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# BIBLIOTHECA SACRA

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## ARTICLE I.

### A SKETCH OF THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE DOGMA OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH.

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THIS paper and the scope of its treatment are due to a casual reading of two chapters of a book published by Appleton and Company in 1913, "The Life of Jesus in the Light of the Higher Criticism," by Alfred W. Martin, A.B., S.T.B., Associate Leader of the Society for Ethical Culture, New York City. As to the value of the book as a whole I am not competent to speak, for I have read only 71 of its 280 pages. The chapters I did read dealt with the Higher Criticism and the Virgin Birth. The style of learning displayed is, it seems to me, about that of the average university extension lecture when the subject involves some theological matter.

The easy-going discussion of a difficult subject in the chapter on the Virgin Birth is an example of much in popular literature which passes for liberality of mind. I wish to review that chapter in the light of higher criticism. If I had to choose a text for my endeavor, I would turn to page 18. to these words, "Foremost among living New Testament critics is Adolf Harnack, recently transferred from his chair in the University of Berlin to the Royal Library." Not, of

course, that the writings of Harnack confirm a belief in the doctrine, but that the grounds on which Martin rejects it are incompatible with some of the most characteristic positions of Harnack in criticism.

Incidentally, I hope to give a positive, if slight, statement of the lines on which the evidence for this doctrine must be sought, and to discuss briefly the assertions, so frequently made, that in the period under treatment many heroes and leaders were thought to be virgin-born, and that the religious mind was so saturated with this conception of the origin of the great that the rise of the birth stories in the canonical Gospels is to be attributed to this mental condition.

The sensitiveness of the very modern mind to the dogma must, in large part, be ascribed to Harnack. In 1892 he published "*Das Apostolische Glaubensbekenntniss*," dealing with the creed in a more or less popular way. It contained little or nothing that was new to the scholars, but it was a trumpet blast to the general public, arousing the popular mind in much the same way as Delitzsch's "*Babel und Bibel*" did at a somewhat later day. The little book stirred up a great controversy in Germany, and passed through twenty-five editions in the course of a year. In England, a year after its publication, it appeared in English dress in the *Nineteenth Century*. In the preface, the translator, Mrs. Humphry Ward, presented it to the public as the work of a free Protestant science. The preface was probably intended to be irritating to English theologians. If so, it was very successful. The article was the chief incentive to a host of writings, varying both in ability and in temper. These remarks will serve to indicate that if Harnack has any prejudices on the dogma of the Virgin Birth, they do not favor that doctrine.

To begin with Martin's exhibition of the evidence for the

doctrine outside of the canon of Scripture. Speaking of Clement of Rome, Polycarp of Smyrna, and Ignatius of Antioch, he says, "We read their 'letters' and search in vain for any allusion to a virgin birth of Jesus," and, "In the absence of any reference to it we seem driven to the conclusion that even as late as the year 100 the belief in the virgin birth of Jesus was not yet known to the Christian church. It is in the writings of Justin the Martyr, who flourished about the middle of the second century, that we meet, *for the first time*, a reference to the virgin birth of Jesus. . . . He refers to it as a newly-presented doctrine." To show that this is not an instance when Homer nodded, I shall quote two sentences from page 60 to the same effect. "We have seen," he says, "that Jesus, Mary his mother, Paul, the triple-tradition, the Gospel of Mark, the Fourth Gospel, Clement, Polycarp, Ignatius, make no mention of a miraculous birth of Jesus," and, "Since Justin was the first of the Fathers to make allusion to the belief in a miraculous birth of Jesus, and referred to it as something new, we infer that the first and second chapters of the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke were incorporated about the middle of the second century."

These quotations disclose Martin's entire offensive, but we shall now deal only with the evidence of the Apostolic Fathers. Since he presupposes greater learning on the part of his readers than at least one of them possesses, and gives neither references nor authorities for his assertions, I am unable to say what he means when he states that Justin refers to the virgin birth *as a newly-presented* doctrine. On the contrary, Justin's mention of it is full, and, to his mind, it is and has been the traditional belief of Christians. Schmiedel, speaking of the doctrines of the preëxistence of Jesus and his

virgin birth, says, "Both together are first met with in Justin *and Ignatius*."<sup>1</sup> This sentence, I strongly suspect, is Martin's authority for his statement that the virgin birth is first met with in Justin Martyr. If so, he has trimmed it to suit his great need by the omission of "and Ignatius."

The evidence that the church held the doctrine between the years 100 and 140, the approximate time of Justin's writing, is threefold:—

I. The Roman baptismal creed, the forerunner of the Apostles' Creed. Kattenbusch dates this document about the year 100 (ZTK, 1901, pp. 407-428). This creed contained the words, "was born of the Holy Spirit and Mary the Virgin." Harnack says of this symbol, "We know definitely that not later than about the middle of the second century (about 140 A.D.) the Roman church possessed a fixed creed, which every candidate for baptism had to profess; and something similar must also have existed in Smyrna and the other churches of Asia Minor about the year 150, in some cases rather earlier" (Hist. of Dogma, ii. 21). Referring to this creed in another place, he says, "It is worthy of note, on the other hand, that the birth from a virgin occupies the first place" (Hist. of Dogma, i. 158). Whether one accepts the date of Kattenbusch or of Harnack, creeds do not grow up in a decade, and the existence of the creed in use for baptismal instruction is fair evidence that the doctrine was not newly-presented in the year 140.

