

Evidence for the Virgin Birth



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The Gospels of Matthew and Luke clearly assert that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary, and that he had no human father. This belief, popularly known as a belief in the virgin birth of Christ, seems to many people to be strange and even irrational. I suggest, however, that it is as well attested as very many of the beliefs Christians have about Jesus; and that it is an entirely plausible and natural belief, if one accepts that Jesus is indeed the only-begotten Son of God, who was raised from death and lived a life of quite unique identity with God. In the first part of this essay I shall look at the New Testament evidence. In the second part I shall show how the virgin birth has a deep spiritual meaning and significance for a full Christian faith.

A unique occurrence

It must be first of all noted that a virgin birth is, and is meant to be, a unique occurrence. In the Bible there are quite a number of miraculous births, when the mothers were beyond the normal age of child-bearing – as with the mothers of Isaac and John the Baptist. But there is no precedent for a conception without a human father. Thus such a birth would clearly mark Jesus out as quite different from any of the patriarchs or prophets of Israel, as a wholly unique person. It would not mean, of course, that Jesus was not fully human. He would still have 46 chromosomes and the same biological constitution as any other person. The fact that none of them came from Joseph is not of any biological significance. So Jesus would certainly be a human being, though marked out from everyone else by the manner of his conception.

It should also be said straightaway that the fact of the virgin birth does not imply in any way that there is something wrong with sexual intercourse. Christians have always taught that marriage is a good and holy relationship,

instituted by God himself. But it is quite obviously true that if Mary was visited by an angel, and conceived a child without knowledge of any man, she and her immediate family would be in n doubt at all of the uniqueness of Jesus from the very first. This was to be no ordinary baby; and the accounts in the Gospels which record the birth are clear that Jesus was regarded as very special from the first.

It is sometimes said that since the Gospels of Mark and John do not mention the virgin birth, and St Paul does not do so either, it must have been a later invention of some groups of early Christians. But that is a very weak argument. Paul hardly mentions anything about the life of Jesus; and Mark and John are very selective in the materials they record. They may not have known the birth stories, which were probably treasured by small groups who knew the family well; or they may have omitted them for very good reasons, most probably because they were not important to the sort of account they were giving of Jesus' life. Arguments from silence are never very strong.

It is also sometimes pointed out that the genealogies in Matthew and Luke both end with Joseph. The compilers, it is then suggested, must have thought Joseph was the real father of Jesus. That argument is just as weak as the first. Since both Matthew and Luke believed in the virgin birth, they would hardly have included the genealogies if they thought the virgin birth of Jesus was contradicted by them. The fact is that Joseph was the head of the family, and so counted as the father of Jesus for genealogical purposes. He gave his name and lineage to Jesus, in a quasi-legal sense. It is as though he had adopted Jesus, and thus became the legal father as well as the social father, though not the genetic father.

The strongest argument for the veracity of these accounts is that it is very hard to see why they should have been invented, when they would be so shocking to Jewish ears. We know that a story was circulated very early on that Jesus was illegitimate, and one would think the apostles would hasten to assert that Jesus was both a legitimate child and the genetic heir of King David. But they did not. On the contrary, fifty per cent of the Gospel writers go out of their way to shock their hearers still further by asserting that Jesus had no father at all. What could have been their motive, except to say what was true?

Matthew 1:23 does cite Isaiah 7:14, which says, 'A young woman shall conceive and bear a son', and translates it as 'A virgin shall conceive and bear a son'. But it is not plausible to suggest that the whole story arose out of a mistranslation from an ancient Hebrew text – as though Matthew found the text, mistranslated it, and then made up a whole set of stories to make his own mistranslation come true. It is vastly more probable that, believing in the virgin birth, Matthew looked through the Old Testament for relevant passages, found this one and translated it as 'virgin' – which it could sometimes mean, anyway – to bring out the predestined nature of Jesus' life and mission.

