

Part Two:

The Birth and Work of Christ

The Virgin Birth

Christ's Birth from the Virgin

“The angel said to her: ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God’ ” (Luke 1:35).

Embarrassment

Why is it that Christians often feel embarrassed when speaking about the virgin birth of Jesus Christ? It is not that we are afraid of speaking to other people about Jesus Christ. We tell them how important Jesus Christ is as our Saviour. We will speak about his work on earth, his healings, his words, his suffering and death. Around Christmas the thoughts are concentrated on the babe in the manger. But how often do we speak about his virgin birth? Are many Christians not reluctant to speak of the way in which he came into this world?

The reason for this reluctance cannot be that the virgin birth is miraculous. One simply cannot speak about Jesus Christ without mentioning his miracles. And we do. As a matter of fact, stories about the miracles Christ performed are often used in evangelism, and rightly so. Why then is the virgin birth so often neglected?

Neither can the reason be that the church is uncertain about the virgin birth. It has been confessed in the Apostles' Creed: “He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.” An older form of this confession can be found in the Nicene Creed: “Who was incarnate by the Holy Spirit from the virgin Mary.” The expression is less clear, but the virgin

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birth is confessed in no uncertain terms. Actually, however far we go back in history, the virgin birth is confessed.¹ It belongs to the core of our faith.

The reason for our embarrassment could be that we are afraid of ridicule, and we know of no good way to protect ourselves from it. We would rather speak of other things in connection with Jesus Christ, things which are easier to explain and easier to accept. It is therefore good once more to ponder the question of why the virgin birth is so central in our Christian faith that it is even one of the fundamental articles of the Apostles' Creed. We will concentrate on the words of the angel in Luke 1:35.

Ridicule

This ridicule can come in different forms. There is bitter ridicule. An early example of this is the philosopher Celsus in the second century, who quotes what a Jew had to say about the virgin birth. Jesus' mother was turned out of the house by her husband because of adultery. The father of her child was a soldier, by name of Panthera. So Jesus was born as an illegitimate child. He went to Egypt to work and there he acquired some miraculous powers. He then went back to his own country and proclaimed himself to be a God.²

There is also civilized ridicule. This is how a minister explained the virgin birth to his catechism students. He first asked them to mention a famous sportsman. And then he asked them, "How would you convince other people that your hero is really a great man?" One answered: "I would tell them a story in which he did something impossible." Another said: "I would say: At his birth it was in the stars that he was to become famous." And yet another began to invent miraculous events in connection with his birth. "Exactly," said the minister. "That is exactly what happened with Jesus. The people were very much impressed with his teaching. And to honour him, they invented a miraculous birth."

The two stories are different. The first one is of heathen origin (or of Jewish origin, for it is unclear whether Celsus made up the Jew or really

¹ See for the old Roman Creed, the predecessor of our Apostles' Creed, J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (3rd ed.; New York: Longman, 1983) 102. For even older forms, see 103 and 91.

² Celsus is quoted in Origen, *Contra Celsum* I.28 (Sources Chrétiennes, 132; Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1967) 151–152. Origen neatly turns the tables on Celsus when he states that these stories were made up to overturn the virgin birth of Jesus, for those who made up these stories show, against their will, that they knew that Jesus was not born out of an ordinary marriage, *Contra Celsum*, I.32.

heard this story). It is clearly hostile in tone. The second story has its origin in some church. It is not hostile to Jesus, but wants to honour him as a great man in the church. But if someone would continue to believe in the virgin birth, he would make himself ridiculous. Who would believe a story which so clearly is the result of hero worship?

And do we know how to answer this ridicule? Or do we feel right out of this world with a story about a miraculous birth? Who can believe such a story in a world which seems to know everything about the whole process of birth? Why is the virgin birth important for us? To answer this question, let us first go back to the two rejections of this doctrine. In both cases, people go to great lengths to disprove the gospel of the virgin birth. Why?

The Reason for the Rejection

In the case of Celsus, the reason is very clear. Celsus, or the Jew he quotes, does not want to believe in Jesus Christ. The virgin birth is a lie; Jesus was actually born out of wedlock. And he also did not perform miracles; these were no more than tricks he had learned from the Egyptians. Why did Celsus reject the virgin birth? Because he felt otherwise he had to believe in Jesus.

