

The Supernatural Birth of Jesus

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I have promised the editors of the American Journal of Theology to indicate to their readers the answer I think must be given to the question, "Is the doctrine of the supernatural birth of Jesus essential to Christianity?" In addressing myself to fulfil this promise, however, I find myself laboring under a good deal of embarrassment. I am naturally embarrassed, for example, by the narrowness of the space at my disposal. Within the limits allowed me, I can hope to do nothing more than suggest a few of the considerations which weigh with me, and these only in the most cursory manner. I am much more embarrassed, however, by the infelicity of discussing the relation to Christianity, considered as a system of doctrine (that is to say, as a consistent body of truth), of a fact, the historicity of which I am to leave to others to discuss, who may perhaps reach conclusions to which I could by no means assent, whether in kind or merely in degree. I can only say that I have myself no doubt whatever of the fact of the supernatural birth of Jesus, as that fact is recorded in the opening chapters of the gospels of Matthew and Luke. I certainly make no question that additional evidence of tremendous weight is brought to this fact by its place in the system of Christianity, commended as this system as a whole is by the entire body of proof which we call the "Christian evidences." But I do not believe that it needs this additional evidence for its establishment. And I prefer my readers to understand that I proceed to the consideration of its place in the Christian system with it in my hands, not as a hypothesis of more or less probability (or improbability), but as a duly authenticated actual occurrence, recognized as such on its own direct evidence, and bringing as such its own quota of support to the Christian system of which it forms a part.

I am embarrassed most of all, however, by the ambiguity of the language in which the question I am to discuss is stated. What is "the doctrine of the supernatural birth of Jesus?" What exactly, indeed, is intended by the main term employed? What is a "super-natural birth"? Were the births of Isaac and of John the Baptist "supernatural births"? Or those of Sampson and of Samuel? Or those of Jeremiah and of Paul, whom, we are told, the Lord had selected for his own in or from the womb? Is not, indeed, the birth of every good man whom God prepares for some special work for him—certainly by influences beginning in the loins of his ancestors—in some sense supernatural? Nay, no one who believes in Providence can doubt that there is a supernatural element in the birth of every man that comes into the world. It may easily come about, therefore, that one may be found contending earnestly that the "supernatural birth" of Jesus is essential to Christianity, and yet sharply denying that that birth was "supernatural" in the only sense in which it is important to contend for its supernaturalness. What sense, further, we need to ask, is to be attached to the word "essential" here? Is the inquiry, perchance, whether the supernatural birth of Jesus constitutes the very essence of Christianity, so that in this doctrine Christianity is summed up? Or merely whether it enters so into the substance of Christianity that Christianity is not fully stated without it? The crowning ambiguity attaches, however, to the term "Christianity" itself. Is it to be taken subjectively or objectively? Are we asking whether it is possible for a man to commit his soul to Christ as his Savior without a clear knowledge and firm conviction of his Lord's virgin birth? Or are we asking whether any statement of Christianity can be thought complete which omits or ignores this doctrine? Or if it be supposed that this question is already settled by the use of the word "doctrine," we still have to ask what objective "Christianity" it is

that we are to have in mind? The Christianity of the New Testament, or of some fragment of the New Testament, arbitrarily torn from its context and interpreted in isolation? The Christianity of the churches-the historical Christianity embodied in the authoritative creeds of Christendom; or the Christianity of a certain school of recent critical speculations-the Christianity of Auguste Sabatier, say, or of Paul Lobstein, or of Otto Pflleiderer, or of Adolf Harnack?