On close reading, the accounts in Matthew and Luke are different both in substance and character. Matthew seems to have derived his account from Joseph, ultimately, and Luke from Mary. So Matthew tells about an angel appearing to Joseph, the wise men visiting the house in Bethlehem and the flight to Egypt. Luke does not mention any of these things. Instead, he speaks of the angelic visitation to Mary, the birth of John the Baptist, the visit of the shepherds to the stable where Jesus was born, and the presentation in the Temple. What this suggests is that there are two independent sources of the virgin birth stories; and that increases the probability that they were founded on historical recollections of fact, drawn from different groups or individuals. There is no point trying to guess why Luke does not mention the visit to Egypt, since we do not know. But again, his silence does not show either that it did not happen or that he did not know about it. For some reason it did not fit into the flow of his account. The two accounts are not contradictory, however. And if there are two distinct accounts of the virgin birth, the basic fact that such a birth occurred becomes more, not less, likely.

A question of motive

There are two basic explanations of why these stories exist, and take up quite a large space, especially in Luke's Gospel. One is that they are based on fact. They are recorded, even though they could give rise to scandal and could seem incomprehensible to Jewish readers, just because Joseph and

Mary knew that they were true, and had passed on these memories to various groups of early disciples (not indiscriminately to just anyone, it might well be thought, considering their very delicate nature).

The other possible explanation is that these accounts are legendary. There were no such traditions, springing from the immediate family of Jesus – even though members of that family would still be alive when the first Gospel accounts were written down, and though James the brother of Jesus was evidently one of the apostles and could easily have stamped out these rather odd rumours, if they were false. What happened, it is sometimes said, was rather like this (though this account is based purely on imagination, in the nature of the case): the early Christians believed that Jesus was the Messiah. So they began to invent stories which would magnify his importance, and bring out his very special role in God's purpose for the world.

Stories of virgin births are not entirely unknown, in some religions. The Buddha, for example, was said to be born when a white elephant entered the side of his mother while she was asleep, and she conceived. It must be said, however, that the Buddhist legend arose hundreds of years after Gautama Buddha was dead, not within the lifetime of his family. And it is obviously legendary or dream-like in a way that the Gospel accounts are not. Little was more anathema to Jews than pagan myths of various sorts; and the idea that the very Jewish Matthew could have imitated some pagan myth in this way seems wholly unlikely.

Anyway, the explanation goes on, some early Christians found these stories of virgin births of the gods, and decided that Jesus would have to be at least as miraculous as they were. And so the virgin birth stories are pure literary legends, not based on history at all, which are simply trying to make the point that Jesus was a very special person.

The main difficulty with this whole explanation is that it is based on one huge logical fallacy. The fallacy is as follows: first of all, it is argued that the virgin birth stories arose because the writers wanted to show that Jesus really was the Messiah. They said, in effect, 'Jesus was the Messiah. And if he was the Messiah, then he must have been marked out from birth in a very special way. In fact, he must have been born of a virgin; so we will say that he was'. But the proposition, 'If he was the Messiah, he must have

been miraculously born' strictly entails the proposition, 'If Jesus was not miraculously born, then he was not the Messiah'. If you believe one of these sentences, you have to believe the other. So the Gospel writers, according to this alleged explanation, are in fact destroying their own case. For of course they knew Jesus was in fact not born of a virgin; from which it follows that he could not have been the Messiah after all.

In other words, the Gospel writers would have had to be stupid to believe, both that Jesus was the Messiah; that he was not in fact born of a virgin; and that if they made up the story of a virgin birth, that would show that he really was the Messiah. The fallacy is to think that you can bring out the real meaning of somebody's life by giving an account of something that never happened, that was never part of that person's life. And I hesitate to think that the Gospel writers were that stupid.

As a matter of fact, I doubt very much whether the virgin birth stories could have been regarded by the Gospel writers as bringing out the meaning of Jesus' life. The stories were so odd and uncomfortable that they did not really know what meaning to give to them at all. So they just told them, as they had heard them, and left it to later generations to discover their meaning.