II. The earliest apologist for the Christian religion outside of the canon was the philosopher Aristides of Athens, who wrote about the year 126. "The Christians," he says, "reckon the beginning of their religion from Jesus Christ, who is named the son of God Most High; and it is said that

<sup>1</sup> Enc. Bib., III. 2964. My italics.

God came down from heaven, and from a Hebrew virgin took and clad himself with flesh," etc. In spite of Martin's insistence that Justin first mentioned the virgin birth, R. Harris, who edited this Apology, says, "Everything that we know of the dogmatics of the early part of the second century agrees with the belief that at that period the virginity of Mary was a part of the formulated Christian belief" (*Texts and Studies*, 1891, Vol. I., No. I., pp. 6 ff.). Lobstein admits as much in the preface to his "Virgin Birth," while Harnack, 'the foremost living critic,' says, "By the middle or more probably soon after the beginning of the second century this belief had become an established part of the church tradition."

III. In his chapter on the Virgin Birth, Martin states repeatedly that Ignatius did not mention the virgin birth. Ignatius says, "The virginity of Mary and her child bearing and in like manner the death of the Lord are three mysteries of loud proclamation which were wrought in the silence of God" (*Eph.*, 19). He thus affirms that these three facts were loudly heralded messages of the church though, in origin, they were of necessity secret. While more to the same effect could be quoted from Ignatius, who wrote about the year 110, enough has been cited to indicate the value of some of Martin's reiterated affirmations.

The plan of this paper is to work back from the time when Martin admits that Justin set forth the doctrine to the earliest witnesses. In pursuance of the scheme let us now go to the New Testament to weigh what it has to tell us of the dogma. Naturally we turn to the Gospels as the narratives of the life of Jesus for their testimony to the belief that Jesus was virgin-born, and to the Fourth Gospel as the latest. First let

me quote as briefly as possible what Martin has to say of this Gospel:—

“Let us note the testimony of the author of the Fourth Gospel, written about the year 120 A.D. The date of the book is still debated, but the increasing tendency among representatives of the higher criticism is to assign it to the first quarter of the second century. Here, again, no reference is made to a virgin birth, but twice in the course of the record Jesus is addressed as ‘the son of Joseph,’ and on neither occasion does he contradict it” (p. 51).

I pass over, for later consideration with other references of the same sort, the designation of Jesus as the son of Joseph. To return to Martin’s deductions from the foregoing:—

“What an immense advantage it would have been to the author of the Fourth Gospel could he have introduced into his interpretation of Jesus as ‘the Word’ incarnate, the statement that he was miraculously born! Prof. Scott in his monograph on this Gospel takes the ground that the author ‘must certainly have known the tradition of the virgin birth.’ But we are prompted to reply, if that tradition was regarded as of recent origin in Justin’s time—some twenty years later than the date now generally accepted for the Fourth Gospel—may it not be fairly doubted whether the doctrine of the virgin birth was known to this evangelist?”

This is the solitary instance in the chapter where Martin condescends to show his hand as to the sources for his reconstruction of Christian history, and it is significant that his one authority—and that a violent opponent of the traditional belief—contradicts his contention that the author of this Gospel was unacquainted with the doctrine of the virgin birth.

I shall not waste space to prove that the date proposed by Martin for this Gospel is not generally accepted by the exponents of the higher criticism. It is true that Schmiedel expresses a desire to date the book about 140 (Enc. Bib., ii. 2551). But a majority of critics would assent to the inde-

terminate date set by 'the foremost living critic' in his "Chronology of Early Christian Literature," "Not after 110 and not before 80."

If it were a fact, and it is not, that the author of the Fourth Gospel nowhere refers to the virgin birth of Jesus definitely, there are many indications that he thought his origin of a supernatural character. The prologue states, in the most magnificent manner, the doctrine of the deity of Jesus and his preëxistence as the eternal Word. There are other evidences of a belief in the unusual character of the entrance of the Word into incarnate life. If this were a treatise and not a sketch, that could be made plain.