Were the inquiry a purely historical one, it might no doubt be soon settled. It admits of no doubt, for example, that, historically speaking, the “supernatural birth of Jesus” forms a substantial element in the Christianity as well of the New Testament, taken in its entirety, as of the creeds of the church. There it stands plainly written in both, and even he who runs may read it.’ Of course, it does not stand written on every page of the New Testament or of the creeds- why should it? And, of course, it may be thought a debatable question whether it has been logically or practically as important to historical Christianity as its prominent confession in the documents might seem to imply.² That it holds no essential place in much of the “Christianity” current at the opening of the twentieth century is certainly too obvious for discussion. To the late Auguste Sabatier, for example, “Christianity” had come to mean just the altruistic temper; and nobody will imagine the “super-natural birth of Jesus”-or any kind of birth of Jesus, for that matter, natural or supernatural or unnatural-essential to the altruistic temper. Must not much the same be said also of the “Christianity” of Otto Pflleiderer, or of any form of that at present very fashionable “Christianity” which supposes the parable of the Prodigal Son, say, to contain a complete statement of the Christian religion? As there is no atonement, and no expiation, and no satisfaction, so there is no mediator, no Jesus of any kind in the parable of the Prodigal Son. And the “Christianity” which refuses to know anything but the love of God which is there revealed to us, as it has no need of a Jesus, can have no need of a “supernatural birth” for the Jesus whom it totally ignores, or for whom it makes at best but an unessential place.

It is very evident, then, that if we are to ask whether “the doctrine of the supernatural birth of Jesus is essential to Christianity,” we must settle it in our minds very clearly at the outset what “Christianity” it is we are talking about. Our answer will be one thing if we are thinking of what many about us are vaguely and vainly calling “Christianity,” and perhaps quite another thing if we are thinking of the Christianity of Christ and his apostles, recorded in the New Testament, and drawn from the New Testament by the historical church through all ages. This latter is the only Christianity in which I can personally have more than a historical interest. I shall therefore confine myself to it. For the same reason I shall take “the supernatural birth of Jesus” in its highest sense-that of the truly miraculous birth of Jesus from a virgin-mother, without intervention of man. It is in this sense that the “supernatural birth of Jesus” was actual; and this is the only sense, therefore, in which a discussion of it can have a real, as distinguished from a merely academic, interest. Defining thus my terms, the specific question which I shall seek to answer is whether the doctrine of the miraculous birth of Jesus from a virgin mother, taught in the opening chapters of the gospels of Matthew and Luke, forms an element in the Christianity of the New Testament, indispensable in the sense that without it that Christianity would be incompletely stated and left in one important matter defective, and, therefore, liable to misconception, if not open to dangerous assault.

Were I asked to name the three pillars on which the structure of Christianity, as taught in the New Testament in its entirety, especially rests, I do not know that I could do better than point to

these three things: the supernatural, the incarnation, redemption. In an important sense, these three things constitute the Christianity of the New Testament; proceeding from the more general to the more specific, they sum up in themselves its essence. What interests us particularly at the moment is that the virgin birth of Jesus takes its significant place and has its significant part to play with respect to each one of them. Without it each one of them would be sheared of some portion of its meaning and value, and would take on a different and weakened aspect.

No one can doubt that the Christianity of the New Testament is supernaturalistic through and through. Whether we have regard to the person of Jesus or to the salvation he brought to men, the primary note of this Christianity certainly is supernaturalism. He who walked the earth as its Lord, and whom the very winds and waves obeyed; who could not be holden of the grave, but burst the bonds of death and ascended into the heavens in the sight of man: he who now sits at the right hand of God and sheds down his gift of salvation through his Spirit upon the men of his choice-it were impossible that such a one should have entered the world undistinguished among common men. His supernatural birth is given already, in a word, in his supernatural life and his supernatural work, and forms an indispensable element in the supernatural religion which he founded.

It would no doubt be difficult-or impossible, if you will-to believe that a natural Jesus had a supernatural origin; or, going at once to the root of the matter, that a natural "salvation" requires a supernatural Redeemer. Much of the Christianity about us today is distinctively, and even polemically, to use von Hartmann's term, "autosoteric," and he who feels entirely competent to save himself finds a natural difficulty in believing that God must intervene to save him. I fully agree with the adherents of this "autosoteric" Christianity, that from their point of view a supernatural birth for Jesus would be devoid of significance, and therefore incredible. They should with similar frankness allow to me, I think, that to the Christianity of the New Testament, on the other hand, just because it stands as the opposite pole to their "autosoteric Christianity," the supernatural birth of Jesus is a necessity.