Now of course all must admit that trying to assess historical probabilities like this is a very tricky business. None of us really knows what the Gospel-writers thought or what their reasons might have been. In that case, it seems best to receive the documents as what they themselves say they are – as Luke, who says most about the virgin birth, puts it, 'Many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses' (Luke 1:1). That is what Luke says, that he is writing an orderly account that Theophilus may know the truth of what happened. If it then turns out that the first two chapters (as we call them) of his account are wholly fictional, I think we have little reason to trust the rest. We have to balance the clear assertion of Luke with the very speculative conjectures and guesses of those who claim the real truth is very different from what Luke says it is – even though we are now about 2,000 years away from events he knew at second or third hand.

Miracles and science

The real reason why the fact of the virgin birth has been rejected by some recent students of the Gospels is not, however, anything in the texts themselves. It is a much deeper prior belief that miracles, especially miracles as surprising and as physical as that, cannot happen. There was even a leading article in an issue of the scientific journal, *Nature*, in 1985, which said that the scientific view of the world excludes the occurrence of the miracles by definition.

That leading article was immediately attacked by a number of scientists, as being far too dogmatic and irrational. And it is indeed irrational to deny the possibility of miracles. If there is a God, who creates and holds in being the whole of the natural world at every moment, then it is true that all the laws of physics and chemistry and so on must be held in being by him. We may well hope that he will continue to allow such laws to operate; otherwise we would never quite know what was going to happen next. But there is no reason at all why he might not sometimes do things which are not predictable from the laws of physics or biology alone.

God can do what he wants with his own universe. And though Christians believe that he will allow us freedom to act responsibly within limits, and that he will normally cause things to happen in accordance with laws of nature, there is nothing odd about supposing that God may also act directly in ways which do not come within the scope of the laws of nature at all.

The philosopher David Hume, who wrote an essay trying to prove that miracles were impossible, admitted that it is always logically possible for laws of nature to be broken. We cannot exclude occurrences inexplicable by general laws of nature just by definition. But the argument might be that, though God could bring about events like the virgin birth, which exceed the natural powers of things he would not do so. Perhaps he has limited himself to not interfering with the course of nature. After all, he did not interfere to prevent terrible tragedies at Auschwitz, and in many other places when whole peoples were exterminated ruthlessly. So it seems that God does not act in particular, miraculous ways, even if he could theoretically do so.

The implications of this argument are much deeper than is sometimes

thought. If God never acts in particular ways in the world, then he could not really have become incarnate in Jesus. He could not have raised Jesus from the dead. He could not have liberated the Israelites miraculously from Egypt. He could not have done most of the things the Bible says that he did. Now it is alright for an atheist to say these things; for an atheist does not believe in God at all. But how can a Christian say them, and still retain any respect for Biblical revelation?

We might well ask where Christians get their idea of God from. If they get it from the Bible, then it would be extremely odd to deny most of the things the Bible does actually say about God, and still maintain that the few things that might remain give us an accurate picture of God. The Biblical picture of God is unequivocally the picture of a God who acts in particular ways and for particular purposes. He chooses one people to be set apart to worship him. He chooses Mary to bear his Son. He chooses Paul to be his apostle. He is constantly making particular choices.

Now these choices might seem odd to us; and we might be unable to explain why he does not act more often to relieve suffering and tragedy in the world. But the fact that we cannot explain why God acts in the ways he does is not really very surprising. It would, however, be irrational to accept that there is a God because of what the Bible says, and at the same time to say that most of what the Bible says about God is wrong. Of course there are problems about the nature of God's action. But it is no answer to these problems to get rid of them by saying that God does not act at all.

Belief in God

Some people seem to think their problems will be made easier if God only acts on human minds, and not on physical matter. He can perhaps try to persuade us, or enlighten our thoughts by his presence or inspire us in various ways. But he will not descend to the vulgar level of moving electrons or chromosomes about.