When the antagonists of the virgin birth assert that the author of this Gospel does not refer to the miraculous birth of Jesus, it is the habit of many to acquiesce. It is one of the valuable results of the literary criticism of the book that we are no longer required to do so. St. John i. 12-13 reads, "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his Name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." The second of these verses has often disturbed the ease of commentators. The verse so translated is based for textual authority on our oldest Greek codices, the Vatican and the Sinaitic. With them nearly all Greek codices of a later date agree. But the earliest dates from about the year 331. Christian authors of the second and third centuries had a different text for this passage. Tertullian, writing about the year 209, says, "They maintain that it was written thus: 'Who were born' . . . as if designating those who were before mentioned as believing on his name. . . . The expression is in the singular, as referring to the Lord. He was born of God. . . . We thus under-



stand that what is denied is the Lord's birth after sexual intercourse, as is suggested by the phrase, 'the will of the flesh,' not his (birth) from a mother's womb" (De Cerne Christi, c. 24).

The same position is taken in Irenæus's "Against Heresies" (III., xvi. 2, xix. 2), in Justin Martyr's "Apology" (i. 32) and in his "Dialogue with Trypho," which occurred about the year 135 (Dial., i. 54; also 61 and 76). It is to be remarked that Tertullian's Latin text was in use before 209; Irenæus's Greek text precedes the year 180; and Justin's Greek text, the year 135. The fact is that Justin's text antedates our oldest codices by two hundred years and, further, that he knew and used a text which was well within fifty years of the latest date set by Harnack for the Fourth Gospel. That this is not a finespun bit of *tendenzschrift* may be seen by the fact that Blass, one of the greatest of the philological critics of the New Testament, has adopted the singular reading in St. John i. 13 (Philology of the Gospels, pp. 234 ff.), and Resch, a leading authority on early Christian literature, has reached the same conclusion (Aussercanonische Paralleltexte, iv. 57).

If, then, St. John i. 13 is amended as these scholars demand, what does the passage mean? The verse refers to the birth of Christ, "Who was born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, but of God," i.e. He was born not by sexual intercourse, of the seed of man, but by the will of God. We have here in the Fourth Gospel a direct reference to the dogma of the virgin birth of which we are so often assured that the author was ignorant, or that he rejected it, or that he ignored it. Inasmuch as this directly contradicts Martin and others, I shall quote again 'the foremost living critic':—

"Neither the *gennetheis ek pneumatos agiou* nor the virgin birth compel us to assume an advanced period in the development of the Christian doctrine; on the contrary, these ideas, which have nothing to do with pre-existence, are primitive in themselves, and are declared to be primitive by the fact that at the end of the first century, or at least at the beginning of the second, they were the common property of Christians, as St. John (Chap. I, according to the true text) and Ignatius teach us. But every belief which at that time was the common property of Christians (including the Palestinian churches) must be traced back to the churches of Palestine, and must be ascribed to the first decades after the resurrection" (Date of the Acts and the Synoptic Gospels, Eng. Trans., p. 148).

It will be apparent that Harnack is forced by his study of the problem to admit that this doctrine, which according to Martin was first mentioned about the middle of the second century, was not only referred to by the author of the Fourth Gospel, written between the years 80 and 110, but also that the doctrine must be ascribed to the first decades after the resurrection. This will become clearer as we proceed.

Our next task is to examine the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke. I shall take them together because they both contain accounts of the virgin birth of Jesus. The treatment they will receive must of necessity be brief.

Martin admits that in the First and Third Gospels we have narratives setting forth the virgin birth of Jesus, but, because all three Synoptics have an account of the baptism of Jesus and the descent of the Holy Spirit on him on that occasion, and the fact that St. Mark has no story of the birth, he argues, that, if the authors of the First and Third Gospels had really known the story of the birth, they would necessarily have identified his reception of the Spirit with the miraculous birth, and not with his baptism.

"Hence," he says, "we are forced to conclude that the birth-narratives of Matthew and Luke formed no part of their original text, but were added at a later day." Again, "And since Justin

was the first of the Fathers to make allusion to the belief in a miraculous birth of Jesus, and referred to it as something new, we infer that the first and second chapters of the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke were incorporated about the middle of the second century." And again, "Thus it appears that down to the year 140 not a single Christian writer, excepting the authors of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, make any reference to a virgin birth of Jesus. But when we turn to those two sources, we find that in several important particulars they are mutually contradictory and hopelessly irreconcilable. Close and careful study of their discrepancies has led many critics to the conclusion that the opening chapters of the First and Third Gospels formed no part of the original record, but were given a place in it after the middle of the second century."

Further reasons, alleged by Martin, which I shall not quote in detail, are:—

I. The genealogies in St. Matthew and St. Luke are not only irreconcilable in facts, but they trace Jesus' ancestry through Joseph and not through Mary. But a believer in the virgin birth would have no reason for such a genealogy; therefore, the genealogies were compiled before the appearance of the birth legend.

II. The so-called Sinaitic-Syriac manuscript, discovered in 1892, flatly states in St. Matthew i. 16 that Joseph begat Jesus.