This, indeed, they in effect do when they argue that the virgin birth of Jesus is the invention of the Christianity of the New Testament on the basis of the extreme supernaturalism of its conception of Christianity. Thinking of Jesus as they did, we are told, the early Christians could not but postulate for him an origin consonant with what they conceived to be his nature, his powers, his career, the work he came to do, did do, is doing.³ Nothing could be more true. The supernatural Christ and the supernatural salvation carry with them by an inevitable consequence the supernatural birth. In other words, the supernatural birth of Jesus is an implication of the Christian consciousness-that is, of course, of the supernaturalistic Christian consciousness.⁴ And the Christian consciousness in this judgment receives the support of the universal human consciousness. Men have always and everywhere judged that a supernatural man, doing a supernatural work, must needs have sprung from a supernatural source.⁵ If there had been nothing extraordinary in the coming of the Savior into the world, a discordant note would have been struck at this point in the "heterosoteric" Christianity of the New Testament, which would have thrown it in all its elements out of tune. To it, it would have been unnatural if the birth of the Savior had been natural, just because it itself in none of its elements is natural, but is everywhere and through all its structure, not, indeed, unnatural or contra-natural, but distinctively supernatural. The cardinal point upon which the whole of this supernaturalistic

Christianity, commended to us by the New Testament, turns, is formed by its doctrine of incarnation. The supernatural Savior, who has come into the world to work a supernatural salvation, could not possibly be conceived by it as of this world. If it would be to “annul Jesus,” to imagine that he had not come in the flesh, or that he who had come in the flesh was not the Word of God who in the beginning was with God and was God-God only-begotten who was in the bosom of the Father-it would no less be to “annul him” to imagine that he could owe his coming to earthly causes or collocations. Born into our race he might be and was; but born of our race, never-whether really or only apparently.

There has been a very odd attempt made, to be sure, to set over against one another the doctrines of the pre-existence and of the supernatural birth of our Lord, as if they were mutually exclusive, or at least parallel rather than complementary conceptions. In speaking of such a thing as birth, however, it is obvious that when we say pre-existence we have already said supernatural, and as soon as we have said Deity we have said miraculous. So far as appears, it required the Socinians to teach us that one of these things could be taken and the other left-that any rational mind could suppose a non-supernatural being to be the product of a super-natural birth; while surely only a pronounced pantheist could so confound things that differ as to imagine that for bringing a supernatural being into the world those causes may be thought to suffice by which commonly mere men are produced. Ordinary people may be trusted to continue to judge that, as incarnation means precisely the entrance into the human race of a being not in any sense the product of the forces working in that race, but introduced from with-out and above, it is in its very essence a supernatural occurrence, and will necessarily bear in its mode of occurrence its credentials as such. It is, indeed, obviously not enough to say that it behooved the Divine Person who became incarnate in Jesus Christ, in entering into a new phase of existence, not to seem then first to begin to be; although to say that is no doubt to say something to the point. Would we do justice to the case, we must go on and affirm that, when the Life itself (which is also the Truth itself) entered into the conditions of human existence, it could not but come, according to its nature, creatively-bringing its own self-existing Life with it, and not making a round-about way so as to appear only now to begin, by way of derivation, to exist. When the Word was made flesh and tabernacled among men, it could not be but that men should behold his glory-a glory as of an only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

In point of fact, accordingly, it is just in proportion as men lose their sense of the Divine personality of the messianic king who is Immanuel, God with us, that they are found to doubt the necessity of the virgin birth; while in proportion as the realization of this fundamental fact of the Christianity of the New Testament remains vivid and vital with them, do they instinctively feel that it is alone consonant with it that this Being should acknowledge none other father than that Father which is in heaven, from whom alone he came forth to save the world. Accordingly, the adherents of the modern kenosis doctrine of the person of Christ, seeing in Jesus Christ nothing but God (though God shrunk to man's estate), have become the especial defenders of the doctrine of the virgin birth, and at this point the especial opponents of the modern rationalists, with whom otherwise they have so much in common. In contradistinction to both, the Christianity of the New Testament, remembering the two natures-which nowadays nearly everybody forgets-offers us in our Lord's person, not a mere man (perhaps in some sense made God), nor a mere God (perhaps in some sense made man), but a true God-man, who, being all that God is and at the same time all that man is, has come into the world in a fashion suitable to

his dual nature, conceived indeed in a virgin's womb, and born of a woman and under the law, but not by the will of the flesh, nor by the will of man, but solely by the will of the God who he is.⁶