However, that argument will not stand up to examination. It is widely accepted that the relationship of mind and brain is so close that any change in people's thoughts and feelings must be reflected in a change in the physi-

cal state of their brains. You cannot modify anyone's thoughts without also modifying their brain-states. So, if God ever modifies anyone's thoughts – by making his presence felt, for example – he is in fact modifying their brain-states too. In other words, you cannot avoid the fact that, if God ever acts on human minds at all, then he acts in quite physical ways on human brains. Once you have conceded that point, why should you think that God only acts on matter when it is in human brains, but never otherwise?

It would be possible to have a God who never acted in particular ways in history; but I am not sure where the idea of such a God would come from, or why anyone should believe it. Christian belief in God is based on one stupendous claim that Jesus was raised from death and appeared to his disciples; so that God is known precisely in historical facts. Of all world religions, Christianity is least able to separate religious facts from historical facts. Its distinctive claim is that God makes himself known in history. Historical facts are, at the same time, religiously significant facts. Their significance lies precisely in the fact that they show the character and activity of God. If those things never happened, then of course they cannot show the character and activity of God at all.

We might put it like this: if there is a God who wishes to reveal his nature and unite to himself for ever all those who will respond to him, one would naturally expect that he will do something, and something quite distinctive, which does reveal his nature and purpose. He will not leave it to people to theorise and speculate and guess at what he might be like and what his purposes might be. He will show them. If there is a personal God, it is very likely that he will act in some specific way to show his purposes for human beings, in ways which leave their freedom intact. To the extent that there are not such specific acts of God in history, it is less likely that there is a personal, redeeming God at all.

Christianity is not a philosophy or a general theory about the world. It is based on the life, death and resurrection of an actual human being. So we do not need to be giant intellects to recognise God's revelation. It is there for the simplest of people to see and respond to. And that is surely how it should be. If there is an active, living, personal God with a purpose for the human race, we should expect to see some historical events which are so

distinctive and startling that they seem to show the meaning of the whole historical process. We should expect to see miracles.

But if that is so, it might be said, why are there not more miracles? As I have said, I do not expect to understand why God acts as he does. But consider the traditional Christian claims about Jesus, and it may throw a great deal of light on the question. Jesus is a person marked out as different from anyone else who ever lived. He is marked out by his sinlessness, his closeness to God and his amazing impact on those who followed him. But the chief thing that marks him out is that he was regarded, by his disciples, as having died to atone for the sins of the world and as having been raised from death to vindicate his mission and proclamation of the Kingdom of God.

No one else has ever been claimed to have been raised from death in this way; so the whole Christian Church came into existence because of a belief that this person was wholly unique. In a very short time, he was actually worshipped by his followers as the one who showed the fullness of God in human terms, and who was declared to be the Judge of the living and the dead.

The uniqueness of Jesus

It is essential to the Christian faith, then, that Jesus should be unique. Even so, he was not saved from suffering and death. God did not intervene to prevent the evil which humans inflict upon one another. Instead, he shared in the consequences of that evil; he suffered for the sins of the world. The miracle of the resurrection did not make suffering go away or avoid it. What it did was to take that suffering and show that the love of God could not be defeated by it. This suggests that people who look for miracles as a way of avoiding suffering are looking for the wrong thing. God does not act to eliminate the evil that human beings do to one another. He lets their freedom work out according to its own inherent pattern, for good and ill.

Nevertheless, the miracle of the resurrection suggests that God enters into human suffering and shows that evil will not conquer good, that his love is invincible, even though it will not interfere to destroy the freedom he has given to his creatures. What God does is to show the way to meet evil

and conquer it in and through suffering. He shows that the way of the cross is also the path to true glory, the glory of the Father. So God's miracles do not happen to get us out of the mess we humans have got ourselves into, as if evil and suffering were not real. When God acts in these particular and special ways, it is to show how he enters into our human situation and transforms it from within. He shows, by his particular actions in history, that there is a higher goal and purpose for our lives, and he shows us the way to achieve it. By his unique action in Jesus, he reveals to us that we are destined for eternal life. And precisely because his action is unique, he shows that it is by relation to Jesus Christ that we can come to realise our proper destiny.