An attack on the genealogies must not divert our minds from the fact, that, whatever information these vexing compilations may or may not impart, they were incorporated in the Gospels side by side with passages the meaning of which is clear and positive. These passages are St. Matt. i. 18–25 and St. Luke i. 26–38. In these narratives, which are acknowledged to be independent, the virgin birth of Jesus is related in unmis-takable terms. Briggs, whose devotion to the cause of criticism was marked, said of them, "These passages are now and always have been in the text of these Gospels, and there are

no variations in codices or translations that impair their statements as to the virgin birth" ("Criticism and the Dogma of the Virgin Birth," *North American Review*, June, 1906, p. 863).

The date of the Third Gospel, with the suspected chapters included, Harnack, in his "Chronology," places between the years 78 and 93; but in "Luke the Physician," he says, "Indeed, in the face of these arguments it is to me very improbable that the date was much later than 80 A.D. He who assigns the work to 80 A.D. will about hit the mark" (Eng. Trans., p. 25). The date of the First Gospel is not so easy to fix, if we follow 'the foremost living critic.' In his "Chronology," he says, probably 70-75, but with the reservation, "except later additions." The only expression of his opinion which I can find, in regard to the date of the Gospel in its present form, says, "In its original form it was older than St. Luke; in its present form it is probably the latest of the Synoptic Gospels" (Luke the Physician, p. 169, note). Confirmation of the fact that the First Gospel (of the years 70-75) contained the birth narrative may be gathered from a quotation, for which I am indebted to Allen (*Com. St. Matt.*, p. 19, note), and which I have not found in the English translation, "Die Legende von der Jungfrauen-geburt, die Matthäus zuerst fuer uns bezeugt, auf juden-christlichen, naeher jerusalemischem Boden entstanden ist" (*Lucas der Arzt*, p. 118, Anm. I.).

May I pause to sum up the results now attained in this study? The method has been to correct Martin's statements by the investigations of an untrammelled Protestant science. In establishing these facts against him I have utilized the work of Harnack for two reasons: Because our author singled him out as the leading authority, and Lord Acton,

whose right to an opinion no man will question, described him in the *English Historical Review* as the best ecclesiastical historian living; and because Harnack is not a believer in the dogma and, therefore, no suspicion can arise that his positions as a critic are biased. On his authority, I submit that this paper has shown that the assertion of Martin with reference to the time when the dogma is first mentioned is proved to be false by the fact that about the year 100 A.D. the belief was the common property of Christians and, further, that written evidence for the existence of the belief among Christians can be traced back to the year 70, approximately.

Here it may be plausibly urged that, in using Martin as an example of the attitude of the opponents of this article of the creed, I am taking one whose critical attainments are small and neglecting the work of great scholars who find themselves unable to accept the doctrine. But, one may say, what critical grounds does Harnack allege for the rejection of this article from the creed of Christendom?

Harnack has been a prolific writer, and from time to time has altered his positions. I am going to quote from his article in the *Nineteenth Century*, referred to at the beginning of this paper. His attitude has changed in some degree since then, but, in the main, he would defend the grounds there set forth:—

“These selected statements [i.e., the five clauses which follow “His only Son, our Lord,” in the Creed] coincide in the main with the *original* preaching of the gospel. Nevertheless, they are no longer in entire agreement with it. If the Creed had only the following: ‘Who was crucified and buried under Pontius Pilate, and rose again on the third day from the dead, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father, from whence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead,’ there would be no difference between the two; but it is one of the best established results of history that the clause ‘born of the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary’ *does not belong to*

*the earliest Gospel preaching, and for these reasons: (1) It is wanting in all of the Epistles of St. Paul and, moreover, in all of the Epistles of the New Testament. (2) It is not to be found in the Gospel of Mark, nor, for certain, in that according to John. (3) It was not included in the original material of Matthew and Luke, and in the sources common to both. (4) The genealogies of Jesus contained in both these Gospels go back to Joseph, and not to Mary. (5) All four Gospels bear witness, two of them directly and two of them indirectly, that the first proclamation of Jesus as Messiah dated from his baptism."*

To take his reasons in order: (1) The clause is wanting in the Epistles of the New Testament. This we shall grant, with the qualifications that the doctrine is nowhere denied in this literature, that no alternative to it is suggested, and that it is entirely compatible with the theology of the Epistles. The miraculous life of Jesus and his preëxistence are explicitly taught: the manner of the Incarnation is not expressly enunciated, be the reasons what they may. (2) It is not found in the Gospel of St. Mark, nor, for certain, in that of St. John. As for the latter, I have already shown that Harnack became convinced that the virgin birth is referred to in the prologue. In regard to St. Mark, this Gospel, according to its plan, deals with the public ministry of Jesus and has nothing whatever to say of his birth. Boundless ingenuity has been expended in the attempt to build a stable argument on the silence of St. Mark. It is worthy of note that, while this is the only Gospel which does not refer to the virgin birth, it is likewise the only Gospel which does not refer to Jesus as 'the son of Joseph.' (3) We agree that it is not in the sources common to the First and Third Gospels. But the point is, that the narratives dealing with the virgin birth in these Gospels are admitted to be independent Jewish documents of Palestinian origin, and, surely, it is no sign of weakness that we have here the strength of a double witness.

