

to put his hands in the marks of his sufferings. There is no need. Thomas confesses that Jesus has laid hold on him. He has been touched by the risen Christ.

The lesson that the earliest generations of Christians learned is necessary for us too. We need to allow ourselves to be touched by Christ, to be drawn into friendship with him. We all have to hear the phrase spoken by the disciple Jesus loved when he recognised him preparing the eucharistic banquet on the seashore, "It is the Lord". That message comes to us in a number of ways: in the breaking of the word and the breaking of bread; in the voice of the Church; in the silence of prayer; in the encounter with those who are close to him. We can never touch him unless we first allow him to touch us.

AJW

## Questioning the Virgin Birth

Fergus Kerr OP

### I

On a wet and windy evening last February over five hundred people gathered in a fine eighteenth century church in central Edinburgh to discuss the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. Given that the population of the city is about 500,000, one need not exaggerate the significance of the event. The interior of the church, modelled on St Andrew's in the Via Quirinale in Rome, and thus neither cruciform nor circular but elliptical, provides a good arena for discussion. It is the church to which the dissenting ministers and elders went in procession when they withdrew from the General Assembly in 1843, to constitute the Free Church of Scotland.

The present controversy about the factual basis and importance of accepting the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is unlikely to split the Kirk, although the main Scottish newspapers were inundated with letters during the weeks after the Moderator of the Church of Scotland (the

Right Reverend James Weatherhead) took the occasion of a Christmastide address to note that Scottish Presbyterians might believe in the doctrine of the Incarnation while being free to regard the stories in Scripture about the virginal conception of Jesus as purely 'symbolic'.

The sermon was given in St Giles Cathedral, another site of great symbolic significance in Scottish history. Only a single scallop capital survives from the original early twelfth century building, in what is now substantially a fourteenth century structure. The central tower received its famous crown spire sometime before 1500. The interior was destroyed in 1560. When sympathizers with episcopacy had their brief triumph over presbyterianism in the Kirk, St Giles became the cathedral of the newly created see of Edinburgh. In 1689 the congregation fled to a wool store down the hill (replaced eventually by the present Old St Paul's), thus marking the birth of the Scottish Episcopal Church, and leaving the Church of Scotland at last definitively purged of prelate. (The Scots have never been presbyterian for as long, or as purely and completely, as many of them think.) It is the church where the General Assembly opens every year and in which the Queen attends divine worship when she is in residence in Edinburgh.

Over a hundred ministers immediately sent a letter to *The Scotsman*, affirming their belief in the historicity of the Virgin Birth. Professor T. F. Torrance, no doubt the Kirk's most distinguished living theologian, had full-page essays in both national dailies, insisting on the necessity of accepting the doctrine. Having consulted the elders, the minister at Kyle of Lochalsh decided to welcome the Moderator on one of his official peregrinations to an informal gathering but not to allow him to ascend the pulpit — 'This seemed to me the best way, in what is a delicate situation, of showing courtesy while not compromising the truth'.

So controversial had the subject become by early February that it was not difficult to sustain over two hours of public discussion. The entire session was recorded by BBC Scotland and turned into a half-hour programme broadcast on Sunday 6 February. It may be doubted if anyone's mind was changed or even much illuminated.

Speaking from the floor, a Catholic priest regretted that no senior figures in the Catholic Church had supported the Moderator's position (and that of the Bishop of Durham). Mentioning the 'infallibility' of the Church and Vatican II's commendation of Scripture study, he urged that 'the people of God in the pews should not be without modern theological scholarship'. He was understood to mean that the historicity of the virginal conception had been called sufficiently into doubt by recent biblical scholarship for Catholics also to feel free to

regard the doctrine as purely 'symbolic'.