If Jesus was not in fact unique, if he was not raised from death, none of this would be securely founded. It would remain a pious hope, a mere speculation. Whereas in fact, Christians say, our hope is founded on a real historical event which turned a bunch of frightened dispirited men into a community which changed the world. And the point is that, for all this to be true, Jesus has to be unique in his death, in his rising from death, and in his life, a life of sinlessness and unity with the Father. But if he is unique in his life and death, what is so strange in thinking that he is also unique in the manner of his birth? It is not that we could have invented the virgin birth, even in the wildest flight of imagination. Only God could have done something so strange and unexpected. But how natural and proper the virgin birth is, when it is seen as the beginning of a life which was in all its detail and importance, of absolutely unique significance for the whole future of the world.

I have argued that God certainly could have caused Jesus to be conceived without a human father; and that it would have been a natural thing for him to do. Miracles only seem unnatural when we forget that there is a personal God who wants to act in unique ways to show the proper goal of human life and the way to attain it. Once we see miracles in their context as showing the presence and purpose of God, as opening the way to salvation for all people, and as rooting the saving acts of God securely in historical facts rather than in obscure theological theories, then we begin to see how the Biblical miracles surrounding the history of Israel and the life of Jesus have an inner rationality and coherence. But is there a more specific theological

meaning to the virgin birth, which gives it a special importance for those who want to give their lives to Christ? Again without wishing to claim any special degree of insight into God's intentions, I think that the Church has seen such a meaning, as it has reflected on the doctrine over the centuries.

A new beginning

In the Christian view, the birth of Jesus was actually a new beginning for humanity. As, at creation, the Spirit moved over the waters of the earth to bring light to birth; so, at this new creation, the Spirit moved in the womb of Mary to form the one who would be the light of the world. The conception of Jesus really was a new Spirit-born creation, a new start for the human race. As the Gospel of John puts it, the children of God are 'born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God' (John 1.13). and the children of God are those who receive that one true Son of God into their lives. It is then wholly appropriate that Jesus should be born not of the will of any man, but of God himself. If one accepts that Mary is Theotokos, mother of God, and not of a man who was later believed to be Divine, then one sees that incarnation was, from the very first moment, the act of God, not the success story of a good man.

God could have become incarnate without being born of a virgin; he is certainly not the physical father of Jesus, in any straightforward sense. So it is possible to believe that Jesus is the son of God without accepting the virgin birth. I do not suppose that anyone comes to believe in Jesus' divinity because they first believe in the virgin birth. Nevertheless, the occurrence of such a birth makes quite clear the fact that Jesus comes into being at the initiative of God himself, and by a direct and unique Divine activity. The beginning of his life is the beginning of a new Divine-human presence in the world, which is continued in the Church. The early Christian churches had a sure instinct when they gave the title 'mother of God' to Our Lady. For it makes the point that Jesus was not a man who came to feel very close to God. He was God himself, in the flesh and blood of a human being. The fact of the virgin birth would help to sustain this belief, not just in a theoretical

way, but in the most direct and unmistakable way, by ascribing his conception to the direct and unique action of the Holy Spirit.

The nature of faith

The virginal conception of Jesus, as it is properly called, also teaches us something important about the nature of faith. For Mary's part was to say 'yes' to God, to accept the summons of God to share in his redemptive work in the world, and to let the new Divine life be born in her by the Holy Spirit. Mary shows the pattern of faith of all those who trust in Christ. That faith is not something that grows by a long and arduous process of ascetic self-denial, as though one hauls oneself up to God by one's own boot-straps; it is a trusting response to the prior saving act of God. So God calls us all to say 'yes' to him, and to let him bring Christ to birth in us, by the creative activity of the Holy Spirit. Thus Mary's assent to the angelic salutation is in the truest sense a sacrament, an outward and visible sign of the inner faith that God calls for in every human soul. To that extent, the virgin birth helps to bring out the meaning of faith.