Now the second story seems different. Here Jesus is not rejected as an illegitimate child, but honoured as a hero. To honour Jesus, people invented a supernatural descent. Even though we know today that this story is not true, we still honour Jesus Christ, they say. This too, however, is a rejection. How do they honour him? As a human, maybe a great man, on the same level as our heroes today. But he is no more than a human.

The virgin birth is not just rejected because it sounds like an improbable story. Many today acknowledge that something miraculous or out of the ordinary can happen. The rejection of the virgin birth becomes necessary because the virgin birth shows that Christ is more than a great man.

The Words of the Angel

Luke 1:35 says first that the Holy Spirit will cause Mary to become pregnant without sexual intercourse.³ And it continues: "So the holy one to be

³ The RSV translates the question of Mary as: "How can this be, since I have no husband?" This translation is misleading. Mary does not say: "I *have* no husband," but "I do not *know* a man." "To know" here is a euphemism for having sexual relations, a usage which also occurs in classical Greek and in the Old Tes-

born will be called the Son of God.” The angel reveals here that there is a direct relation between the virgin birth and the divinity of Christ. Because he was born from the virgin Mary, he can rightly be called the Son of God.

At first hearing, the words of the angel sound contradictory: The Holy Spirit will come to Mary and work so that she will conceive; therefore the child to be born will be called the Son of God. You would expect that as the result of the overshadowing of the Spirit this child would rightly be called a man. Even though no man had taken part in it, the child would be a true man. But the emphasis is not on his humanity; Jesus’ divinity is emphasized. The words of the angel mean that as a result of the work of the Spirit the child that will be born will be rightly called the Son of God.

This goes completely beyond the thoughts of men. The Greeks had their mythological fantasies about relations between a god and a human. The result was always a half-god, a person who had some divine characteristics and at the same time some human characteristics. A half-god was neither fully God nor fully man. That is the best the Greeks could come up with.

But God’s works are radically different. God’s thoughts are beyond our thoughts, and God’s works are beyond our works. The Holy Spirit worked in Mary and prepared a complete human nature for the Son of God. He is not half God, half man, but fully God and fully man. And that came about because the Holy Spirit wrought the humanity for the Son of God.

We have to connect this word of the angel with that of verse 32. The angel had already announced that the son of Mary would be called “the Son of the Most High.” The “Most High” is a title for God. The words of the angel in verse 32 mean that the earthly Jesus would be the Son of God. Then, in verse 35, he gives the explanation. The Son of the Most High would not be born from human parents, for then he would be a mere man. He would also not be born from the union of a god and a man (supposing such a union were possible), for then he would only be a half-god. No, the Holy Spirit will prepare his human nature; therefore the human child can at the same time rightly be called Son of God. As the result of this work of the Holy Spirit, his divinity was not compromised in his human birth.

The Importance of this Confession

Now we can understand the opposition against the virgin birth. This opposition is the old rejection of the divinity of Jesus Christ. If someone

tament; see W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 161.

acknowledges the virgin birth, he has to acknowledge the full divinity of Jesus Christ. And as a result, he has to serve him, obey him, and worship him. This rejection will never end. And we will always have to face opposition concerning the virgin birth. Gresham Machen wrote a whole book on the virgin birth in which he showed in great detail that the virgin birth is an integral part of the gospel, and that the reasons to call it a later addition all fail.⁴ This is good and necessary work, but it will convince no one from the other side. For it will mean that they have to recognize that in Jesus Christ God has come to save us. If Jesus Christ is born of the virgin by the work of the Holy Spirit, then he is God, and we have to obey and serve him as God.

No “outsider” will believe us when we speak of the virgin birth. They will ridicule or ignore it. Unless God changes the heart, no one is ready to admit that through the virgin birth God made it possible for his Son to be born as a man. But we should continue to speak of it. The Son was not embarrassed to come into our world in this way, even though derision was only to be expected. Then we should not be embarrassed in confessing the virgin birth, even though derision can be expected. Eternal life depends on recognizing Jesus Christ, the Son of God (1 John 5:5–13). Everyone, therefore, should believe the virgin birth. For the virgin birth was the way in which God brought his Son into this world.

⁴ J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (2nd ed.; New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1932).

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 twenty-two 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 up 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 the Greek heroes, and that the virgin birth was no more than a 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

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

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

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. *National Geographic* reported this phenomenon in a lizard.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 nineteenth-century apologist B. B. Warfield was confronted with the problem of how to defend the virgin birth when he was invited by the editors of the *American Journal of Theology* to answer the question of 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.

³ Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, 4.12. The translation is taken from A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (10 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.) 7.110. 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 [Sources Chrétiennes, 280; Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1980] 103). The same argument is used by Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 1.37.

⁴ See James Owen, "Virgin Birth Expected at Christmas—by Komodo Dragon," *National Geographic News*, December 20, 2006 [the original reference appeared to be incorrect and this one was supplied, ed.]. Also see articles in encyclopedia, e.g. the article of G. Barendrecht in *Winkler Prins Encyclopaedie* (18 vols.; 6th ed.; Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1952) 15.187ff.

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

⁶ The article has been republished in *Christology and Criticism* (*The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*; 10 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 3.447–458.

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 indispensable 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 supernaturalistic 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 supernatural work, must needs have sprung from a supernatural source.”¹⁰

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

⁷ Warfield, *Christology and Criticism*, 451.

⁸ Warfield, *Christology and Criticism*, 454.

⁹ Warfield, *Christology and Criticism*, 456.

¹⁰ Warfield, *Christology and Criticism*, 452.

The Mystery

At this point, Paul's word of 1 Timothy 3:16 deserves our attention: "Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit..." (RSV).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 (Eph. 6:19). The gospel Paul makes known is still a mystery. He calls Christ the mystery of God, for in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 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 (Rom. 1:3; Gal. 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, nor can we 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

¹¹ The RSV and the NIV do not have the word "God" and translate the second sentence with: "He was manifested in the flesh" (RSV), "He appeared in a body" (NIV). 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 Calvin's commentary on 1 Tim. 3:9.

our thoughts. We cannot convince anyone that the virgin birth exactly fit 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 those who believe God see his 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.

The Virgin Birth is Not a Problem

The Bible speaks in plain language about the great miracle that took place at the beginning of Jesus' earthly life: the virgin birth. In a few verses it is all matter-of-factly said and done. God sent his angel to a virgin, Mary, and the angel said to her, "You will be with child and give birth to a son." The gospels never come back to this; what was said at the beginning was clear enough for all centuries. Jesus the Christ came into this world without a human father, but from a human mother. Neither do the gospels try to explain this truth. No attempt is made to show how this miracle could take place. The gospels only state the fact: God let Jesus Christ grow in and be born of the virgin Mary.

Is this not a very problematic story? That depends. This birth does not really present a problem to those who believe in God and trust his Word. They know that God is capable of doing what we cannot do. God can do what we cannot even imagine. When God says in his Word that Jesus was born of a virgin, then that is what happened.

Neither does the virgin birth present a problem to those who reject God and his Word. For them, God does not exist, and the Bible is not his Word. This story about Jesus' birth must have been thought up by men. Both the acceptance of the virgin birth in faith and the rejection of it in unbelief are straightforward, without a problem.

There are people, however, for whom the virgin birth poses a real problem. They are those people who want to believe in the God of Scripture and at the same time reject the Scriptures of God. Such a theologian is H. Berkhof. He wants to maintain that the God of the Scriptures exists, but at the same time he does not trust what Scripture says about God. He denies the information given in the story of the virgin birth. The result is that the gospel of the virgin birth becomes the trick of the vanishing virgin.

Now tricks of this sort are usually done on a stage. It is far from easy to attempt this in a book that can be read by all. Berkhof must have had a good reason for attempting to let the virgin birth disappear. It is, therefore, not sufficient to investigate *how* Berkhof did the trick; we should also investigate *why* he did this. What could have been the theological conviction that made him reject the virgin birth and caused him to think up this vanishing act?

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The Disappearing Trick

How can the virgin dissolve into thin air? First of all, the stage has to be set. The trick takes place against the background of the denial that Scripture is God's revelation. God does not speak, according to Berkhof, he only acts. Through his deeds, God brings people to put their trust in him. When the people begin to trust him, he rewards them by new acts through which he supports them and helps them along.

The people seeing these events understand them as acts of God. In other words, they interpret their own experiences as things God has done. They even continue to interpret and to re-interpret. In the light of what they perceive as new acts of God, they re-interpret God's previous acts. Prophets and visionaries see increasingly more in those old events. The results of this process of interpretation have been written down in Scripture. The Bible documents for us the various stages in which men have interpreted and re-interpreted the acts through which God helped the people.¹

Scripture, therefore, is a human book; there is not a word of God in it. It consists completely of words and thoughts of men about God. But the authors did not think alike about God. Each spoke in his own way about his impressions concerning God. Four levels can be distinguished in the Bible.

