

CHRISTIAN FAITH & LIFE

The Bible Student

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complete

Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.

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Contents:

EDITORIAL NOTES: Theology a Science. Too Low an Idea of "Science." Too Low a View of "Theology." Theology Too Practical for a "Science." "Theology" and "Systematic Theology." "Knowledge and Knowledge." "Theology" Has a Religious Effect. Secular Theologizing No "Theology." Theology Essentially Practical. B. B. W.....	1
OLD TESTAMENT NOTES: "The Story as a Method of Teaching." Deserved Praise. Beginning of Difficulties. Distinctive Characteristics of Religious Fiction. A Painful Possibility. Is It a True Story? Light from an Etymology. A Famous Dictum. Salmond's Dictum. Light On an Important Group of Words. W. M. MCP.....	4
NEW TESTAMENT NOTES: Prejudice Against "Harmonies." Just, as Against the Merely Mechanical. Sometimes Can Be Hypothetical Only. Uniformity Not Necessary. Ideal "Harmony" Simply a Complete History. To Whom "Hebrews" Addressed? Christians in Rome? Evidently Hebrews. Probably Christians in Palestine. G. T. P.....	9
I. THE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT OF JESUS. B. B. Warfield.....	12
II. IS THE CHRONICLER A VERACIOUS HISTORIAN FOR THE POSTEXILIAN PERIOD? No. II. Willis J. Beecher.....	20
V. THE MINISTRY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST. Geerhardus Vos.....	26
VI. CHRIST AS AN INTERPRETER OF SCRIPTURE. No. 1. W. M. McPheeters.....	32
VI. THE VIRGIN-BIRTH. George T. Purves.....	38
VII. RECENT RESEARCHES IN THE HOLY LAND. R. L. Stewart.....	44
VIII. FOREIGN BIBLICAL THOUGHT: "God as Father in the Old Testament." Testimony of Pre-exilic Prophets to Pentateuch. Errors of Specialists. Two Points in Acts. The Visit of Paul in Gal. 2:1-10.....	54
X. BOOK PAMPHLETS AND ARTICLES.....	59

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CONTINUING

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Number 1.

Our common definitions of Theology are of the logical order, and begin by assigning it to its genus, viz.,

Science, and then seek its differentia, by which it is distinguished from other sciences, in its subject matter. Theology, we say, is that science which treats of God in Himself and in His relations. This appears orderly and entirely satisfactory. It refers Theology to its class, and discriminates it from the other members of this class in the same way that each of them is discriminated from its fellows. It has not given universal satisfaction, however,—chiefly through an unwillingness, for one reason or another, to recognize Theology as a Science.

Sometimes this unwillingness is the result of nothing more than too low a conception of "Science." If, for example, we mean by "Science,"

the study of phenomena, merely,—then, to be sure, theology is not a "science," just as philosophy is not a "science," because, to wit, it is something immensely more. This is the

point of sight, for example, of Professor WILLIAM KNIGHT, who writes:

"It is outside the province of science to investigate the nature of substance. That is the province of philosophy; and when we raise the question of the ultimate essence of all things, it is a problem of philosophical theology. Theology is not a science. If theology were a science, God would be a phenomenon. There is a science of Religion, because the phenomenon of the human mind, in its effort to apprehend that which lies beyond Nature, can be classified and so far sustained: but there can be no Science of the Infinite. It is true that we might scientifically explain the results of any manifestation of the Infinite in Nature or in History; and, therefore, to that extent, we might have a Science of Theology; but we cannot place it within the circle of those sciences which have for their object-matter the phenomena of the universe" (Essay on "The Classification of the Sciences," in *Essays on Philosophy*, pp. 80, 81).

On the other hand, there is often apparent a low view of theology which denies to it, in principle, all

scientific character, and sets it, indeed, over against "Science" as its very antipodes. A specially gross form of this misconception may be found in Dr. ANDREW D. WHITE'S *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology*, the very

THE VIRGIN-BIRTH.