The Catholic Church tolerates a great range of beliefs, of course, particularly about the place of the Virgin Mary in the divine scheme of salvation. On the whole, exuberant Marianism is the problem. Sometimes, indeed, the enthusiasm becomes so excessive that the caution of a local pastor needs the support of episcopal intervention. The liberation theologian Leonardo Boff, in *The Maternal Face of God* (1987), speaks of 'hypostatic union' between Mary and the Spirit of God. If a respected and influential theologian permits himself such hyperbole, there is surely room at the other extreme for those who find the virginal conception of Jesus one miracle too many.

On the other hand, excesses one way or the other that may be tolerable in paraliturgical devotion or personal belief can hardly define the limits of essential Catholic doctrine. So — has the time come for Catholics to admit that, as a matter of fact, Jesus was biologically the son of Joseph, as many in the audience at Edinburgh clearly believed? Or to say that it does not matter, as some did? Or that it is easier to believe in the Incarnation if you give up trying to believe in the Virgin Birth?

## II

The judgment of recent biblical scholars is neither as unanimous nor as negative as is often supposed, by traditionalists as well as by liberals.

It is true that, in *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (1979), Edward Schillebeeckx ascribes the tradition of the Virgin Birth inherited by Matthew and Luke to creative reflection on a verse from Psalm 2: 'You are my son, today I have begotten you'. 'Recent exegetical studies have made it clear', so he says, that there is no question of 'historical information' in the tradition (page 554). On the other hand, during his exchange of views with the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Schillebeeckx accepted the virginal conception as 'a truth of faith' — 'a virginal conception understood in the corporeal sense as it is meant in the traditional statement that Jesus was conceived of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit' (see *The Schillebeeckx Case*, edited by Ted Schoof, 1984, page 130). In his book, he insisted, he was examining the gospel texts on their own, purely from the standpoint of critical exegesis. Thus, according to his analysis, the stories represent 'a Christological interpretation according to which Jesus is holy, Son of God from his very birth'. As for the 'truth of faith' regarding the historical character of the virginal conception, he stated that this was something which he believed 'in virtue of the magisterium of the Church which has spoken on this point' (*ibid*).

The same kind of distinction is made by Raymond Brown. In *The Birth of the Messiah* (1977) he concludes that, in terms of what he calls 'the scientifically controllable biblical evidence', the question of the historicity of the Virgin Birth remains 'open' (page 527). That is to say, it is neither proved nor disproved. But this does not mean for Brown that the story of the virginal conception is necessarily 'theological dramatization' of the truth about Jesus's divine origin. On the contrary, he says that 'it is easier to explain the New Testament evidence by positing historical basis than by positing pure theological creation'. Thus, Brown relies a good deal less in this matter than Schillebeeckx seems to do on the authority of the magisterium of the Church.

In *Mary in the New Testament*, the collaborative assessment produced by Protestant and Catholic scholars in North America in 1978, the conclusion again is that the historicity of the virginal conception of Jesus cannot be settled one way or the other merely by historical-critical exegesis but that attitudes towards patristic and ecclesiastical tradition on the matter would be the decisive factor in determining one's view as to whether the Virgin Birth is 'a theologoumenon or a literal fact' (page 292).

On the narrowest view of what biblical scholarship can do, then, it is perfectly respectable to hold that the historicity of the virginal conception has at least not been conclusively disproved. In *Chosen by God: Mary in Evangelical Perspective* (1989), a group of Protestant scholars, with no qualms about admitting their dismay at much Catholic Mariology, survey the New Testament and patristic tradition, concluding (in the words of Professor I. Howard Marshall of the University of Aberdeen) that, 'even if it cannot be historically proved to be true', the story of the virginal conception is at least 'historically defensible' — but it is also 'doctrinally congruous with the Incarnation' (page 63). That last phrase is the decisive one.

