

The Virgin Birth of Christ

J. Gresham Machen

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A Brief Book Summary from TGC

By Steve West

Introduction

In *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, Machen sets out to demonstrate that the virgin birth is an integral part of the biblical witness to Christ. He responds to criticisms of the doctrine and examines alternative hypotheses that attempt to give an account for the doctrine's emergence. Machen canvasses comparative religions, Jewish antecedents, and critical biblical scholarship, but he also pays very careful attention to the data of the biblical texts themselves. He concludes with theological reflections on the importance of the doctrine.

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Summary

Chapter 1

The Virgin Birth in the Second Century

When we study the teaching of the early Christians in the second century, we find that there was a unanimity of belief in the virgin birth. In fact, it was part of the Roman baptismal creed, which shows both that it was not a novelty, and that it was a fundamental doctrine. By AD 110, Ignatius was unequivocally teaching the virgin birth; his stature and knowledge prove that this doctrine

had deep roots. It is not surprising that the enemies of the church denied the virgin birth, but none of their alternative explanations are based on historical evidence. Those who claimed to be Christians but who denied this doctrine all operated out of defective Christologies (e.g. Docetism, where Jesus wasn't born at all; Adoptionism, where Jesus was adopted at his baptism, etc.). Various Jews opposed the virgin birth, but Christians did not deny the doctrine. Other challenges came from Gnosticism, but these objections were rooted in philosophical *a priori*s and were rejected by the church. The schismatic Ebionites were divided on the issue of the virgin birth. We do not always have lots of clear evidence about the nuances of schismatic groups, and often they were diverse and internally divided on various issues. Although this requires reconstruction, it seems that the Gospel according to the Hebrews contained material similar to that found in Matthew 1-2. A variety of circumstantial and evidential details lead to this conclusion. At times, people have confused sources and misidentified groups, which has naturally generated misunderstandings and misinterpretations. When the evidence is weighed, it is clear that the tradition of the virgin birth represented the primitive tradition, and that the orthodox always accepted it. Those who denied it were on the margins, and they did so on the basis of presuppositions rather than historical data and tradition.

Chapter 2

The Birth Narrative an Original Part of the Third Gospel

We have seen that the doctrine of the virgin birth was accepted at the very beginning of the second century. Two of the first century Gospels contain the virgin birth teaching. Luke was the travelling companion of Paul, and he knew the traditions of the earliest church. Linguistic analysis demonstrates that his birth narrative was not a later addition to the Gospel. Furthermore, the manuscript witness is uniform in showing this material in copies of the Gospel. Some have tried to maintain that the original Gospel of Luke depicted Jesus' baptism as the beginning, and that this rules out an interest in his birth. This is an entirely unsustainable position. The baptism of Jesus was a vital event, and it marked the beginning of his public ministry but it was not detached from his birth. Nothing in Luke's structure or language requires the view that he had no interest in Jesus' life before his baptism. The baptism did not make Jesus the Son of God; it revealed him for what he was. The reference to John the Baptist as the son of Zechariah (3:2) clearly draws on the antecedent material in the first two chapters. The Gospels may incorporate earlier units of material, but they are full books written by their authors, and they were transmitted as such. Luke's Gospel is not merely an amalgam of previous work, but a carefully crafted book, the hand of one author. Careful criticism establishes that one author wrote Luke-Acts, and that Luke 1-2 were from the same hand and always part of the original.

Chapter 3

Characteristics of the Lucan Narrative

Luke 1:5-2:52 is very Jewish and Palestinian in flavor. The first four verses comprises one complex sentence in good Greek style, but the infancy narrative is written in short sentences and simple style, like the Old Testament narratives. There is a lot of Hebrew parallelism in both the

poetic and prose sections. The thought world and concepts are also Old Testament in their nature; there is no anachronistic importing of Christian themes. The text's view on child-bearing, righteousness, and the Messianic hope are all clearly formed according to OT patterns. If the text invented details well after the time of Jesus, it would bear the marks of distinctively late Christian concepts, but these are absent. Even in the first two chapters' universalism, the role of Israel and Jerusalem is prominent (which would not have been the way a story would be written after AD 70). Simeon's prophecy about the sword does not go beyond the bounds of predictive prophecy—if it were invented after the crucifixion, it would likely have been more explicit. Some have tried to argue that Luke 2:22 reveals an ignorance of the customs of the Mosaic Law that would preclude a Palestinian origin, but this is singularly unconvincing.