Accounts of the birth of our Lord are given by only two of the four evangelists. Mark's gospel confines itself to the public ministry of Jesus, and in this respect doubtless represents the subjects about which the common preaching of the apostles was mainly occupied. John's gospel, on the other hand, was concerned to report the testimony of and about Jesus bearing on his divine nature, his manifestation of God in the flesh. It, too, begins with the period following his baptism, and records a selected number of his own words and works in which "his glory as of the only begotten of the Father" was revealed. But it lay within the purpose of the first and third evangelists to go back to the beginning of his earthly life. Yet even they do not pretend to give complete accounts. Their narratives also are a selection of events and the selection was plainly controlled by the point of view of the writers.

Thus Matthew presents Jesus as the royal Messiah of promise. Hence he begins with the genealogy of Joseph, whose legal son Jesus was, in order to present Jesus as the heir of David and of Abraham. Further, he is not concerned to prove that Jesus was born of a virgin. He briefly states the fact as one that was well known and universally believed among Christians. He is concerned to explain how Joseph, the legal father of Jesus, was led to marry Mary and thus secure to her son his legal heirship. In the revelation granted to Joseph, moreover, the latter was assured that in this way the Saviour of Israel was to be born and was referred by the angel to the prophecy of Isaiah as a prediction of the event. The leading thought of Matthew's narrative, therefore, is the Davidic royalty of Jesus, and that this was brought about in accordance with prophecy. The same motive appears in his account of the infancy which follows in chapter two. The story of the Magi illustrated the fulfilment of prophecy as to the place where the Christ was born, and exhibited him, even when in the manger, as the royal object of homage. So the flight into Egypt, the slaughter of the children by Herod, and the final settlement of the holy family in Nazareth, are all connected by the evangelist with prophecies. His object was evidently to

furnish illustrations from the birth and infancy of Jesus of the main theme of his Gospel, which was to relate the life and teaching of Jesus from the point of view of one to whom Messiah must be the Davidic king of Israel and the fulfiller of prophecy.

Luke's point of view is more purely historical. He wanted to trace the very beginnings of Christianity. He intended to show how out of a Hebrew origin God had brought about a universal religion. He remarks in his preface that he "had perfect understanding of all things from the very first." Hence he goes back to the origin of the whole Christian movement in the birth of John the Baptist, and relates at length the angelic prediction of the character and mission of the Forerunner. Then, carefully noting the time as became a historian (I, 26), he relates the annunciation to Mary, in which the glorious destiny of her divinely given child was declared to her. The intense religious faith in which she accepted her marvellous lot is brought out not only in her submission to it (I, 28), but in the lofty strains of Israelitish piety with which she sang her Magnificat in the home of Elizabeth (I, 46-55). The narrative thus describes the purely religious spirit in which the instruments of God accepted their duties, and advises us at the start that Christianity was born out of the loftiest faith in God's redemptive purposes, as well as out of the marvellous manifestation of his power. Chapter two of Luke's gospel is likewise governed by the wish to relate historically the outward circumstances of the birth of Jesus, and the predictions of his world-wide mission given by the angels to the shepherds and by Simeon and Anna in the temple. The narrative of the boy of twelve years lingering in the temple, with his significant inquiry, "Wist ye not that I must be in my Father's house" (I, 49, R. V.), was doubtless added to illustrate the pure, religious character of him whom Luke meant to describe as filled with grace and with the Spirit of God.

Thus the two accounts of the Lord's birth were not written mainly for the purpose of recounting wonders. They differ utterly in this from the later apocryphal gospels. The miraculous events which did happen are not concealed. They are rather related as commonplaces of the Christian faith. But the miraculous is not elaborated for its own sake. On the contrary, the evangelists are mainly concerned with the moral and religious

aspects of the story. The birth of Jesus is presented with a view to the great portraiture of him which were to follow. This makes on every thoughtful reader the double impression that the accounts were not worked up in the interest of the miraculous, and that the miraculous portions of the history were accepted facts among the Christians when the evangelists wrote.

Moreover, when we examine the two accounts, it must be evident that they were independent of one another. They have nothing in common but the bare fact of the miraculous conception of Jesus and his birth in Bethlehem. Matthew brings Joseph into prominence; Luke brings Mary. Matthew does not bring out the relation of Mary and her child to John the Baptist. Luke does not tell us of the Magi, nor of the flight into Egypt, nor of the slaughter of the children. Matthew does not explain how Jesus came to be born in Bethlehem, nor the annunciation to the shepherds, nor the events connected with the presentation in the temple. Yet much that Luke relates would have well served Matthew's purpose of bringing out the fulfilment of prophecy; and on the other hand the story of the Magi would have harmonized admirably with Luke's idea of Jesus as the Saviour of the Gentiles. The two accounts are, therefore, plainly independent. This doubles their value. It shows that more was known even about the birth of Jesus than both of the evangelists give; and that, as already remarked, his miraculous conception was a widely known and generally accepted fact among the Christians of the first generation.

