

The Virgin Birth of Christ

by W.H. Griffith Thomas

The Virgin Birth is a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith, demonstrating the uniqueness and divinity of Jesus Christ and providing an adequate explanation for His earthly origin.

Scripture: Genesis 3:15, Deuteronomy 22:23, Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah 9:6, Matthew 1:20, Luke 1:35, 2 Corinthians 13:14, Galatians 4:4, 1 Peter 1:19

Topics: "Christology", "Virgin Birth"

Description

W.H. Griffith Thomas delves into the significance of the Virgin Birth in explaining the earthly origin and uniqueness of Jesus Christ. He emphasizes the importance of considering the Virgin Birth in light of the New Testament accounts in Matthew and Luke, highlighting the impact on the authenticity of the Gospels. The sermon explores the historical, theological, and philosophical reasons supporting the belief in the Virgin Birth, including the necessity to account for the uniqueness of Jesus' life and the Church's universal belief in this doctrine. Thomas also addresses the challenges posed by modern denials of the Virgin Birth and the implications of rejecting this foundational belief on the Person of Christ.

Transcript

Although the Virgin Birth is not strictly an evidence of the Divine Person of Christ, but simply the New Testament explanation of the earthly origin and appearance of His Person, it seems necessary to include a consideration of it in the present discussion. The prominence given to the question is one of the most obvious facts of recent theological thought. While, therefore, the purpose of this book would have been fully served without any discussion of the Virgin Birth, the attention devoted to that problem for several years past is so thoroughly indicative of a general attitude to Christianity on the part of many minds, that it may be well to state the Christian view and to give reasons for adhering to the New Testament teaching.

Without concentrating attention on particular arguments, it is proposed to adduce several reasons which singly and cumulatively support a belief in the truth of the Virgin Birth. Starting from the most obvious position, the Virgin Birth is the account of our Lord's introduction to earth which is found in the New Testament. The chapters in Matthew and Luke present this view, and no other is fairly deducible from the records as we now possess them. We are therefore on sure ground in arguing that at least the authenticity of the first and third Gospels in their present integrity is involved in the denial of the Virgin Birth.

If this is not a fact, our Gospels can hardly retain the position they have had for centuries, at any rate so far as the early chapters are concerned. And even though the rest of the Gospels may conceivably be

spared, their value must necessarily be greatly weakened by the removal of these early chapters. There is no certain warrant on purely literary and textual grounds for separating these chapters from the rest of the Gospels of which they form a part. The brevity and reserve which characterize the chapters in relation to the Virgin Birth are very noteworthy.

There are only two verses in Luke's account which actually deal with the Virgin Birth, though, of course, the whole narrative is instinct with the idea. Further, there are no valid arguments based on textual criticism that would lead us to separate these chapters from the rest of the Gospel. Still more, the claim made by Luke in his preface to have "carefully traced everything accurately from the first" is a strong argument in favor of their authenticity. Nor can we disregard Luke's medical training, his close association with St.

Paul, and the significant reference in Gal. 4:4 to our Lord being born of a woman. Even if this be not a subtle allusion to the uniqueness implied in the Virgin Birth, we may fairly argue for the authenticity of the story from all that we know of Luke personally and from his association with the great Apostle of the Gentiles. Not least of all, the clear independence of the genealogies given by Matthew and Luke is an unmistakable proof of the genuineness of these chapters. We find another support for belief in the Virgin Birth in the universal belief of the Church in all ages.

All recent criticism tends to push back the dates of the Gospels well into the first century, and they thus become strong witnesses for the belief of the Church of that day. It is also a simple matter of historical fact that from the time of Ignatius the Virgin Birth has been held by the Church, and has for centuries been enshrined in the great historic creeds. Surely this would count for a great deal even after making all possible allowance for the uncritical ages of the Church.

The early date of the Gospels leaves no adequate time for the growth of myth and legend or for the apotheosis of Christ by enthusiastic disciples. The early reception and universal acceptance by the Christian Church of the idea of the Virgin Birth is one of the greatest historical problems unless it has been based upon simple fact. The chief support for the doctrine is, however, the necessity of accounting for the uniqueness of the life of Jesus. The fact of this uniqueness, as we have seen, is "writ large" on the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament.

It constitutes the problem of the ages, and has hitherto defied solution in any other way except by the Christian explanation. Now it may fairly be contended that such a unique life demands a unique origin and entrance into the world. We have to be told when and how this supernatural life began on earth. If we believe that in the Person of Jesus Christ God was manifest in the flesh, we may point to the Virgin Birth as at least a satisfactory way of accounting for that Divine coming into human life.

As it is impossible to reduce the person of Jesus to the limits of ordinary humanity, we work back from His uniqueness to discover some explanation of His method of entrance upon human conditions. Let us suppose Jesus to be very God, and the Virgin Birth becomes at least credible. Our belief in the doctrine is supported by the consideration that no other adequate explanation is forthcoming as an alternative. The doctrine continues to hold the field as accounting for the entrance of Jesus into our humanity.