Chapter 4

The Hymns of the First Chapter of Luke

Besides the general character of Luke 1:5-2:52 as Palestinian, the Magnificat and the Benedictus can be seen to be especially so. Their diction, style, and pre-Christian conceptual bases make this conclusion sound. No arguments succeed in demonstrating that these hymns were composed by Luke, rather than originally uttered by Zechariah and Mary. The first long sentence of the Benedictus is not at all like the long sentence of Luke 1:1-4. Its structure is entirely different, and it has affinities with the loose structure of other Semitic poetry put into Greek forms. The Magnificat is almost completely composed of OT phrases, which are put together in parallelism. The evidence against Lukan composition of these hymns is so strong that some scholars have even argued that they are Jewish pieces that have been appropriated by the Christian community. It is contended that there is very little in the hymns themselves which point to a specific context; they may be taken as general expressions of praise for deliverance. If they were truly Christian, it has been argued, the Messiah would be far more prominent. There is no reason why a Christian writer would take a generic Jewish hymn and use it to express truths about Christ, without making it more obviously about Jesus. The only explanation that accounts for all of the data is that the Magnificat was a Semitic song of Mary, put into Greek form. Many similar things can be said about the Benedictus. Both songs represent compositions that reflect thinking about the Messianic hope in OT categories, not later Christian ones. In fact, both songs fit perfectly into a Palestinian context of pre-Christian hope at the birth of the Messiah.

Chapter 5

The Origin and Transmission of the Lucan Narrative

Harnack argued that the Magnificat and the Benedictus were free compositions by Luke, but this view has been refuted. This does not mean that Luke did not have a hand in shaping them according to his own style. Luke may have edited, but he was not the inventor of the material. It is also possible—though often overlooked—that Luke's own style might have been affected by this earlier material. There are always times when translation requires more than literalness if the meaning is to be conveyed, and so Luke could have exercised liberty in translation. Being a translator with liberty does not equal being the author of the original. Examination demonstrates

conclusively that Luke's hand shaped the infancy narrative of his Gospel, but he did not invent the material. The Palestinian style is again confirmed. The birth narrative was always part of the original Gospel. Whether Luke relied on a Hebraic, Aramaic, or previous Greek source for some of his material is uncertain, but it is also not relevant for these major points. Authors, editors, and translators alike could be highly influenced by the Septuagint, which would create stylistic particularities.

Chapter 6

The Integrity of the Lucan Narrative

If the infancy narrative in Luke is Palestinian—which it is—then the idea that the virgin birth is a pagan idea is ruled out. Some hold that the virgin conception is a pagan idea interpolated into the original text (there are, of course, diverse views on how much material is interpolated). It is often urged by these theorists that Luke 1:34-35 is an interpolation, but there is no textual evidence for this contention anywhere. The text works very hard to insist that Mary was an unmarried virgin when the annunciation took place and when she conceived. Luke 3:23 also supports the virgin birth, and there is no evidence there of interpolating or tampering. Tracing Jesus' lineage through Joseph's line does not nullify or challenge the virgin birth, since Joseph accepted Jesus as his legal son, and Jesus was a gift from God to the Davidic household. Even though Mary had received the angel's visit and she had experienced the miraculous conception, she did not understand everything fully as Jesus grew up (indeed, no one does to this day). Many of the arguments of the critical scholars only succeed in cancelling each other out. There is no compelling evidence—and much against—the Roman Catholic view of the perpetuity of Mary's virginity even after her marriage to Joseph and the birth of Jesus. Mary did not take the angel's words as implying that she would conceive after her marriage, but as a message that she would conceive before. The message was taken to apply to the immediate future. Perhaps the strongest argument against the interpolation hypothesis is that the entire narrative only makes sense given the divine identity of Jesus and the virgin birth. If 1:34-35 are removed, the narrative is thrown into illogical disarray. The first two chapters of Luke are coherent on the basis of the supernatural conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit, and incoherent if he is only an ordinary child, conceived in a natural way. There is a widely recognized, remarkable parallelism between the annunciation to Zechariah and the annunciation to Mary. This tight parallelism rules out the possibility that 1:34-35 were a later insertion (since such an interpolation would destroy the literary twinning). This demonstration is a clear victory given the principles of structural analysis. Unlike Zechariah, Joseph is not prominent in the text: Mary is. This only makes sense given the special relationship that Mary has to the child, and this relationship is explained by the supernatural conception. The conception of Jesus is more, not less, miraculous than that of John the Baptist.