Not even in the incarnation, however, is the Christianity of the New Testament summed up. Rather, the incarnation appears in it, not for its own sake, but as a means to a farther end—redemption. And it is only in its relation to the New Testament doctrine of redemption that the necessity of the virgin birth of Jesus comes to its complete manifestation. For in this Christianity the redemption that is provided is distinctively redemption from sin; and that he might redeem men from sin it certainly was imperative that the Redeemer himself should not be involved in sin. He would be a bold man, indeed, who would affirm that the incarnation of the Holy One in sinful flesh presents no difficulties to his thought. The sinlessness of Jesus, in the sense of freedom from subjective corruption as well as from overt acts of sin, seems to be involved in the incarnation itself, purely and simply; and, in point of fact, those who imagine it was in principle sinful flesh which was assumed by the Son of God are prone to represent this flesh as actually cleansed of its sinfulness, either by the act of incarnation itself or by the almighty operation of the Spirit of God as a condition precedent to incarnation. But something more than sinlessness in this subjective sense was requisite for the redemption up to which the incarnation leads. Assuredly no one, resting for himself under the curse of sin, could atone for the sin of others; no one owing the law its extreme penalty for himself could pay this penalty for others. And certainly in the Christianity of the New Testament every natural member of the race of Adam rests under the curse of Adam's sin, and is held under the penalty that hangs over it. If the Son of God came into the world there-fore-as that Christianity asserts to be a "faithful saying"—specifically in order to save sinners, it was imperatively necessary that he should become incarnate after a fashion which would leave him standing, so far as his own responsibility is concerned, outside that fatal entail of sin in which the whole natural race of Adam is involved. And that is as much as to say that the redemptive work of the Son of God depends upon his supernatural birth.

I am, of course, well aware that this doctrine of redemption, and as well the doctrine of sin which underlies it, is nowadays scouted in wide circles. With that, however, I have no present concern. I cheerfully admit that to a "Christianity" which knows nothing of race-sin and atonement, the necessity of the supernatural birth of the "Redeemer," if it be recognized at all, must rest on other, and perhaps on less stringent, grounds. But I have not undertaken to investigate the possible place of the supernatural birth of Jesus in the varied forms of so-called "Christianity" prevalent in the modern world, many of which stand in no other relation to the Christianity of the New Testament than that of contradiction. Nor am I to be deterred from recognizing the doctrines of "original sin" and of "satisfaction" as fundamental elements in the Christianity of the New Testament, by the habit which has grown up among those who do not like them, of speaking of them scornfully as "Augustinian" and "Anselmic." What rather attracts my attention is that it seems to be universally allowed that, on these "Augustinian" and "Anselmic" presuppositions, the doctrine of the virgin birth of Jesus is an absolutely essential element of Christianity. In so far, then, as it is admitted that the doctrines of "original sin" and of "satisfaction" are constituent elements of the Christianity of the New Testament, it may be taken as acknowledged that the virgin birth of our Lord is confessedly essential to it.⁷