But, while the two accounts are independent, they are also harmonious. So far as the main facts are concerned, this is obvious. The events narrated may be arranged in a natural sequence, as may be seen in any Harmony of the gospels. The only two points on which difficulty has been found are minute, and even they are capable of easy adjustment. Thus some have noted that Matthew does not, like Luke, represent Joseph and Mary to have lived in Nazareth before the birth of Jesus. But it may be replied that Luke's account supplies just the needed reason why, after the return from Egypt, Nazareth was selected by them as a home. They had intended to bring up the child in Bethlehem; but when the warning came from God not to return thither (Matt. II, 22), they naturally sought the town where they had

lived before. The other point in which some have found a difficulty is in Luke's statement (II, 39) that "when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth." This is sometimes said to state that they *immediately* returned to Galilee, and thus to be inconsistent with Matthew's narrative of the visit of the Magi and the flight into Egypt. But Luke does not say that they returned *immediately* into Galilee. His statement is simply a general one, and does not exclude intervening events. He may not have known indeed of the flight into Egypt. But even if he did, and if it was not within his purpose to record it, his language would still be true. We may confidently affirm, therefore, the harmony of the two accounts; and when this fact is added to that of their independence, the value of both narratives appears still further guaranteed.

Again, the accounts are supplementary. Each supplies information which helps to explain the facts related in the other. When we read in Luke of the origin of Mary's conception, we naturally want to know the attitude of Joseph toward it and the character of their subsequent relations; and of this we are informed by Matthew. On the other hand, as already observed, when we read in Matthew that the obscure village of Nazareth was chosen for the residence of the holy child, we find in Luke the explanation that previously Joseph and Mary had lived there. Without any intention on the part of the evangelists themselves of supplementing one another, they unquestionably do so. This fact again increases our confidence in both narratives.

Finally, it should be observed that both accounts plainly originated in Jewish Christian circles. That Matthew's did so, is indicated by the genealogy with which it begins, and which presents the lineage of Jesus from the point of view of legal heirship on his father's side, and presents it in a table of three parts, of fourteen generations each, carrying it back to David and Abraham. Only by Jews would such a genealogical register have been constructed. In like manner the fulfilments of prophecy which Matthew connects with each incident related by him must be regarded as reflecting not only the mind of the evangelist himself but also of that portion of the apostolic church with which he was connected. But Luke's narrative, though belonging to a gospel

intended for Gentiles, betrays its Jewish Christian origin even more plainly than Matthew's. The style of it in the Greek is singularly Hebraistic, which shows that Luke derived it from an Aramaic source. The substance of it is equally Jewish in tone. It refers to ceremonies and customs practised among the Jews, while the sentiments expressed by the various speakers are largely couched in Old Testament language, and convey ideas such as only pious Israelites would have had. We thus have two independent accounts of the birth of Jesus, both of which were derived by the evangelists from Jewish Christian sources. They both belong, therefore, to the earliest literature of the apostolic age. They could not have been devised at a late period. We are taken back by them to that early circle of believers to which Mary herself and the brethren of Jesus belonged, and from which alone we should expect to obtain the information which is here given. It may be added that additional weight is given to these narratives, when thus viewed, by the fact that there is no evidence whatever that the Jews expected Christ to be born of a virgin. Nothing, therefore, but the fact itself can account for the origination of the story.

The narrative of the virgin-birth thus accredits itself to us as the record of an historical fact. Why, then, is it not referred to by our Lord himself or by the apostles in their epistles? Why do they not appeal to it as a credential of his divine mission? This omission has seemed to some quite inconsistent with the originality of the belief and the truth of the alleged fact.