Chapter 7

The Narrative in Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew does have a particular Jewish emphasis. Matthew established Jesus' Davidic ancestry, while simultaneously and clearly teaching the virgin birth. There is no documentary evidence that Matthew 1-2 was not always part of the original Gospel. Matthew's infancy narrative shares the style of the rest of the book. It also carefully protects the special identity of Joseph's relationship to both Mary and Jesus. Some have appealed to the Sinaitic Syriac version of Matthew 1:16, but this variant reading is ruled out by textual evidence and critical logic. Emendation of the text is entirely unnecessary and unwarranted: the earliest Greek manuscripts are uniform and have no need of alteration. Once this is accepted, it is easy to see how any corrupted variants were generated. Even if the text did say that "Joseph begat Jesus," this would be understood in context as a legal begetting (the genealogy is obviously stylized).

Chapter 8

The Relation between the Narratives

Although the infancy narratives are part of the original Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the accounts are both Palestinian, and the virgin birth was always part of the narrative, no literary relationship between the two Gospel accounts can be established. All theories that have tried to show such dependency have failed to gain acceptance, and all theories that have attempted to reconstruct an original source that both Matthew and Luke relied upon have likewise floundered. There are no contradictions between the accounts, even though there are independent details; these can be harmonized. There are times when one account is silent about a detail in the other, but this hardly amounts to the assertion of contradictory propositions. Matthew records an annunciation to Joseph, and Luke records an annunciation to Mary—both happened! Neither one of the accounts is exhaustive; they supplement each other. It would seem that Joseph is the primary source behind Matthew's account, and Mary behind Luke's. This accounts for the fact that Matthew's account presents Joseph's point of view, whereas Luke's presents Mary's. Many have pointed out the differences in the genealogies as being clear contradictions. These differences have been identified from the beginning, however, and several ways of accounting for them have been proposed. Perhaps the best explanation is to see Luke's genealogy as tracing back Joseph's physical ancestry, and Matthew's enumerating the line of succession from David. "Begetting" is a broad word in the genealogies, and there can be legal adoption of collateral lines in the kingly succession.

Chapter 9

The Inherent Credibility of the Narratives

The two birth accounts in the Gospels are independent but not contradictory. Those who reject the supernatural and miracles will, of course, not find many of the narrative elements credible. Some have simply denied the accuracy of the stories entirely, while others have vainly attempted to maintain a historical core of natural events while rejecting all of the supernatural details. The accounts can be seen as true history or as religious mythology, but the miraculous cannot be excised. It is apparent that the supernatural is at the heart of the accounts. Historical detail is not irrelevant to faith, and all historical inquiry proceeds on the basis of presuppositions. Compared

with the stories in the apocryphal Gospels, the canonical accounts reflect sobriety and factuality. Once we accept the incarnation, there is no difficulty whatsoever in accepting the appearances of the angels—after all, they are ministers of Christ. The magi may have seen natural events in the heavens and interpreted them to indicate the birth of the king in the West. There is no indication that the star continually traced a path across the heavens that the magi continually followed. In the end, the magi relied on experts in Old Testament prophecy to tell them where the child would be. But even if the star was an entirely supernatural event, it is perfectly coherent given the supernaturalism of the story. The accounts are not overly polished and leave much unsaid, which points towards authenticity rather than fabrication. Critics have nitpicked at textual details, but their criticisms do not undermine the plausibility of the historical events.