If, then, it cannot be denied that the supernatural birth of Jesus enters constitutively into the substance of that system which is taught in the New Testament as Christianity—that it is the expression of its supernaturalism, the safeguard of its doctrine of incarnation, the condition of its doctrine of redemption—are we to go on and say that no one can be saved who does not hold this faith whole and entire? The question is thoroughly impertinent. We are discussing, not the terms of salvation, but the essential content of the Christian system; not what we must do to be saved, but what it behooved Jesus Christ to be and to do that he might save us. Say that faith is the instrument by which salvation is laid hold upon; the instrument by which the prerequisites of the salvation laid hold of by faith are investigated is the intellect. As it is certain that the only Jesus, faith in whom can save, is the Jesus who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, and born of the virgin Mary, according to the Scriptures, it is equally certain that the act of faith by which he is savingly apprehended involves these presuppositions, were its implicates soundly developed. But our logical capacity can scarcely be made the condition of our salvation.⁸ The Scriptures do not encourage us to believe that only the wise are called. They even graciously assure us that blasphemy itself against the Son may be forgiven. It would surely be unfortunate if weakness of intellect were more fatal than wickedness of heart. On the whole, we may congratulate ourselves that it was more imperative that Jesus, by whom the salvation has been wrought, should know what it behooved him to be and to do that he might save us, than it is that we should fully understand it. But, on the other hand, it will scarcely do to represent ignorance or error as advantageous to salvation. It certainly is worth while to put our trust in Jesus as intelligently as it may be given to us to do so. And it certainly will over and over again be verified in experience that he who casts himself upon Jesus as his divine Redeemer, will find the fact of the virgin birth of this Savior not only consonant with his faith and an aid to it, but a postulate of it without which he would be puzzled and distressed.

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Footnotes

1 “The church assigns the highest value to the doctrine of the virgin birth” (Schmiedel, *Encyclopadia Biblica*, 2964). It is “a constant and, we may truly say, universally recognized element in the doctrinal tradition of the post-apostolic period, for of any important or fruitful opposition to it the history of doctrine knows nothing” (Hering, *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, Vol. V, p. 67).

2 This is the gist of Hering’s assault on it; cf. as above, and p. 74: “The denial of the fact (of the virgin birth) has in all ages been adjudged heresy, but its positive utilization has been very slight.”

3 “The conception that our Savior was a son of God born from a virgin was the involuntary, yea the inevitable, reflection of the divinity of Christ in the souls of converted Greeks” (Usener, *Das Weihnachtsfest*, p. 75; cf. p. 76: “There could not fail the birth as visible sign that something divine had entered the world”). Cf. Soltau, *The Birth of Jesus Christ*, p. 44. 4 Lobstein, *The Virgin Birth*, p. 33, argues that the consciousness of the gulf which separates the believer from

“the One in whom he has found his Master,” leads him instinctively to infer a difference in origin, and thus “the traditions of the miraculous birth of Jesus seem to anticipate the conviction of the believer, merely transferring into the realm of history a truth of which he finds in himself the most conclusive confirmation;” cf. p. 35. What is this but to say that in the logic of the heart the super-natural Redeemer demands for himself a supernatural origin?

s “Stories of supernatural birth may be said to have a currency as wide as the world. Heroes of extraordinary achievement or extraordinary qualities were necessarily of extraordinary birth. The wonder or the veneration they inspired seemed to demand that their entrance upon life, and their departure from it, should correspond with the impression left by their total career” (Hartland, *The Legend of Perseus*, pp. 71, 72). So Origen (*Contra Celsum*, I, 29), speaking of the story of Plato’s super-natural birth, says: “But this is really a myth, and the simple incitement to imagine this of Plato was that man believes that a man of wisdom and power greater than those of the multitude must have had a higher and more divine origin than they.” The point of importance is whether the truly supernatural life and work are real.

6 Such criticisms as that of Reville, *Histoire du dogme de la divinite de Jesus Christ* (1869, p. 30; 1904, p. 27), miss the mark and would apply only to the kenotic perversion: “A pre-existent being who becomes man reduces himself, if you will, to the condition of a human embryo; but he is not conceived by virtue of an act external to himself in the womb of a woman, etc.” In the New Testament view of the God-man, as there is no reduction of the Godhead to the level of a human embryo, so there is a true conception of a complete human embryo by an act external to itself. Only, the cause external to this embryo, by virtue of which it is conceived, is the power of the Most High, and not natural fertilization.

7 Cf. Lobstein, *op. cit.*, p. 84; Cheyne, *Biblical Problems*, p. 95; etc.

8 I have the unwonted felicity of being thoroughly at one in this with Professor Paul Schwartzkopff, who remarks: “The faith which lays hold of the living God in Christ is not necessarily conditioned by the thoroughness with which the intellect grasps its content” (*The Prophecies of Jesus Christ*, E. T., p. 3).