People are of course just as easily bemused by the biological implications of virginal conception as they are by the supposed unanimously negative results of modern biblical scholarship. Parthenogenesis has been found among aphids, they say, suggesting that this might make you think the Virgin Birth less improbable. On the other hand, if Jesus had no male human parent, they tell you, he would have been a woman (Mary could not have provided the Y-chromosome determining masculinity). Such thoughts were aired at the discussion in Edinburgh. Patristic and medieval theologians were just as fascinated as we are today in our allegedly uniquely sex-obsessed culture by the thought of a virgin's conceiving a child without sexual intercourse. As

we now know, their ideas about how babies are made were all rubbish. But the argument put forward by Thomas Aquinas, for example, surely still holds. What Mary contributed was not enough for a *natural* conception but we are, after all, talking about a *miracle* — ‘the divine power, which is boundless, completed what was necessary for the foetus’ (*Summa Theologiae* 3a 28, 1). If you can swallow a camel, why strain at a gnat? The provision of the Y-chromosome must just have been part of the miracle of the Incarnation.

### III

The most interesting question is, however, whether anything of evangelical significance is lost if we accept that the virginal conception of Jesus never happened. If it was not just somebody’s bright idea (a theologoumenon), but an actual historical event — what does it mean? Can you preach it?

In *Mary Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (1993), by Edward Schillebeeckx and Catharina Halkes, the two retired professors reflect on how their views have changed since their pious Catholic childhoods. She tells us that, even when she had become ashamed at much of the rampant Marianism around her (in the 1950s), she brought her children up to take part in May devotions — ‘Anyone who is born on the Visitation of Mary and is married at Candlemas does not get detached so easily’ (page 49)! By the time she got involved professionally in feminist theology (in the 1970s) Halkes had begun to reconsider the role of Mary in Catholic doctrine. Reflecting on the political significance of the cult of the Virgin in Latin America and in Poland, she argues that the memory and celebration of Mary’s virginity ‘can be a powerful influence for women to offer resistance to sexual excess and to marginalization and violation by men’ (page 75, translation slightly modified). While the cult of the Virgin has certainly had mystificatory and oppressive effects on women in a variety of ways for hundreds of years, as she of course says, Catharina Halkes refuses to abandon the truth that Mary is ‘a female human being, unique through her role in the incarnation of God and therefore first transformed into a prophetess, a translator of God’s salvation in realizing what we are called to: being fulfilled by the divine Spirit, hallowed and divinized’ (pages 69-70).

Feminist theology is surely at the cutting edge, particularly of Mariology. If so, it becomes quite instructive to turn up the articles on Matthew and Luke in *The Women’s Bible Commentary* (edited by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, 1992). With over forty contributors (all women, including five or six Catholics), this is not only a good

introduction to Scripture — it also testifies to the very high level of North American feminist biblical scholarship.

Jane Schaberg (University of Detroit Mercy), in the article on Luke, notes that he agrees with Matthew that Jesus was ‘virginally conceived’; ‘conceived, that is, by the direct act of God, without male sperm or intercourse, like a new creation from nothing, with Mary the nurturing “vessel”’ (page 283). Whatever is to be made of this, Schaberg argues, it is quite unlike any Greco-Roman story of the miraculous conception of a hero: such tales always involve a divine mating with the virgin, in literal or symbolic penetration (sacred marriage). Nor does it fit in with stories from Jewish traditions, she says, because they never replace human with divine paternity. She takes the reference to Jesus as the ‘supposed’ son of Joseph (Luke 3:23) to rule him out as Jesus’s biological father. Her proposal, as she has developed at greater length in her book *The Illegitimacy of Jesus* (1990), is that both Matthew and Luke inherited a tradition according to which Jesus’s father was some other man than Joseph. In other words, however beautifully the two evangelists deal with the story, and however differently from one another they do so, there is no reason to doubt that it has a basis in fact.