Chapters 10 and 11

The Birth Narratives and Secular History

The Birth Narratives and the Rest of the New Testament

If we accept the reality of the supernatural, there is nothing in the birth narratives which must be rejected. The fact that secular history does not record the slaughter of the children as ordered by Herod is meaningless. Given the amount of violence Herod unleashed during his latter reign, it really was a small event in a remote location. More difficulty attaches to Luke's account of the census taking place under Quirinius. This problem has been the subject of much attention, and there are a variety of possible ways to uphold the accuracy of the account. The general accuracy of Luke-Acts used to be ridiculed, but now many discoveries have revealed how precise and accurate his historical particularities are—this gives a presumptive bias in favor of the accuracy of his narratives, even if we find challenges. There are ways of explaining how Luke's account lines up with secular history that at least show there are possible ways to avoid contradiction.

The Gospels show that the masses knew nothing of the virgin birth, but this is hardly surprising. It is also not in the least surprising that Mary did not tell Jesus' brothers about his conception. We should not imagine that Mary should have had perfect understanding and perfect faith. The career of her son thirty years after his birth was not what anyone anticipated, and there were confusion, uncertainty, and pain. The Gospel of Mark contains no account of the virgin birth, but then again it contains no account of Jesus' birth at all! Mark's silence hardly undercuts the testimony of Matthew and Luke. John does not have a birth narrative, but he does talk about the divine Word becoming flesh and revealing his glory. Despite hyper-criticism, there are simply no details in Mark or John—or any silences—that contradict the accounts of Matthew and Luke. The Book of Acts does not mention the virgin birth, but given its purpose and the sermons that are recorded, it would be strange to find references to it. Nothing in Paul contradicts the virgin birth either, and there is little reason why he should mention it given his subject matter. If it wasn't for the Corinthians' abuse of the Lord's Supper, Paul's letters would have been silent about it, but it would be an enormous mistake to think he had never heard of it or to think that he rejected it. Analogously, the same holds for the virgin birth: it wasn't mentioned because there was no occasion that required it. It is actually entirely plausible that Paul never mentioned it because it was universally accepted in the churches. The virgin birth isn't as well-attested as the

resurrection, but it is as well-attested as is fitting given its relative importance and the needs of the early church. The probability of the virgin birth cannot be detached from everything else Jesus was and did.

Chapters 12 and 13

Alternative Theories: Preliminary Considerations

The Theory of Jewish Derivation

Taking all things into consideration, the best explanation for the belief of the early church that Jesus was born of a virgin is simply that the virgin birth was a fact of history. All other theories that attempt to explain how the erroneous belief arose in the church that Jesus was born of a virgin have lacked cogency and explanatory power. We see no trace of a belief amongst Jesus' contemporaries that he was conceived in a scandalous fashion—charges of scandal arose later. The majority who reject the veracity of the virgin birth believe that it is a religious myth, designed to express religious commitment. Many look to Jewish antecedents for such phenomena, and point out that there are several miraculous conceptions before Christ. This is true, but in every other case there is recognized human paternity. Judaism revered the transcendence of God, and anything that suggested illicit contact with his creation would never have been imagined. A more important objection notices that the Messiah must be descended from David. At first glance, this seems to challenge the virgin birth. Yet, the fact that Jesus is a gift to the Davidic house means more than his physical descent from Joseph would have meant. Since Davidic descent was so important for the Messiah, the Jews would not have invented the idea of the virgin birth. They thought it happened because it did happen. Isaiah 7:14 should not be interpreted in a minimalist fashion; it is about Christ, but it can be interpreted typologically. Nevertheless, the Jews did not take Isaiah 7:14 to prophesy the virgin birth of the Messiah, so the doctrine would not have been invented to conform to that expectation. There is no evidence whatsoever that there was a pre-Christian teaching in Judaism that the Messiah would be born of a virgin. The alleged parallel between the canonical virgin birth accounts and Philo's discussion of supernatural conceptions is very strained; Philo is not talking about the type of Holy Spirit conception that creates Jesus in Mary's womb. Philo taught that God breathes spirit into men, and that he gives great men great qualities, but this is not a virgin conception in the canonical sense. When Philo is writing about heroes begotten by God, he is not thinking about flesh and blood beings, but is rather writing allegorically. The vast majority of scholars recognize that the idea of the virgin birth could not have arisen out of Jewish ideas before the New Testament.