If the story were in the common sources, we should be told very sharply, that it rested on the testimony of a single document. This, it seems to me, demonstrates the value of criticism to those who believe in the Creed. Had we not benefited by this criticism, we should have to acknowledge that the farthest we can trace this doctrine, on the admission of its antagonists, is to the year 70, or thereabouts. The position of the believer would not in that case be hopeless, but, on the grounds and methods of literary criticism, we can say, with confidence, that back of the First and Third Gospels there existed older written evidence of the fact of the virgin birth. (4) The genealogies have been a source of annoyance since the second century, and it is true that both trace Jesus' ancestry through Joseph. This has been confirmed since the discovery of the new Syriac version, in 1892, by Mrs. Agnes Smith Lewis in St. Catharine's Convent on Mt. Sinai. Ordinary texts of St. Matthew's genealogy close with these words, "Jacob begat Joseph, the husband of Mary the Virgin, of whom was born Jesus, who is called the Christ." This Syriac version gives the same verse as follows, "Jacob begat Joseph; Joseph, to whom was betrothed Mary the Virgin, begat Jesus, called the Messiah." This discovery was an inestimable boon to the opponents of the virgin birth and provoked an immense controversy. It is to be noted that the narrative of the birth in verses 18-25 of the same chapter remains unchanged; and that Mary the Virgin is an expression which did not bother the copyist. What, then, is the explanation of the word "begat" in this genealogy?

St. Luke begins his genealogy with these words, "Jesus himself, when he began, was about thirty years of age, being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph, the (son) of Heli." There is no variation in this verse in the manuscripts affect-

ing the question in hand. But if "as was supposed" were an interpolation — and there is no evidence that it is — then the verse would mean no more than the expression "son of Joseph" does elsewhere in the Gospels.

If we accept this earliest Syriac version as the true reading in St. Matthew, must we believe that Jesus was the son of Joseph? And, if we do not hold that Jesus was the son of Joseph, what meaning can there be in the fact that both genealogies trace Jesus' origin through Joseph? In short, what does *begat* mean in the genealogies? Allen shows that *begat* is used in a legal and not in a physical sense. He says:—

"So non-natural a sense of fatherhood may seem strange to us, but the fact of the supernatural birth which gave rise to it is stranger. Whatever we may think of it, this was the belief of the editor of the Gospel; so that there is no ground for the widespread opinion that the existence of a genealogy of Christ is a proof of an underlying belief he was the natural son of Joseph and Mary. If the editor simply tried to give expression to the two facts which had come down to him by tradition, the fact of Christ's supernatural birth, and the fact that He was the Davidic Messiah, and did not attempt a logical synthesis, who shall blame him?" (Com. on St. Matt., p. 6).

Plummer, writing of St. Luke's genealogy of Jesus, says:—

"It is evident from the wording that Luke is here giving the genealogy of Joseph and not of Mary. It would have been quite out of harmony with either Jewish ideas or Gentile ideas to derive the birthright of Jesus from his mother. In the eye of the law, Jesus was the heir of Joseph; and therefore it is Joseph's descent which is of importance. Mary may have been the daughter of Heli; if she was, Luke ignores the fact" (Com. on St. Luke, p. 103).

According to the mental atmosphere of some people we cannot quote English scholars to establish anything of a critical nature, so I hasten to say that Plummer is one of the English scholars whom Harnack, in the preface to the English edition



of "Luke the Physician," rather tardily thanks for all that he has learned from them. Now if we turn to the genealogy in the Third Gospel and to the facts of Jewish history as we know them, we are confronted with the fact that Jeconiah did not beget Shealtiel, nor did Shealtiel beget Zerubbabel, in any other than in a legal sense.

It is noteworthy that outside of the questioned chapters of St. Matthew and St. Luke, which teach the virgin birth, Joseph is mentioned by name in these Gospels only in St. Luke iv. 22: "And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words, which proceeded out of his mouth. And they said, Is not this Joseph's son?" But this is an expansion of St. Mark vi. 3: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary," etc., and it parallels St. Matt. xiii. 53-57, "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary?" It would seem, then, St. Mark being the basis of the passages in St. Matthew and St. Luke, that the phrases "son of Joseph" and "carpenter's son" are expansions of the question, "Is not this the carpenter?" that is, Jesus himself. In other words, in the source common to both Gospels, Joseph was not mentioned.

Outside of the First and Third Gospels, reference is made to Joseph in the New Testament only in St. John i. 45 and in vi. 42. In the former instance, Philip says to Nathaniel, "We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." In the latter reference, the crowd finds fault with Jesus' claim to pre-existence, and asks, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" Of the expression "son of Joseph," it will be sufficient to say, that, if the virgin birth was not a part of the first public presentation of the Gospel, as admittedly it was not, to the public at that time

Jesus must have been known by some patronymic and, being legally the heir of Joseph, the phrase is most natural and fully accounted for. According to Jewish authorities, the son of a man's wife, even by an adulterous union, would be his heir legally and would be classed as his putative son (Jewish Encyc., i. 218).