Those who cast doubt on the historicity of the Virgin Birth nowadays take it for granted that Joseph was Jesus’s biological father. Jane Schaberg is not so blithe about disregarding what Luke says. The Ebionites, a sect of Jewish Christians who flourished on the east bank of the Jordan in the second century, are the only ones until very recent times who have ever taken this line. From the second century onwards, the alternative to treating the virginal conception as a historical event has been to regard Jesus as the illegitimate son of some passing soldier (Celsus even gives us his name: Panthera). According to Raymond Brown, with predictable caution, there is no way of deciding whether the story represents anti-Christian polemics against Matthew and Luke, or goes back to recollections or rumours in circulation before the gospels were written (*The Birth of the Messiah*, Appendix V). As has often been noted, the remark that his interlocutors make to Jesus in one of his altercations with ‘the Jews’ — ‘We were not born of fornication’ (John 8:41, *my italics*) might indicate that suspicion already surrounded his birth in the New Testament period. Anyway, nonchalantly rejecting the historicity of the virginal conception in favour of assuming Joseph to be Jesus’s natural father has never been the only option. Indeed, such evidence as there is, which is not much nor very reliable, makes the passing soldier a better documented candidate than Joseph.

Turning now to the article on Matthew in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, written by Amy-Jill Levine (Swarthmore College), we

find that she takes the first chapter pretty literally. Matthew 'explains the virgin birth as the prophetic fulfilment of Isaiah 7:14', she says (page 254, my italics) implying that she thinks that something happened which needed to be explained, rather than that Matthew created the idea of the virginal conception from the much disputed Isaiah text, as many scholars happily assume. While denying any basis in the text for the notion of Mary's perpetual virginity, Levine says of Matthew 1:25 — '[he] knew her not until she had borne a son' — that it 'serves as a guarantee only for Jesus' unusual conception'. She reminds us that the word for the Holy Spirit is grammatically neuter in Greek but feminine in Semitic languages such as Hebrew and Aramaic. Her main thesis thus runs as follows: 'The combination of the originally feminine Spirit and Jesus' lack of a human father indicates the restructuring of the human family: outside of patriarchal models it is not ruled by or even defined by a male head of the house'.

At no point does Levine suggest that this sidelining of the patriarchal household was a bright idea which had struck Matthew or one of his predecessors with such force that he (or she!) created the nativity story to illustrate or dramatize it. On the contrary, Levine writes as though she assumes that what was (sooner or later) seen as implying 'the restructuring of the human family' was first of all simply the event of Jesus's 'unusual conception'.

At least from the fourth century, and certainly in Augustine, the virginal conception has been regarded as the *a priori* necessary condition to ensure the sinlessness of Christ. Since original sin was (as people thought) transmitted by sexual intercourse, the only way that he could be without sin was for Jesus to be conceived in the womb of a pure virgin, undefiled by the taint of sexual intercourse. The sinister implications for marriage, sexuality, and especially for women, of this belief need no rehearsal here. But there is no trace of any such connection between original sin and sexual intercourse in the nativity stories either of Matthew or of Luke. Indeed, if any New Testament writer is to be held responsible for propagating this connection it would have to be Paul — who of course, never mentions the Virgin Birth, as opponents of its historicity like to remind us.

Matthew's great concern is to insist that Jesus was 'conceived of the Holy Spirit', precisely to be named 'Jesus' ('he will save his people from their sins') and thus also have the prophesied name 'Emmanuel' ('God with us'). It is through his conception by the Holy Spirit that Jesus is 'Emmanuel'. Matthew neither makes nor assumes any link between the absence of sexual intercourse and sinlessness.

There is no easy way of obliterating the sex/sin connection which



has dominated the interpretation of the Virgin Birth stories for so long. On the other hand, we are not forbidden to attempt a totally different interpretation. If the virginal conception never was anything but a bright idea in some early Christian's head, we are surely bound (unless we are post-Nietzscheans) by whatever he (or she) had in mind. On the other hand, if something actually happened (however grotesque, unbelievable, bizarre and unprecedented), we can advance new interpretations of the given event.

A doctrine which cannot be preached at all may well be ripe for oblivion. As Amy-Jill Levine's reading of Matthew hints, however, the time may have come for a 'feminist' interpretation of the significance of the Virgin Birth.