Chapter 14

The Theory of Pagan Derivation

Most scholars who reject the historicity of the virgin birth believe that it was an idea appropriated from pagan sources. This reveals a massive misunderstanding about the relationship between the early church and paganism. It also believes, quite erroneously, that the church was influenced by paganism in its crassest manifestation. We have already established the clear Jewish and Palestinian features of the infancy narratives. Pagans did have many stories about the

gods copulating with mortal women, and early apologists like Origen and Justin Martyr did defend Christianity by pointing out the analogies. But they also pointed out the large and massively important dissimilarities. They were scholars who tried to show that pagans were inconsistent to have their own crass stories of gods sleeping with women, but then to reject the idea of the virgin birth (where there was no lust or physical intercourse). That these scholars could see the analogies hardly means that average Christians appropriated the pagan myths to invent the virgin birth. We also need to bear in mind the infinite distance that lies between the anthropomorphic and lustful gods of the pagans and the Holy One of Israel: Christians and Jews did not think that Yahweh was like Zeus. Critically, pagan religions were polytheistic, but Judaism rigorously monotheistic. Some people have looked to the East—to Buddhism or Zoroastrianism—to find parallels with the virgin birth, but such attempts have failed. Looking for the roots of the biblical virgin birth accounts in Babylonian or Egyptian mythologies have proved to be no more convincing. Students of comparative religions need to bear in mind that parallels can be readily manufactured between many things—it is essential to also pay attention to the dissimilarities and disanalogies. Time and again we discover that all of these alleged parallels suffer from insurmountable defects at crucial points. The New Testament teaching on the virgin birth stands in a holy class all by itself. Those who deny the authenticity of the virgin birth cannot agree amongst each other as to how the belief arose, and they criticize each other's hypotheses vehemently. Yet they cannot constructively build a theory that is sustainable.

Chapter 15

Conclusions and Consequences

We have seen that the virgin birth accounts are Palestinian and original to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. No theory yet proposed that attempts to explain how this view arose has been convincing, except for one—the view arose because it was historically true. When we look at the incredible life of Jesus, we find that the virgin birth is necessary and fitting. If the story of the virgin birth is false, then the Bible is false and it loses its high authority. Jesus is a historical figure, and if the biblical history about him is wrong, it cannot be trusted and its credibility is eviscerated. The Bible is not merely a book of religion and ethics—it is grounded in historical particularity. Today, people can say that they believe that Jesus is God, but this means very little, since it depends on how God is defined. Others say they believe in the resurrection, but again, this can mean little. Acceptance of the doctrine of the virgin birth, however, is a good litmus test of faith in our contemporary society. Without the account of the virgin birth, we could still know that Jesus was fully God and fully man, but there would be a serious gap in our knowledge. We would not know how he came into the world, and we could fall into many vain and dangerous speculations. The virgin birth is necessary for the sinlessness of Christ: to deny the doctrine is to either deny Christ's full humanity, or to deny that he was born without original sin. The Bible presents only one Jesus Christ, and he came into the world by the conception of the Holy Spirit in the Virgin Mary.