1. Some words of the Bible are direct reactions to God's acts. These passages give a direct witness concerning God and his works.²

2. The second level is what men afterwards began to think about God's saving acts. This reflection led to new insights. At this second level we find the theological thoughts that came up when men were reconsidering God's previous acts.

3. On the third level we find figurative expressions and elaborations on previous insights. They have, however, no real connection with the original insights.

4. Then there is also a fourth level. Information on this level has nothing to do with the original revelation. Thoughts from different back-

¹ See H. Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith* (trans. S. Woudstra; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 62–65. Berkhof summarized this in one sentence: "Revelation consists of a cumulative process of events and their interpretation."

² This section can be found on p. 90. As a matter of fact, Berkhof himself formulated the first one as: "The direct witness concerning God and the words and acts in which he savingly reveals himself." It seems to me that "words" in the quotation contradicts what Berkhof said earlier about revelation.

grounds crept in when the writers of the Bible described their reactions to God's revelatory acts.³

In this scheme, the virgin birth belongs on the third level. The virgin birth, therefore, is no more than a figurative expression of theological hindsight, re-interpreting an event as a saving action of God. Or, to say this in the right order, the original event was: the child Jesus is born just like any child.

On level 1, that was seen as a work of God.

On level 2, the beginning of Jesus' life is re-interpreted in the light of Jesus' later deeds as connected with God's saving work.

On level 3, the story of the virgin birth is added as a figurative expression of the fact that Jesus' birth has saving significance.

And look: the virgin has been spirited away!

Thunderous applause.

Curtain.

But wait a moment with closing the curtains. Let us have another look at the stage. Why did Berkhof place the virgin birth on the third level where he could do his disappearing trick? He gives as reason that the virgin birth is not mentioned everywhere in the New Testament, but only in the introduction of two of the gospels.⁴

That, however, is far from a convincing argument in this connection. The thesis that should be proven is that the virgin birth is an embellishment. Everything revolves around the character of the story of the virgin birth. Berkhof wants to prove that it is a figurative expression. But the argument that is given in support of this view does not speak about the character at all. Berkhof works with numbers; not all four of the gospels, but only two mention the virgin birth. That is an illogical way of reasoning. On the basis of the fact that only two gospels mention the virgin birth, one could try to prove that the other gospels did not know of this event. But the fact that only two gospels mention the virgin birth does not lead to the conclusion that this story is a later improvement on the story of Jesus' birth. Berkhof made the virgin birth disappear by sleight of hand. Just like

³ One of the examples mentioned here is the position of women.

⁴ Page 90: "If we reckon the resurrection of Jesus to the first level but the virgin birth to the third, the decisive consideration is that the first is mentioned everywhere in the N.T. and the second only in the introduction of Matthew and Luke." See on the fact that the virgin birth is mentioned explicitly in two gospels: Y. Feenstra, *Geboren uit de maagd* (Kampen: Kok, 1959) 8ff.

a magical trick, it looks intriguing, but it is not convincing.

The Theological Reason

This brings us to the next question: Why all this effort to let the virgin birth disappear? What is the theological motive behind this? The answer to this question is given in the chapter on Jesus, the Son, when Berkhof comes back to the virgin birth.

Berkhof calls Jesus the Son of God. For him, this title does not mean that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God. Actually, he was born as man and only later became Son of God. There was no creative work of God at the beginning of his life, no virgin birth. Instead, Berkhof speaks of a creative work of God during his life, ending in Jesus becoming the Son of God. Jesus started out as the carpenter's son from Nazareth.⁵ After much inner turmoil and struggle, he finally fully participated in the life of the Father. The Father permeated the man Jesus with his Spirit, and thus Jesus became the Son of God. In this relationship with God, Jesus' humanity came to its highest fulfillment, and that is what the expression "Son of God" means.

Jesus was the first to whom this happened, but he did not remain the only one. History reached a new stage in Jesus. In him a new humanity began. The human world is being renewed after his image.⁶

This is an evolutionistic view on history.⁷ According to Berkhof's version of evolutionism, the history of the world goes through stages which are separated by qualitative changes. In Christ, humanity came to a new level of existence. Humanity now can develop to a new form of mankind. Jesus was the first, but we should be like him in becoming sons of God.

