



The mystery of the virgin birth

The defense of the early church

The miracle of the virgin birth is often embarrassing for Christians. How can we expect other people to believe this? At worst it causes sniggers: "Don't try that on me, I know what happened." At best it is rejected with a superior smile: "You did not believe that story about a woman who had given birth to 22 babies, although a picture was shown of the mother with her babies. Do not expect me to believe that Jesus was born from a virgin." How can we make people take the virgin birth seriously?

This is not a new problem, the early Christian church was already confronted with this rejection. It was tempted to come with explanations to make the virgin birth acceptable. One tentative line of defense was to refer to similar stories in classical literature. Great men were often portrayed as superhuman right from birth. To give just one example, it was said about the great philosopher Plato that he was born from the Greek god Apollo. Origen, who refers to this story, says that it is not improper to quote Greek stories when speaking to the Greek. But he hastens to add that those stories are in fact myths.¹

But in effect, such parallels can only weaken the gospel of Jesus' birth. The Jew Trypho actually used this to counter the Christian message. The Christians should be ashamed for making up a story about Christ's birth so similar to Greek stories about their heroes.² Christians would implicitly admit that their Christ was no more than Greek heroes, and that the virgin birth was no more than groundless embellishment. Christian apologists of the virgin birth could not use this argument.

They did use another line of defense, however: parthenogenesis. Some animals can have young without male involvement. The early church apologist Lactantius was one who used this as a parallel: "*But if it is known to all that certain animals are accustomed to conceive by the wind and the breeze, why should anyone think it wonderful when we say that a virgin was made fruitful by the Spirit of God, to whom whatever He may wish is easy?*"³ Even though the examples Lactantius was probably thinking of, were wrong, the fact is now generally recognized that some plants and animals can propagate without fertilization. A recent issue of *National Geographic* carried an interesting article about a lizard where this phenomenon was observed.⁴ Can we make the virgin birth acceptable by showing that it is not as totally impossible as some would think?

This parallel, however, is not really helpful. In the first place, parthenogenesis only occurs among certain forms of life, among some plants and animals. It has not been observed in higher animals and definitely not among humans. Moreover, the virgin birth is not presented in Scripture as a biological triviality, but as an exceptional act of God through His Spirit.⁵ These attempts to make people receptive to the miracle of the virgin birth do not succeed.

The defense of Warfield

The great 19th Century apologist B.B. Warfield was confronted with the problem how to defend the virgin birth when he was invited by the editors of the *American Journal of Theology* to answer the question whether the doctrine of the supernatural birth of Jesus is essential to Christianity. He accepted the challenge but did not attempt to make the virgin birth generally acceptable. Rather, he set out to prove that the virgin birth is necessary within the religion described in the New Testament.⁶ Three arguments support his conviction that the supernatural character of the Christian religion requires a supernatural birth of the Christ.

First of all, the New Testament presents a supernatural religion. Jesus is supernatural, the winds and waves obeyed Him. He even broke free from the grave, ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God. It is impossible that Jesus, who did so many supernatural things, would have entered this world like every man. *“His supernatural birth is given already ... in His supernatural life and His supernatural work, and forms an in-dispensable element in the supernatural religion which He founded.”*⁷

Further, we have to consider who Jesus is. He is the only begotten Son of God who was at the bosom of the Father. How could He come into this world by earthly causes? If the Son of God comes into human existence He can only come creatively. The more people realize that He is the Son of God, the more 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.”*⁸

There is even a third reason why the virgin birth is necessary: redemption. The doctrine of original sin implies that every natural member of Adam’s race is under the curse of sin. The Son of God, therefore, had to come in such a way that He would be outside the sin in which the human race is involved. *“And that is as much as to say that the redemption work of the Son of God depends upon His supernatural birth.”*⁹

Warfield presents an impressive case to prove that the virgin birth is the only and perfect way in which God’s Son could become our Saviour. *“The supernatural birth of Jesus is an implication of the Christian consciousness – that is, of course, of the super-naturalistic Christian consciousness.”* He even appeals to common understanding:

*“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 super-natural work, must needs have sprung from a supernatural source.”*¹⁰

But the question cannot be suppressed whether this solution is not too glib. Is God’s work of the virgin birth so obvious that outsiders can be convinced of the logic behind it?