Every effect must have its adequate cause, and the life of Christ finds no other cause or explanation than that of the Virgin Birth, so far as His earthly origin is concerned. Besides, the Virgin Birth seems to include and combine all the elements which were required for the human life of the Messiah. (a) The Messiah was to be the legal heir of Joseph. Betrothal gave the legal status of wedlock (Deut. 22:23-24), and in such

phrases as "Mary thy wife" (Matt. 1:20), "His father David" (Luke 1:32), we see the fulfillment of this requirement in the Person of Jesus, the Son of Mary, the betrothed wife of Joseph, the heir of Solomon. (b) The Messiah was to be born of a virgin, or at least of a young woman.

Whether Isaiah 7:14 is to be rendered by "virgin" or "young woman," a Messianic application of the passage seems clear, and coming midway between the "seed of the woman" (Gen. 3:15), and "born of a woman" (Gal. 4:4), it certainly points to His human parentage on the maternal side. (c) The Messiah was to be the Son of God. Another Messianic passage is Isaiah 9:6, where the Child with the four or five names is clearly someone far beyond any human personality, and in the light of Luke 1:32, 35, and 2:11, it is impossible not to see in these passages the unique Divine Sonship of the Messiah as realized in Jesus the Son of Mary. (d) The Messiah was to be a perfect sacrifice for sin.

The Passover and other offerings required by the Mosaic law pointed forward to something yet to come, to the blood which spoke "better things than that of Abel"; and in view of such passages as 1 Peter 1:19 we can readily see how the sinless and spotless Person of Jesus was the complete fulfillment of these typical anticipations. Now, when these four historical requirements are considered separately and together, they are seen to be fulfilled by Him whom the Church believes to have been "conceived of the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary."

There is no other personage in history in whom all these four requirements are blended, united, correlated, and fulfilled. We have a right to demand an alternative before giving up the universal belief of centuries. Our reluctance to yield the question of the Virgin Birth is confirmed by a consideration of the attitude of mind on the part of many who deny it. In general, the denial is due to the prevalence of belief in a doctrine of evolution. Now, whatever may be said of this doctrine in the spheres of natural and mental science, we are still without proof that morality can be accounted for by it, much more that human self-consciousness and self-determination are explicable thereby.

Above all, we are faced with the fact that Jesus Christ cannot be explained in terms of evolution; the records of His life and extraordinary influence conclusively disprove the theory in His case, and in view of this great exception we have a right to say that if evolution cannot account for His personality as Man, it may well be unable to account for His human origin. If a Divine intervention was necessary to account for the Man Christ Jesus, it may have been equally necessary for His earthly origin.

At least there is no a priori reason why this should not be the case. There is, however, a special reason for being suspicious of present-day denials of the Virgin Birth. They are connected with a phase of modern philosophy which substitutes for a Divine Incarnation in the Person of Christ a Divine Immanence in creation, and will allow only such Immanence in Christ as we find in nature and in man. Further, this philosophy substitutes ideas for facts, and dissipates the historic personality of Jesus in ideas which are to have for us the value of God and His truth.

Now it is manifestly easy to surrender the Virgin Birth if there has been no Incarnation and no historical revelation of God in Christ, but granted the historical appearance at a particular period of Jesus Christ as Messiah and Redeemer, it is obvious that no mere natural and human considerations, and certainly no mere ideas, will account for Him. It is an unquestioned historical fact that from the time of Cerinthus, who was the first to deny the Virgin Birth, denial of this has often led to the rejection of the Incarnation itself.

The historic Person of Jesus as Messiah and Saviour as stated in the former chapters has still to be explained, and all attempts to solve the problem apart from a Divine Incarnation have utterly failed. It is

futile to say that belief in the Virgin Birth is due to Jewish ideas, while at the same time the one Old Testament text that looks in that direction (Isa. 7:14), is denied. If that passage is not to be used in support of the doctrine, then there is no Old Testament anticipation whatever, and certainly nothing in Jewish literature of the time of Christ to account for the doctrine.

Nor is there any proof that any such expectation prevailed among Alexandrian Jews as represented by Philo. Again, there is no trace of Oriental influence on Christianity which would account for a belief in the Virgin Birth. The chapters in the Gospels are essentially Jewish in characteristics, and not only is there no trace of any such contact of Oriental ideas with primitive Christianity as would suffice for the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, but still more, the hostility of early Christianity to other forms of thought would almost certainly have prevented any such influence if it had been forthcoming.

The argument from incarnations as believed in India today is not to the point, because there is no trace of early contact between Christianity and India, and because Indian incarnations have no virgin birth associated with them. They are witnesses to the doctrine of a Divine Immanence, but nothing more. [See Tisdall, *Mythic Christs and the True*, for a discussion on the supposed connection of Christianity with Eastern faiths and cults.] The one rock on which all these non-miraculous theories are shattered is the historic Person of the Man Christ Jesus.