#### IV

Funnily enough, the outline of some such interpretation may be found in the *Church Dogmatics* of Karl Barth. In his thirty pages on 'The Miracle of Christmas' (CD I/2 #15), published in 1939 (English version 1956), we have a stout defence of the historicity of the virginal conception of Jesus. The exegetical difficulties are not so hard to deal with that one is 'forced by exegesis to contest the dogma' (page 176). His main concern, however, given the mystery of the Incarnation, is to work out an *a posteriori* understanding of the appropriateness or otherwise of the dogma of the Virgin Birth. The decisive move, that is to say, is to establish whether it is 'doctrinally congruous with the Incarnation'.

We are talking about 'an event in this world of ours', Barth says, but one which is 'not grounded upon the continuity of events in this world' (page 187). 'In the *ex virgine*', he insists, 'there is contained a judgment upon humankind'. That is to say: if a human being becomes the collaborator of God in establishing the place of divine revelation in the human nature of Jesus Christ, 'it is not because of any attributes which [she] possessed already and in [herself], but because of what is done to [her] by the divine Word, and so not because of what [she] has to do or give, but because of what [she] has to suffer and receive — and at the hand of God' (page 188). The virginity of Mary in the birth of Jesus is 'the denial . . . of any power, attribute or capacity in [human kind] for God'. Since Mary clearly does have this 'capacity for God', Barth says, 'it means strictly and exclusively that [she] *acquires* it, that it is *laid upon* [her]' (my italics). 'Upon this human nature a mystery must be wrought' (page 189).

In a couple of pages of small print, which Barth rather self-



consciously describes as 'only a *parergon*' (page 193), he raises 'a secondary but all the same a necessary question' — to what, why is the function of the male excluded? Having insisted that Mary's virginity must be seen as the sign of the form of man (*Mensch*) who 'can merely receive, merely be ready, merely let something be done to and with [itself]' (page 191), Barth now specifies that it is *men*, male human beings, in whom, as a matter of historical fact, human will, striving, achieving, deciding, and so on, has always been most manifest. 'There can be no talk of an equality of the two sexes in this respect', Barth says. On the contrary: 'the history of humanity, nations and states, art, science, economics, has in fact been and is . . . predominantly the history of males [*Männer*]'. The historical consciousness of all peoples and cultures 'begins with patriarchy'. In contradiction to the birth of all other men, 'the *genesis Iesou Christou* is in no sense a history of males [*ganz und gar keine Männergeschichte*]'. The event of the virginal conception reveals the limitation of all human powers but especially 'the limitation of male pre-eminence [*die Begrenzung jenes männlichen Vorrang*]'.

In the Virgin Birth there is revealed — enacted — both continuity and discontinuity with the past history of the human race that the miracle of Christmas has always been supposed to transform. What Luke stresses is that in Mary, surrounded as she is by the little people, the *anawim*, in the ambience of the Temple, the human race was gracefully waiting and open for the hint half guessed and the gift half understood. What Matthew's story might prompt us to think, by contrast, is that Joseph, the just man, with his genealogy from Abraham and David (thus representing law, patriarchy and monarchy) could never 'father' the New Creation. In effect, even at its best (think of Joseph's compassion, tact and ready obedience), the entire system of male institutions and achievements could never generate the miracle of salvation. The one in our history with an unprecedented authority to forgive sins, who taught with a radically different authority from that of the scribes, who gave authority for us to become children of God, and so on, was born of a woman under the Law, but his authority owed nothing whatsoever to the deeds and works of *men*.

In short, the virginal conception of Jesus is not somebody's bright idea but a revelation in history of God's judgment on the barrenness, the ultimate infertility, in themselves, of all human systems, institutions, works. It would be a real loss of the practical subversive political implications of this to deny the historicity of the virginal conception of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is certainly a doctrine you can preach.