Here, I think, we have the real reason for Berkhof's rejection of the virgin birth. The virgin birth would place Jesus Christ far above us, as Son of God who became man. Such a Jesus Christ is unacceptable to Berkhof. He can only accept a Jesus who is the first, not a Jesus who is unique. We have to go through the same struggle as Jesus. Just like Jesus began as son

⁵ H. Berkhof writes: "Jesus starts his convenantal way as the carpenter's son from Nazareth" (*Christian Faith*, 287). Berkhof seems to see Jesus as the son of Joseph. If that is his conviction, then the story of the virgin birth should not be termed an embellishment but an outright lie.

⁶ Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 292.

⁷ See on Berkhof's view on history C. Graafland, "Berkhofs theologie in het licht van de gereformeerde traditie," in *Weerwoord: Reacties op Dr. H. Berkhof's "Christelijk Geloof"* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1974) especially 49ff.

of the carpenter and became Son of God, we are born as children of men who should become children of God. In Berkhof's evolutionistic view of mankind, there is no place for Jesus who began as the Son of God. And for that reason Berkhof has to make the virgin birth disappear.

Back to God's Word

Back to the beginning. We accept the God of Scripture and the Scriptures of God. God not only acted in history, he also explained his actions to us. He acted in history: a virgin became pregnant and gave birth to a human son who was at the same time God's Son—a miracle that is far beyond our understanding. God also sent an angel with a message. When Mary did not understand how this could happen to her, the angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). The virgin birth is not meant to be a problem we have to explain somehow. It is a mighty act of God that calls for our adoration. God was able to provide a human nature for his Son through the virgin birth. And the Son was willing to live as this man on earth, for our salvation. He who accepts Scripture as the Word of God, accepts the virgin birth as the work of God.

Where is the problem? Nowhere. But where is our adoration?

The Importance of the Virgin Birth

The Absence of the Virgin Birth

The virgin birth is a great miracle. It is questionable whether we can speak of “lesser” and “greater” miracles. Is the healing of Malchus’ ear less of a miracle than the stilling of the storm? We do not know what powers would be needed to re-attach a severed ear. Neither do we know how the Lord Jesus was able to command the wind and the sea so that they were quiet in an instant. Since we do not know what is involved in performing miracles, we cannot really compare them to determine which would be the greatest. Therefore, we cannot really say about the virgin birth that it is the greatest miracle, for how can we fathom one, let alone compare several?

We can say, however, that among all God’s miracles the virgin birth is the greatest miracle as far as importance is concerned. The healing of Malchus’ ear prevented an ugly scar and saved Malchus from a loss of hearing. The stilling of the storm saved the disciples from a situation that looked life-threatening. Both miracles show something of the character of Jesus’ saving work. But the virgin birth marks the way in which our Saviour came into this world. Our salvation is dependent on this miracle.

It is, therefore, surprising that the story of the virgin birth is only told in two gospels, Matthew and Luke. The other two gospels, Mark and John, do not mention it. Neither do Acts nor any of the New Testament epistles pay specific attention to it. There are only two clear witnesses, recorded by Matthew and Luke.

Is it a serious matter that the virgin birth is not mentioned explicitly in the other gospels or in the rest of the New Testament? Calvin does not seem to think so. In his commentary on the gospels, he simply combines the gospels. First he deals with Luke’s record of the virgin birth, then with Matthew’s. When he weaves Mark’s beginning into the life story of Christ, he seems not to be aware of a serious omission in this gospel.¹

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¹ Calvin’s remark when he first introduces Mark’s record may serve as a proof that he did not see any problem in Mark’s not having the birth story: “Though what we have hitherto taken out of Matthew and Luke is a part of the Gospel, yet it is not without reason that Mark makes the beginning of the Gospel to be the preaching of John the Baptist.” J. Calvin, *A Harmony of the Evangelists* (3 vols.;

Our age has said farewell to this innocence. R. Bultmann quite rudely calls the virgin birth a legend which sprang up in Hellenistic Christianity. This legend was unknown to Paul. Mark and John have a different view on the origin of Jesus than do the other evangelists.² Behind the approach of Bultmann and others is the denial that the New Testament, as the Word of God, is a unity. They see it as a collection of books in which different authors present their views concerning Jesus. None of these views have been revealed; instead, they are all the result of human contemplation on the story of Jesus. We have a fundamental disagreement with this approach. Both Luke and Matthew present their record as a statement of fact, not as the interpretation of Hellenistic Christians.