He has to be accounted for. The effect demands a sufficient cause, and the Virgin Birth alone gives this adequate explanation of the mode of entrance upon His earthly life. If it be asked why this doctrine was not made prominent in the early Church and put in the forefront of apostolic preaching, the reply is obvious. There was no need of it. Attention was rightly concentrated on the resurrection of Jesus and the Divine claim involved in that. In other words, it was the unique Personality rather than the mode of His earthly appearance that formed the Gospel.

We can see this by a simple illustration. The Apostles preached the Divine forgiveness of sins in Christ instead of proclaiming the Godhead as a Trinity revealed in Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. By so doing the hearers would be led through the avenue of personal experience to a spiritual assurance concerning Christ which no intellectual discussion could either give or take away. But on the basis of this personal experience the early Christians would inevitably seek some intellectual explanation, and thus from their personal consciousness of Jesus Christ in His redeeming power they would rise to a distinction between Him and the Father which virtually carried with it an essential distinction such as is now involved in the doctrine of the Trinity.

We can see that by the time of 2 Corinthians (13:14) the Christian doctrine of the Godhead as Triune was perfectly clear. In the same way, the doctrine of the Virgin Birth would in due course give the early Christians the needed and adequate explanation of the mode of the appearance of Christ, and we know by the date of Luke's Gospel that the doctrine was then fully known and accepted. The preaching of the fact of the Incarnation rather than the mode is the true method of presenting the Gospel; first what Christ is, and only then how He came to be what He is.

In these considerations of the true perspective of Christian teaching we may rightly explain the silence of St. Paul and St. John. There was no need of the Virgin Birth for evangelistic purposes, but only for the intellectual instruction of Christian people. Adequate reasons could be given for silence on this point in the earliest years of the Church, but to argue from this silence to a disbelief, or at any rate to an ignorance of the doctrine on the part of the early Christians, is not only in the highest degree precarious, but is really

contradictory of the facts associated with the early date of Luke's Gospel.

From all this it will have been seen that the Virgin Birth cannot be viewed alone or discussed merely on its historical evidences. It must be considered in the light of our impression of Christ and His revelation. In other words, our decision will virtually depend upon our theological and philosophical presuppositions concerning Jesus Christ. As Illingworth rightly says - It is impossible to approach any complex problem without presuppositions; and doubly so a problem that not only involves physical, moral, and spiritual elements all combined, but is also of supreme personal interest, of one kind or another, to all who approach it, and touches human nature to the quick.

Indeed, it is not too much to say that the controversies waged over the Gospel history are entirely concerned with the presuppositions of the respective combatants. The Gospels considered as documents that have come down to us are the same facts for all alike. It is over their interpretation that issue is joined, and this interpretation is determined by our presuppositions. [Illingworth, Reason and Revelation, pp. 88, 89.] Even if it were possible to satisfy everyone on the historical and critical problems connected with the early dates and integrity of the first and third Gospels, we should not have settled the question.

The decision depends on something far deeper than scholarship. It turns on our view of the Person of Christ, whether or not He is Divine, supernatural, miraculous. Attention must be concentrated on this point. The ultimate solution of a belief in the Virgin Birth lies in the answer to the question, "What think ye of Christ?" We therefore see no reason for rejecting the testimony of the Gospels and the witness of the whole Church to the Virgin Birth. If the narratives of the Gospels are not true, they are a deliberate fiction; there is no other alternative.

And if the Church has been mistaken throughout the centuries, it is certainly the greatest, most widespread, and most persistent delusion that has ever been known. Two almost insuperable difficulties appear in this connection: (1) How did the idea of the Virgin Birth arise so soon if it was not based on fact? (2) How were the narratives of the Gospels accepted so early and universally if they were not historical? The Person of Christ must, therefore, be accounted for. A sinless Man is a moral miracle, and inasmuch as mind must have an organism by which to express itself, there is no valid reason for not accepting a physical miracle.

We approach the Virgin Birth with the definite belief in Jesus Christ as God to which we have come on independent grounds, and our acceptance of the truth of the Virgin Birth is thus mainly due to our prior belief in the Godhead of Christ. To quote Dr. Stanton - Believing in the indissoluble union between God and man in Jesus Christ, the miraculous birth of Jesus seems to us the only fitting accompaniment of this union, and so to speak, the natural expression of it in order of outward facts. [Stanton, The Jewish and the Christian Messiah, p. 376.]

The ultimate decision will perhaps only be arrived at by settling the question as to what Jesus came into the world to do. If the one thing that man needs is illumination, then ideas will suffice, and no Divine Incarnation is necessary, but if there is such a thing as sin in the world, we must predicate a Divine, sinless Redeemer to deal with it. For such a Redeemer the only adequate explanation, so far as His earthly origin is concerned, is the ancient belief of the Church Universal that He was "conceived of the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary."

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