The mystery

At this point, Paul’s word of 1 Timothy 3:16 deserves our attention:

*Great indeed is the mystery of our religion: God was manifested in the flesh.*¹¹

Paul refers here to the incarnation when God’s Son appeared in the flesh among men. He mentions this as part of the “mystery of our religion.”

Now a mystery is not the same as a secret. Something no one knows is a secret, but it is no longer a secret after it has become known. It is different with a mystery, however. Something that is known but not understood is a mystery. Paul uses the word mystery in that sense for the gospel he preaches, when he asks that it may be given to him boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel (Ephesians 6:19). The gospel Paul makes known is still a mystery. He calls Christ the mystery of God, for in Christ are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:2, 3). It is a mystery for it is too deep for understanding.¹²

This meaning of “mystery” should be applied to 1 Timothy 3:16 where Paul mentions the incarnation of God’s Son as a part of the “mystery of our religion.” The way God’s Son came into this world was not unknown to Timothy and his congregation, Paul had preached about it in the congregations and written about it in his epistles (Romans 1:3, Galatians 4:4). Yet, it is still a mystery, it is beyond our comprehension. We know that the virgin birth is a fact but we cannot fathom it or reason it out.

We can admire Warfield for defending the “unbelievable” fact of the virgin birth for the general theological world of his time. He did not back down or weaken this doctrine. We can also appreciate the points Warfield makes: Jesus’ life and work are supernatural, Jesus is the Son of God, Jesus could not be subjected to original sin. We cannot, however, prove the intrinsic necessity of the virgin birth in this way. No man would have come up with the “solution” of the

virgin birth. We cannot logically reason from our need for salvation to the virgin birth as the perfect answer. Let alone that we can prove that the virgin birth is the only possible solution God could find to save us. Our logic cannot make the virgin birth reasonable or acceptable.

God's ways are higher than our ways and God's thoughts higher than our thoughts. We cannot convince anyone that the virgin birth fitted exactly God's salvation plan, for we cannot fathom the depths of that plan. God's thoughts are beyond us, and God's ways are higher than our ways. God's solution is more than we could ever think of. Even though revealed, the virgin birth is still a mystery.

But one thing we can say: the virgin birth fits with God. It reflects the vastness of His understanding, the unsearchableness of His ways and the greatness of His love. He who rejects this God cannot be brought to believe the mystery of the virgin birth. But he who believes God, sees God's wisdom reflected in the mystery of the virgin birth. That is the bottom line of our defense: Believing in God is all that is needed for believing the virgin birth.

NH Gootjes

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¹ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, I, 37 (SC 132; Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1967) 178ff.

² Justin, "Dialogue with Trypho" in E.J. Goodspeed, *Die ältesten Apologeten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, repr. 1984) 174.

³ Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, IV, XII, the translation is taken from A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, eds. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.) vol. VII, 110. This phenomenon was attributed to horses, see a poem by Virgil, referred to by the editor of Lactantius, and vultures, see Tertullian *Adversus Valentianos*, 10 (SC. 280; Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1980, 103). The same argument is used by Origen, *Contra Celsum*, I, 37.

⁴ See articles in Encyclopedia, e.g. the article of G. Barendrecht in *Winkler Prins Encyclopaedie* vol. 15 (6. ed.; Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1952) 187ff. *The National Geographic* article on parthenogenesis appeared in the September 1995 issue and discussed this phenomenon in a lizard.

⁵ See e.g. J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (2. ed.; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985) 217.

⁶ The article has been republished in *Christology and Criticism* (*The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. 3; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 447-458.

⁷ *Christology and Criticism*, 451.

⁸ *Christology and Criticism*, 454.

⁹ *Christology and Criticism*, 456.

¹⁰ *Christology and Criticism*, 452.

¹¹ The RSV and the NIV do not have the word "God" and translate the second sentence with: He was manifested in the flesh. The manuscript evidence is in favour of the text presented in the KJV: God was manifest in the flesh. For our purpose it does not make a real difference but the KJV is clearer.

¹² See for this sense of "mystery" also J. Calvin's commentary on 1 Timothy 3:9.