May I point out that, if we leave out of consideration the questioned chapters of St. Matthew and St. Luke, as the opponents of the dogma ask us to do, the reference to Joseph in the New Testament is confined to these two verses in St. John? To take the New Testament writings as a whole, the only ones which call Jesus the son of Joseph, or mention Joseph at all, refer definitely to the virgin birth; and the writings which do not expressly refer to the virgin birth do not mention Joseph at all. That fact, I submit, is significant.

Now for Harnack's fifth reason for believing that the virgin birth does not belong to the earliest preaching of the Gospel. We willingly admit that the four Gospels date the proclamation of Jesus' Messianic office from his baptism. It does not, however, strike one as inconsistent with the virgin birth, that, at the opening of his public duties as Messiah, the Spirit should descend upon him for his work. This manifestation of the Father's approval was partly forensic in nature to convince the Baptist and the future disciples, who stood by, of the uniqueness of his character and claims.

I wish, for the moment, to carry the war into the enemy's country and to wage it according to his methods. The only serious alternative to the virgin birth is that he was the son of Joseph in the physical sense. My thesis in this paragraph is that Jesus was not the son of Joseph in that sense for the following reasons: St. Mark does not refer to Joseph as the father of Jesus, or otherwise; nor does St. Paul, or other

writers of New Testament Epistles; nor does the author of the Acts. The Fourth Gospel refers to Joseph, but only twice. According to Martin this book dates from the first quarter of the second century. The questioned chapters of St. Matthew and St. Luke mention Joseph frequently, but they also give an extended account of the virgin birth of Jesus. Neither the apostolic Fathers, nor any other Fathers, refer to Joseph as the father of Jesus. According to Origen (*Against Celsus*, i. 28) the Jews said that Jesus was born in fornication, the son of Mary by a Roman soldier named Pandera. It is interesting to observe that the name Pandera in the Talmud is a formation of the Greek *parthenos* (Levy, *Chald. Woerterbuch*, p. 278). So, the name which the Jews gave to Jesus, instead of being Ben Joseph, was in the language of this ancient slander Ben Pandera, son of the virgin. Compared with the evidence for the resurrection, the grounds for belief in the virgin birth may not be strong, but compared with the evidence that Joseph was the physical father of Jesus, the virgin birth rests on impregnable foundations. Indeed, Cheyne, who is nothing if not critical, writing of Joseph, says, "It becomes the historical student to confess that the name of the father of Jesus is to say the least uncertain." To such absurdities, does criticism "of rigor and vigor" lead!

If I may now repeat the progress gained, we find that about the years 70-75, in Jerusalem, or in that vicinity, where the disciples of the inner circle made their home, the tradition of the virgin birth is published by the author of the First Gospel. Within ten years St. Luke gives to the world a similar tradition, though from an independent source. How far back the documents underlying these accounts would lead us must be forever a matter of conjecture. They took their rise,

however, not in the circle of Gentile ideas with pagan mythology at hand, but in the homeland of Jesus' friends, where members of his family were present to contradict them, if they were false. That the facts of these narratives were not a part of the original public preaching, we need not deny.

How then did it come about that St. Mark, whose Gospel was in circulation before the year 70 (Luke the Physician, p. 161), does not refer to the birth of Jesus either directly or indirectly, and that St. Paul's reference to the birth of Jesus and his early years is so scanty, while the First Gospel, which was in circulation such a short time afterward, was so well provided with information on these points? Harnack says, "If we consider the gulf that yawns between the latest accounts in St. Luke and the earliest in St. Mark we are astonished that such a tremendous development should have been accomplished in so short a time and exclusively on the soil of Judæa and Jerusalem" (Luke the Physician, p. 164). Reasons for this extension and development of the presentation of the Word may be indicated from his own language. "We may even say that St. Luke wrote his gospel in order to supplant the gospel of St. Mark, in the sense, at least, in which every author writing after another author on the same subject intends to supersede the work of his predecessor. He regards it as containing in the main authentic traditions, but . . . on the ground of what he considered better information he has in important details condemned it as wrong in its order of events, too unspiritual, and imperfect and incorrect," and "The Gospel of St. Matthew was written as an apology against the objections and calumnies of the Jews, which were soon also adopted by the Gentiles" (Luke the Physician, pp. 158, 167). I shall try to connect these statements with the quest in hand.

It has often been stated that the birth narratives in St. Matthew portray the circumstances of the nativity from the viewpoint of Joseph. This will hardly need elaboration. On the other hand, St. Luke presents the same events from the side of the mother. The feminine element in the Third Gospel is generally commented on. It is possible to trace this tradition published by St. Luke back from woman to woman to the mother herself. The facts related in both Gospels are of such a nature that it requires no strain on the imagination to believe that there would, at first, be no public statement of them on account of probable misrepresentation. We, indeed, keep our birthdays, but say nothing of the immediate circumstances which led to our births. And yet in the case of Jesus, they were of a character so extraordinary that some record of them would be preserved. To save the mother from scandal, Joseph would remain silent, no matter what means he took to record the facts; and the mother would say little, except to those who could be trusted.