It will not do for us, however, to simply go back to Calvin and accept without question the fact that the virgin birth is only referred to in two of the four gospels. Once raised, the problem of why this miracle is not mentioned by other authors must be addressed. If their silence does not imply that they were ignorant or possibly even that they rejected this, then why did they not refer to it?³

Mark and John

It is not really surprising that Mark does not speak of the virgin birth, for he does not say anything at all about Jesus' life before John the Baptist pointed him out to the people. It was obviously Mark's intention to describe Jesus' life from the moment he came forward to begin his public ministry. This would agree with the early tradition that Mark recorded the

Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 1.173. Calvin is not an exception. J. A. Bengel, an important exegete of the eighteenth century, notes on Mark 1:1: "The specific goal of this evangelist is, as he himself professes it in the title, to describe the beginning, history, reasons, progress and end of the gospel about Jesus Christ the Son of God," see his *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* (8th ed.; Stuttgartiae: Steinkopf, 1891) 173.

² R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951) 1.131; the same opinion can be found in W. G. Kummel, *Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973) 124 (on Luke and Matthew); 165 (on Paul); and 271 (on John). Their view has exercised influence in several directions. It underlies J. N. D. Kelly's explanation of this section of the Creed, *Early Christian Creeds* (3rd ed.; New York: Longman, 1983) 11–12; and the denial by H. Berkhof in his *Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 292–293.

³ There is no reason to deal specifically with the book of Acts. This is the sequel to the gospel of Luke (see Acts 1:1) and it records later history. The occasional speeches summarized in this book are not intended to be complete.

apostle Peter's witness concerning Jesus Christ.⁴ The virgin birth does not belong to the events Peter had first-hand knowledge of.

For understanding John's gospel, the purpose as it is described in the end must be considered:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name (20:30–31; see also 21:24–25).

In accordance with this purpose, John introduces Jesus as the Son of God (1:1–18) and continues to speak about the things he and the other eye-witnesses had heard and seen of Jesus Christ. Moreover, his gospel gives the impression that John consciously tries to avoid duplicating what has already been said in other gospels. Within his own purpose, John had no reason to speak of the virgin birth.

When considering the gospels of Mark and John, we should not overlook the fact that they do not contradict the virgin birth. These gospels do not speak of a human father of Jesus.⁵ In fact, what they say is quite consistent with the virgin birth. Mark introduces Jesus as the Son of God (1:1) and John records that Jesus taught that God is his Father (ch. 5). Both gospels indicate that Jesus is more than an extraordinary man.

The Silence of Paul

It will surprise no one that no indication of the virgin birth can be found in the epistles of James, Jude, John, and Peter. Not only are these epistles very brief, they do not really deal with Jesus Christ's earthly life. Neither could a reference to the virgin birth be expected in Hebrews and Revelation because of their particular goals.

The situation is rather different for Paul, however. Thirteen of his epistles are still extant, and among these are some quite substantial writings. Could we not expect Paul to deal with the virgin birth, or at least to refer to it? Some have found an indication of the virgin birth in Galatians

⁴ This information of Papias has been preserved by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical Histories*, 3.39.15.

⁵ We need not deal with John 6:42: "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" This statement was made by opposing Jews who obviously did not know of the virgin birth. John records their statement without indicating his own views. See also D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1981) 370.

4:4: “When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law....” However, it is difficult to see how this text could be used in this discussion. Paul does not say more than that Jesus Christ was born of a woman. He did not even state that the woman was a virgin. Neither does this text give any indication whether he thought that Jesus had a human father. His statement neither denies nor affirms the virgin birth. The only thing Paul wanted to stress is that Christ, by being born of a woman, was born under the law. For this reason, Jesus could redeem sinners who are born under the law.⁶

The question remains as to why Paul did not write about the virgin birth. Two general answers have been given. The first points to the fact that Paul focused on the saving work of Jesus Christ. In connection with Christ’s salvation work, Paul needed to emphasize the importance of Christ’s death and resurrection. The period of Christ’s public ministry is hardly mentioned, even though it must have been known to Paul.⁷

The second answer reminds us that Paul mentions facts from Christ’s life only when there is a specific occasion to speak of these. The institution of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11) would never have been mentioned if this sacrament had not been abused in Corinth. And had Paul not been forced to mention witnesses of Christ’s resurrection (1 Cor. 15), would we have concluded that Paul did not know of the resurrection? Paul says here that facts such as the resurrection belonged to the “first things” he taught to the churches. Gresham Machen, the able defender of the virgin birth, even turns Paul’s silence to his advantage. The fact that the virgin birth is not mentioned in his letters could mean that this was so universally accepted within the churches that no defense was needed.⁸