We reply that it was not a fact which would have served the Lord's purpose in his teaching. On the one hand, it could not be used as a credential because it was not a *public* fact. The mere assertion of it would not have gained credence. A credential had to be an event which appealed to the eyes and ears of men. On the other hand the purpose of Christ in his teaching was to set forth the great religious verities of the character of God, his will concerning their salvation, and of the moral and spiritual nature of his own mission. He never sought to thrust even his miracles, which were his credentials, into the foreground. To have related the story of his birth would have been to seek to astonish men by the marvellous rather than to lead them by the path of real spiritual truth into reconciliation of life with God. It would have in-

volved an entire reversal of his method as a teacher for him to have appealed to or even to have related the manner of his birth.

It may seem, however, that the same silence was unnatural in the apostles. It should be remembered, however, that the epistles do not give us the preaching of the apostles but only certain instructions and exhortations addressed to those already Christians; and further, that the gospels do give us the preaching of the apostles (Comp. Lk. I, 2) and that, therefore, we are warranted to infer that the story of the miraculous conception did form part of the apostolic teaching. It may be questioned also whether Gal. iv, 4, and Rev. xii, 1, 2, do not imply the virgin-birth. But, apart from these considerations, the virgin-birth could no more be used as a credential of Christianity by the apostles than by Christ. There was needed public events for this purpose. Hence we find the apostles appealing to Christ's miracles, character and teaching, but above all to his resurrection. The latter was the crowning credential. Appeal, therefore, was especially made to it. Hence it need not occasion incredulity nor need it throw any doubt upon the evangelical record, that the virgin-birth is not plainly mentioned in the epistles of the New Testament.

Nor can the belief in the virgin-birth be attributed to dogmatic tendencies. Here the silence of the epistles does become distinctive. The only doctrinal tendencies which could have originated it were the desire to establish the divinity of Christ or his sinlessness, or Paul's doctrine of Christ as the Second Adam. But these doctrines are maintained and defended in the epistles without reference to the virgin-birth. There is, therefore, absence of proof, just where proof might be expected, that the belief in these doctrines led to the construction of the evangelic narrative. That story has no reasonable explanation except that it records the general belief of the apostolic Christians.

Of course, to those who are invincibly opposed to miracles, these considerations will carry no weight. But with such we have at present no argument. Our remarks are intended to relieve the difficulties of believers in the supernatural Christ. Such must admire the delicacy with which the story is narrated. There is no coarse attempt to satisfy vulgar curiosity. The religious value of the facts is kept in the foreground. Yet how appropriate is the whole setting of the story! Where was it fitting for

Messiah to be born except in the bosom of a household where the old revelation maintained its power? Yet he was not, and must not appear to be, the natural product even of such a household. He was not merely the perfect fruitage of Hebrew faith and culture. He was God, who himself assumed a human nature. What then was more appropriate than that his entrance into flesh should be supernatural; and that he who was afterwards to be known as the God-man, should combine in the very manner of his birth the evidence of his heavenly as well as of his earthly nature?

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RECENT RESEARCHES IN THE HOLY LAND.

Pre-eminent among the lands of Sacred Story is the narrow strip, inland of the Mediterranean Sea, which for long ages has borne the distinctive title of the Holy Land. It is a rugged and singularly diversified tract, and yet throughout its whole extent it is a *unity* in its physical conformation. It is not a domain of uncertain area, whose metes and bounds were determined in different periods by political changes or revolutions, but by Divine allotment it became the peculiar heritage of Israel, and in the title deed of its transfer its limits are carefully defined. On the one hand, its border is the Sea; on the other the Desert. Northward its boundary is the wide break between the Lebanon and the Nusairiyeh Mountains, designated as the "Entering in of Hamath;" southward it extends to the "River, or Brook, of Egypt, a long, shallow wady or watercourse, which skirts the northern edge of the wilderness of Israel's wanderings." Thus on every side, except the north, it is bordered by a wide expanse of sea or desert. The extent of this Greater Palestine from north to south is 290 miles. Its area is not less than 25,000 square miles. To this land in its entirety belong the glowing descriptions, poetic allusions and hallowed associations which have given to it its world-wide fame and exclusive title. Here as nowhere else the Almighty has manifested His glory and unfolded His purpose of redeeming grace. "Its hills and valleys have been transfigured by meanings and mysteries mightier than physical influences," and over it all there shines a light that fades not, but grows more radiant with the ages. It is the land of the Patri-