The greatest claim made for Jesus by his followers, previous to the resurrection, was of an undefined Messiahship, and that claim raised no expectations of the stupendous events either in the early or later career of Jesus. The disciples themselves were slow of heart. It was only after the resurrection and the scattering of the disciples, subsequent to the first persecution, that men began to inquire closely into the life of Jesus. And even then, while Mary lived, it is altogether natural to find the reserve maintained on the manner of her son's birth, because of misunderstanding. After her death, while the community was small, and the opposition of the Jews great, little emphasis would be placed on the subject, lest it should raise more difficulties than it would settle. This does not mean that the inner circle of followers

knew nothing of the facts—the documents on which the narratives of St. Matthew and St. Luke are based are patent evidence of their knowledge—nor that St. Paul was ignorant of them. It does mean that the method of the Incarnation was, as yet, not a theme of public preaching.

St. Paul in some of his epistles had to deal with a section of Jewish Christians whose efforts at minimizing the life and work of Jesus were just beginning. From him, the conclusive arguments were the preëxistence and resurrection, and, in this, he picked the line of apology which Christians have followed ever since. These Jewish opponents of the Gospel came to see the value of attacking the life of Jesus as an offset to the effect of these claims. Jesus, they said, was merely man and, to prove their contentions, we have, among other things, the slander that he was born in fornication. At a time little removed, we know these people as Ebionites. They were the bane of the church from the last quarter of the first century through the second. They cut and slashed everything in Christian literature and tradition to fit in with their preconceptions. They furnished the method for Procrustean critics of a later day. To overcome their attacks in the period before us, the reserve thus far maintained as to the birth of Jesus must be cast aside, the facts must be published. The traditions left by Joseph were now set forth in the First Gospel as a refutation of the calumnies of the Jews and the persistent attempts of this type of Jewish Christians to lessen the estimation of the claims of Jesus.

Almost simultaneously, a different set of conditions operated to bring about the publication of the facts. The effect of the fall of Jerusalem on the community of Christians and the spread of the Gospel into other lands naturally tended to make the presentation of the life of Jesus more explicit. At

any rate, the time came when the first generation of Christians, having probably used in public preaching some such message as St. Mark's Gospel, passed from the scene, to be succeeded by those whose knowledge of the facts in controversy was of a less intimate kind. New converts would need instruction. They would turn to the Marcan message for information relative to the details of the life of Jesus to find it very similar to the description of Melchizedek in Hebrews, "Without father, without descent, having no beginning of days." This state of things became intolerable in the new communities which were springing up everywhere. St. Mark's Gospel became inadequate for the conditions which now confronted the church. To cope with this difficulty, the traditions left by the mother are published by St. Luke in his Gospel.

The only reply which the Christian community at Jerusalem, or elsewhere, ever made on this subject to the slander of enemies or to the eager questions of friends is to be found in the early chapters of the First, Third, and Fourth Gospels. Except possibly the last, which may be based on personal knowledge from the mother, these accounts were grounded on the intimate traditions of the inner circle of friends, expressed in written documents which may have been in literary form as early as 50. Harnack admits that they belong to the first decades after the resurrection. They are poetical in form and show evidence of care. The most hostile critics have never produced any other answer from these circles to these questions.

Do the opponents of the dogma exhibit more reasonable grounds for their theories of the rise and development of the birth narratives of the Gospels? Are their accounts of the genesis of the stories consistent and convincing?

Since we have had so much to say of Harnack as an authority, we turn naturally to his theory first. In his "History of Dogma," referring to the conjecture of Usener that the birth narratives are to be explained as a heathen myth, accepted by the primitive Christians, he says, "Besides, it is in point of method not permissible to stray so far when we have at hand such a complete explanation as Isaiah vii. 14" (vol. i. p. 100). This passage is quoted in the First Gospel from the Septuagint. His theory is that the birth stories arose as a result of Jewish expectation that the Messiah was to be virgin-born. This seems to presuppose a valuation on virginity among the Jews, which did not exist. On the reference to Isaiah, Chase has this to say, "But there appears to be absolutely no evidence that this passage in Isaiah, so familiar in this connection to ourselves, was ever interpreted by the Jews in a Messianic sense. It is easy to understand how it might be adduced to illustrate a history already current; it is difficult to see how it could be considered so relevant to Jesus as Messiah as to lead to the fabrication of a particular story about his birth" (Cambridge Theological Essays, p. 412). The quotation does not occur in St. Luke or in the sources common to both Gospels. Harnack's position on this subject has been felt to be untenable both by those who accept the doctrine and by the more radical critics.

