid of than the evidence for public facts, like the resurrection, resulting in the fact that in many quarters the virgin birth is openly treated as a fable or myth, and belief in it is scouted as unworthy of modern insight and intelligence. Proof of this can be readily seen in the heretical pronouncements of Bishop Bromiley C. Oxnam, Bishop James A. Pike and more recently, the Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong.

2A. The Argument from Silence:

1b. The gospels of Mark and John:

The objection to the narratives on the virgin birth on which most stress is laid is the silence concerning the miracles in the remaining Gospels and other parts of the New Testament. This is to prove conclusively that the virgin birth was not known in the earliest Christian circles, and was a legend of later origin. Respecting the Gospels of Mark and John, the objection would only apply if it were the design of the Gospels to narrate, as do Matthew and Luke, the circumstances of the nativity. Both Mark and John knew that Jesus had a human birth and that His mother was Mary. But they deliberately tell us nothing about it. Mark begins his Gospel with Christ's entrance on His public ministry, omitting an explanation of how Jesus came to be called "the Son of God" (Mk. 1:1). John tells us that the "Word became flesh" (Jn. 1:14), but does not say how this miracle of becoming flesh was wrought. It did not lie in John's plan to say so. He knew the Church tradition and had access to the Gospel narratives of the virgin birth, and he takes the knowledge of their teaching for granted. So where is the alleged contradiction?²

2b. The writings of Paul:

From the silence of Paul on this item nothing detrimental can be inferred. The one thing that was central to the mind and preaching of Paul was the resurrection of Jesus. He must have known of the supernatural origin of Christ because he was in company with Luke. One thing certain is, that Paul could not have believed in the divine dignity, the pre-existence, the sinless perfection, and the redeeming work of Christ as he did and not have been convinced that His

¹ Orville E. Crain, *The Credibility of the Virgin Birth* (New York: The Abingdon Press, 1924), 5-6.

² R. I. Humberd, *The Virgin Birth* (Flora, Indiana: R. I. Humberd, n.d.), 243-244.

entrance into humanity was extraordinary and miraculous in nature. This Son of God, who “emptied” Himself, who was “born of a woman, born under the law,” “who knew no sin” (Phil. 2:7-8; Gal. 4:4; 2 Cor. 5:21) could not be the simple product of nature. Paul wrote his epistles about 53-61 A.D. If the virgin birth had been an incipient heresy, Paul must have known of it and would most surely have denounced it as he did some of the other Jewish and heathen heresies that were threatening the Church.³

3A. The Argument from the Early Church:

1b. The Jewish Christians:

Those who object to the virgin birth occasionally appeal to the history of the early Church in confirmation that his belief was not primitive. However, as far as one can trace back in the history of the Church, Christians have always held this doctrine. No Christian sect is known to have denied it, save the Jewish Ebionites. The general body of the Jewish Christians accepted it—and so did the greater Gnostic sects in their own way. Those Gnostics, like Cerinthus, who denied it, were vehemently repelled by the Church’s greatest teachers.

2b. The Sects:

At this point it is well to consider the Scriptures themselves as far as their prophetic and historical accounts of the virgin birth are concerned. Those who assert that nothing depends on this belief for one’s estimate of Christ do a gross injustice not only to the plain statement of Scripture, but, in fact, deny the possibility of their own salvation. Those who are ready to deny the credibility of the Gospels are also quick to deny the supernatural element of the prophecies of the Old Testament.

4A. The Argument from the Old Testament Predictions:

1b. Genesis 3:15

There are those who assert that the Old Testament is strangely silent on the fact of the virgin birth. But is this true? Relevant to this discussion is the oldest of all evangelical promises, that the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). The “serpent” is Satan and the “seed” who would destroy him is described emphatically as the *woman’s* seed. As sin entered the race through the woman, so salvation would come through a woman. The early Church writers often pressed this analogy between Eve and the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus.⁴

2b. Isaiah 7:14

³ Crain, *op. cit.*, 48-49.

⁴ Hubert Vecchierello, *The Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ* (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1932) 14.

The clearest expression of the virgin birth in the Old Testament is found in Is. 7:14, centered in the declaration, “Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” This is none other than the child of wonder extolled in Is. 9:6-7. Critics strenuously object that the word “virgin” or “almah” actually means “virgin.” They insist that it means “young woman.” This is true, but the usage of the term also applied to “virgin,” and throughout the whole Old Testament, “use of the term ‘almah’ applies only to persons who are virgins, and to such only as are in the flower of youth, in opposition to a virgin denoted by the common, indeterminate word ‘betulah’.”⁵ Furthermore, the translators of the LXX understood the term to mean “virgin” and rendered it as such.

The prophecies of the Old Testament were fulfilled. In Bethlehem of Judea, as Micah had foretold, was born of a virgin mother, He whose “goings forth” were “from of old, from everlasting” (Mic. 5:2; Mt. 2:6).

5A. The Argument from the Gospel Narratives:

1b. Their genuineness:

By general consent, the Matthew 1 and 2 and Luke 1 and 2 narratives are independent—yet both affirm, in a most detailed way, that Jesus, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, was born of a virgin, Mary of Nazareth, espoused to Joseph, whose wife she afterwards became. The birth took place in Bethlehem and announcement by an angel was made to Mary and Joseph beforehand.

Critics assail the genuineness and trustworthiness of the Gospel records. But it can be firmly retorted that the narratives are undoubtedly genuine parts of the Gospels. The only manuscripts and versions that fail to mention the narratives of the virgin birth are those that have been corrupted and mutilated by either Ebionitic or Gnostic tendencies. But even these manuscripts are few in number and cannot be employed as evidence.⁶

2b. Their Credibility:

As to the Gospels themselves, they were not of late origin but were written by apostolic men and accepted from the first. Luke’s Gospel was from Luke’s own pen and Matthew’s Gospel passed without challenge in the early Church as the genuine Gospel of the Apostle.

The sources for the narratives concerning the virgin birth are Joseph and Mary themselves. Matthew’s account is told from Joseph’s point of view, Luke’s is from Mary’s. The narratives are not contradictory but independent and complementary. They bear the stamp of truth, honesty, and purity.

⁵ Charles L. Feinberg (ed.), *The Fundamentals for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregels’ publications, 1961) 242-243.

⁶ Crain, *op. cit.*, 39-40.

Thus the virgin birth stands. Had Christ been naturally born, He could never have reversed the curse of sin and death brought in by the first Adam. He, as one of Adam's race, not an entrant from a higher sphere, would have shared in Adam's corruption and doom—would Himself have required redemption. Through God's infinite mercy He came from above, inherited no guilt, needed no regeneration or sanctification, but became Himself the Redeemer, Regenerator, and Sanctifier for all who receive Him. "Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift." (2 Cor. 9:15).

1 Timothy 3:16

And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness:

*God was manifested in the flesh,
Justified in the Spirit,
Seen by angels,
Preached among the Gentiles,
Believed on in the world,
Received up in glory.*