Moreover, consider how very differently Mary and Joseph, and even Jesus himself, must have looked upon the life and destiny of this child if the virgin birth did occur. Mary and Joseph would have known from the very beginning that Jesus was the son of God, born to fulfil a unique role in Israel and in the world, to be 'a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of his people Israel'. It is sometimes said that Jesus, being a Jew, could not possibly have believed that he was Divine, or even that he was the Messiah. Those who say that assume the virgin birth did not happen. But suppose that Jesus was born as the Gospels of Matthew and Luke say he was. Then he would have known from his mother and father that he was not as other men. Born of the flesh of a woman, he would yet have known his own uniqueness. He would have had the best of reasons, if he needed them, for thinking that he was not deluded in believing he had a special role in Israel, and that he was, in a very direct sense, the unique son of God.

If the virgin birth did occur, Jesus' whole understanding of himself would have been quite different from that of any other human person. Once again,

this would not have been just a speculative or theoretical matter. Reflection on the brute physical facts of his own conception would have assured him, if such assurance was ever needed, that he was indeed in a unique relation to the creator of all things. What a difference that would make to his understanding of his mission; and how strange it would then be to assert that he could not have thought of himself as the son of God.

One further thing that the virgin birth has to teach is that the actions of God in the world really do make a difference. God is not an inert, passive or impersonal force. He can and will act to accomplish his purposes in history. As we have noted, God does not seem to act to take away the consequences of human evil – even when that includes the suffering of the innocent. Nevertheless, it is his will that the Kingdom of God should come into being, that community of love which is the purpose of creation. Naturally, we want to know if God really has such a purpose, and whether he can ensure that it eventually comes about. The physical fact of the virgin birth, when taken as part of the story of Jesus, is just such an assurance that God can really change the character of his creation, when he is met by the response of trusting faith, so as to bring about his purposes. And that really is the basic importance of the virgin birth. It is not just an extremely odd happening long ago and far away. It is an affirmation of God's real, transforming, particular and effective action to bring his purposes to pass.

A summing up

What, then, is the evidence for the virgin birth? It lies in the testimony of Matthew and Luke. The stories of Jesus' birth take up more space, in both Gospels, than the stories of his resurrection. Luke prefaces his whole account by stressing that he had tried to collect eye-witness accounts of the matters he relates. There is in fact more material about Jesus' birth than there is about many of the incidents in his life; so the amount of evidence is quite substantial. Clearly, its reliability depends entirely on whether the account was really received from Mary and Joseph. No one else could have been in a position to know the facts. It seems unlikely that the Gospel writers were lying in claiming to have received such accounts – if they were, the

whole Gospels come into disrepute. And it seems unlikely that they were deceived, since members of Jesus' immediate family were still around in the early Church to correct such very strange stories, if they were false or even hitherto unknown. It therefore seems probably that these are genuine accounts received from the mother of Jesus or her husband, of an event so strange and unexpected that its meaning needed to be worked out over generations of meditation and prayer.

To those who say that the virgin birth could not have happened, or that it is overwhelmingly improbable, on general philosophical grounds, the brusque answer is that even philosophy has to conform to the facts, however unexpected. And if one believes in a personal, active God, miracles are not wholly improbable in any case. Of course, they are improbable in relation to what normally happens, by definition. It is no objection to the virgin birth that it is unique – it is meant to be unique; that is the whole point. But if there is a personal God, it would be very odd indeed if miracles never happened; if he never acted in particular and astonishing ways to reveal and accomplish his purpose. It would also be very odd if the resurrection was the only miracle; as if it was a totally extraordinary ending to a fairly normal life.

So while we could never predict the virgin birth, or say that God must have caused it if he was going to become incarnate, we should not really be wholly surprised when the Scripture asserts it to have happened. At first sight it seems extraordinary – but perhaps that just shows how far we have moved from really believing in the active God of history, of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. On reflection, it seems a deeply intelligible, spiritually illuminating and entirely appropriate expression of the self-revealing action of God, that Jesus of Nazareth was marked out as unique from the first moment of his earthly existence by being conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary.

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