There are two groups among the opponents of the doctrine: those who, with Harnack, account for its rise as a Jewish myth on Jewish soil, and those who, with Soltau, Schmiedel, Cheyne, and Conybeare, ascribe its rise to the incorporation of pagan ideas from Hellenic, or Semitic, or Egyptian, or even from Indian sources into the body of the Gospel. The differences between the two parties are irreconcilable, and to a bystander they appear to destroy each other. Again, within the second



group there is likewise fundamental lack of harmony. On the time of the incorporation of this foreign element into the Gospel they differ by a matter of fifty years, and, as to the source from which it was derived, they range from the gods of Babylonia to Egypt, or to Greece; from the divine contemporary of Jesus, Augustus, back to Gautama, or to Plato.

Here I wish to draw a distinction, which is often neglected in literature on this subject, but which is nevertheless fundamental. It is a frequent trick of clever writers to cast discredit on the virgin birth of Jesus by the assertion that many religions present practically identical stories to decorate the tombs of heroes, to account for the origin of gods, or to explain the apotheosis of men. My point is that there never has been adduced an example of virgin birth in character similar to that of the narratives of St. Matthew and St. Luke. These accounts state that Jesus was born of a virgin by the power of the Holy Spirit and not by sexual intercourse. On this plane, the birth of Jesus is unique, and is not the outcome of pagan influence, for the very simple reason that these religions were incapable of conceiving it. Let Cheyne be our authority for the significance of the word "virgin" in certain religions: "And what was the original meaning of the term 'virgin'? As has long since been shown, it expressed the fact that the great mythic mother-goddess was independent of the marriage tie. In these remote times to which the cult of the goddess properly belonged, 'the mother held the chief place in the clan, and all women shared a measure of free love'" (Bible Problems, p. 75). How far afield such conceptions are from the canonical accounts of the birth of Jesus, any one may judge.

To take the so-called virgin birth in Greek and Roman Mythology. A god overcomes a maiden, and a child is born.

But the means was sexual intercourse, and not divine overshadowing. That is virgin birth, of a certain kind!

Some time ago there appeared in a newspaper an extended article on the subject from the pen of a university professor. It was an especially vicious example of the inability to see a difference when one exists and, further, it was a type of much that is written on the virgin birth. Comparing the birth of Jesus with the legend of the birth of Plato, the professor said, "In the case of Plato the correspondence is startlingly exact, since he was believed by the people of Athens and immediately after his death, for his own sister's son bears witness to it, to have been miraculously born by a pure virgin." The writer was misled by neglect of the most primary principle of research. As a matter of fact, Jerome is responsible for the statement that Plato was virgin-born (*Ad Jovianum*, i. 42), as he is responsible for many fanciful interpretations of history. According to the Greek legend, given by Diogenes Laertius (*De Vita Phil.*, ii. 2), Plato's mother, who was the wife of Ariston, and not a virgin at all, bore a son by union with the god Apollo. The son was Plato. Sexual intercourse was the means of conception, and the mother was not a virgin, and that is a startlingly exact parallel to the birth of Jesus! It is mere credulity, due to an unreasoning adherence to a pet theory, which can see, in stories of this sort, the source of the idea of virgin birth as set forth in the Gospels.

The Pharaohs were known as the sons of Ra. But kingly titles are not to be taken seriously either in ancient or modern times. It is contended, however, that an actual parallel exists in the birth of Amenophis III. According to Sayce, the god Amon Ra had a desire to be a father, so he took the form of Thothmes IV., the husband of Amenophis' mother,

and visited her on her couch. It is a parallel of the birth of Plato, but its resemblance to the birth of Jesus does not appear.

Perhaps the most widely instanced case of supposed virgin birth, cited to account for the Gospel story, is that of Buddha Gautama. One passes over the difficulty of believing that Buddhism influenced the obscure Christian community in remote Palestine. Oddly enough, it was Jerome again (*Ad Jovianum*, i. 42) who set afloat the rumor that Gautama was virgin-born. In one of the stories of the birth of Buddha, it is related that his mother said to her husband, "I wish from the present night to undertake the eight special rules of fasting, to wit, Not to kill anything that lives . . . to have no sexual pleasure," etc. Then Buddha came down and entered her right side and she dreamed, among other things, that a white elephant with six tusks entered her side. The next morning the queen told her husband her dream and said, "From this time forth, I will no more partake of any sexual pleasure." After ten months she gave birth to Gautama. Whatever may have happened to Queen Maya, Gautama was certainly not virgin-born.

It is not my purpose to deny that miraculous events have been supposed to accompany the births of heroes and leaders of religion, or to assert Jesus was the only founder of a religion in regard to whose origin legend has nothing to say. Legendary matter did connect itself with the birth of Christ and can be read in the Apocryphal Gospels by those who are interested. My contention amounts to this, the ideas of virgin birth in the case of Jesus, as set forth in the canonical Gospels, have no parallels in the instances cited from pagan sources. The birth of Jesus, as told in the First and Third Gospels, whether true or false, is at least unique.