These are valid observations, and yet they do not satisfy. It is true that Paul’s epistles hardly quote any words spoken by Jesus during his earthly ministry, and they do not describe the things he did during his three years of public ministry. The virgin birth, however, cannot be equated with Christ’s works or words, for it indicates his origin. When Paul pays special attention to the end of Christ’s earthly life, why could he not give equal attention to the beginning of Christ’s life? His coming into the world was crucial in his salvation work. Actually, Paul does speak on several occasions

⁶ See e.g. the commentary of H. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Church of Galatia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953) 155–156.

⁷ Y. Feenstra, *Geboren uit de maagd* (Kampen: Kok, 1959) 15.

⁸ J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985) 262ff.

about his coming into the world, for example, in Romans 1:3 and Galatians 4:4. Yet, not even once does he mention the virgin birth. Christ's birth, surely, deserved the attention of the congregations as much as his death.

The Place of the Virgin Birth

This brings us back to the gospels. Can we possibly find in the records of the virgin birth the reason why Paul saw no reason to mention it? We need another look at the gospel of Luke. The announcement of the virgin birth begins with the angel saying to Mary: "You will be with child and give birth to a son." Three statements are added, one of which is that Mary's son will be called the Son of the Most High.

Mary does not respond to much of what the angel says. Instead, she comes back to the first words of the angel. She asks how in her present situation she can conceive a son? The angel answers that no man will be involved. He says, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Mark the word "so." How can this child of Mary truly be called the Son of God? It is because no man was involved in his conception; instead, God brought him to life through his Holy Spirit.

The virgin birth, then, is not the main issue but only the means. It is the miraculous way in which God brought his Son into this world. The virgin birth is a great miracle but, like all God's miracles, it does not want to draw attention to itself. It is similar to the healing of Malchus' ear or the stilling of the storm. These events do not focus on the healing or the quieting work but on what Christ achieved by means of his miraculous power. He healed even his enemy and righted an injustice. He is able to protect his disciples from the greatest dangers. In the same manner, the virgin birth is subservient to the astonishing result that the Son of God becomes a man.

Now we can understand why there was no need for Paul to mention the virgin birth. For all its miraculous character, far surpassing anything we think possible, the virgin birth is in the final analysis merely God's way of bringing his Son into the world. It is the means for the central fact of God's salvation work—bringing his Son into the world for our salvation. And Paul certainly emphasizes the coming of God's Son.

The absence of the virgin birth in Paul's epistles should not lead us to consider this a legend made up by Hellenistic believers. It has to be maintained as a fact, but in its subordinate place. Paul's silence is a reminder for us to focus not on the virgin Mary but on the Son of God who, by way of his birth of the virgin, became our Saviour.

The Virgin Birth by Grace Alone

When Christmas approaches, the mighty acts of God again present themselves to us. We see God at work through many centuries to protect Israel, out of which the Christ would be born. And we see the incredible greatness of God in the miracle of the virgin birth. We praise God for his mighty deeds in the history of Israel, and above all in the life of the young Mary. As Mary sang to the glory of God, “From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name” (Luke 1:48-49). We join her in glorifying God.

At the same time, man is humbled here. The people of Israel could not protect themselves from the attacks of the enemies. And no earthly man could bring about the virgin birth. Our Saviour had to be a man, but mankind could not bring him forth. Already at the moment where he began his human life, man was effectively excluded. The virgin birth is the death of all human pride that wants to take part in our salvation.

But the old man does not die easily. He has his pride and tries to get away from this humiliating message. One of the ways out has been to emphasize Mary, the mother of Jesus. The human father may have been excluded, but a human mother will carry and give birth to the Saviour. Did she not contribute to our salvation? Is the coming of our Saviour not partly dependent on Mary and her cooperation?

Roman Catholic theology has always emphasized the role of Mary. Especially since 1850, much of this has become the official position of the Roman Catholic Church.¹ This attention for Mary has also led to attributing to Mary a decisive role in the birth of Jesus Christ. She is seen as cooperating in his coming into the world. In this article, we will briefly present the Roman Catholic position on the virgin birth. Is this a biblical development, or is the biblical teaching damaged?

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¹ This upsurge in the official teaching about Mary began in 1854 with the proclamation of Mary’s immaculate conception. Just as Jesus Christ was born without original sin, so everyone has to believe that Mary was born without sin. The provisional end was the proclamation in 1950 of Mary’s corporeal assumption into heaven. Just as Jesus Christ was taken up into heaven, everyone has to believe that Mary did not die but went to heaven. The second Vatican Council (1961–1965) did not add a new chapter to this developing Mariology.

The Roman Catholic Position

There are three stages in the Roman Catholic doctrine concerning the virgin Mary giving birth to Jesus Christ. The first is that Mary gave her consent so that the Son of God could be born of her. The words which Mary said in answer to the angel, “May it be to me as you have said,” are understood as Mary giving permission (to God!) to use her for the birth of the Saviour. “When the eternal Son of God willed to assume the nature of man for the redemption and honour of man.... He did not do so before his chosen mother had given her free consent.”²

This leads to the second step: a very exalted position of Mary. Just as no one may go to the Father except through the Son, in much the same way no one can go to the Son except through Mary. Mary is exalted over all men and all angels. Of all creatures, she is closest to Christ. She even receives the title of mediator: “She is the one of whom Jesus is born,... and for that reason the worthy and most beloved mediatrix with the Mediator.”³

Calling Mary a mediator between God and men presents a great problem for Roman Catholic theology. Paul writes to Timothy: “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). How can Roman Catholic theology square this text with the title “mediatrix” for Mary?

The solution is to distinguish between the roles of Christ and of Mary as mediator. Jesus Christ earned salvation for men by fulfilling God’s justice. But he chose Mary as his associate for the work. Jesus Christ has earned all gifts with his death. Mary has, by her participation in Christ’s work, received the right to distribute his gifts.⁴

² See the translation of the official documents in John F. Clarkson et al., eds., *The Church Teaches: Documents of the Church in English Translation* (Rockford: Tan Books and Publishers, 1973). The quotation in the text can be found on pp. 209 and 211. See also on p. 210: “[Mary] with her wonderful consent received the message of the mystery of peace brought to earth by an angel.” The word “consent” seems to have been taken from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, 30, Art. 1, 4.

³ See Clarkson et al., *The Church Teaches*, 209–210. In the years preceding the second Vatican Council, there was a movement to call Mary co-redeemer next to Jesus Christ, but this was not officially adopted at the Council; see John H. Miller, ed., *Vatican II: An Interfaith Appraisal* (Notre Dame & London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966) 311, 328ff.

⁴ See Clarkson et al., *The Church Teaches*, 210 (from the Encyclical *Ad Diem Illum*, from 1904). The Second Vatican Council came back to this question in its Dogmatic Constitution on the church, III, 60; see A. P. Flannery, ed., *Documents of*

But there is a third important element in the consent of Mary to carry the Son of God. She was at that point in time “in some way impersonating the whole human race.”⁵ What happened, therefore, in the virgin birth was this: The Son, representing God, wanted to become incarnate. And Mary, representing mankind, gave permission. Undoubtedly God is the origin and beginning of our salvation through the virgin birth. At the same time mankind, in the person of Mary, cooperated by giving permission. Salvation is not just the work of God, but, subordinate to the initiative of God, it is at the same time the work of man.

And suddenly we have now arrived at one of the central issues in the conflict between Rome and the Reformation: is our salvation “by grace alone” or not? According to Rome, we are not saved by grace alone; man has to contribute to salvation by giving his cooperation. Over against this doctrine, Luther maintained that salvation is by grace alone.⁶ The question of whether Mary gave permission to God for the virgin birth forms part of a larger question: does God save us, or do we humans in some way contribute to our own salvation? Is the virgin birth uniquely God’s work, or is it a co-operative effort between God and Mary?

The Words of the Angel

We now have to turn to the Scriptures to find an answer to this question. How is the virgin birth presented in Scripture? Is the role of Mary in the conception and birth of Jesus Christ described as a cooperating role? The answer of the Bible is clear: the coming of the Saviour is solely the work of God. Several elements in the text show this.

In the first place, the first words of the angel are not a question but an announcement. The angel does not ask, “Are you willing to conceive in your womb and bear a son, who will be called Jesus?” He tells Mary what will happen to her: “You will be with child and give birth to a son” (Luke 1:31).

Vatican II (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 418.

⁵ See Clarkson et al., *The Church Teaches*, 209, a statement dating from 1891; the statement was repeated in 1896 (see p. 210) and in 1943 was rephrased as: “in the name of the whole human race she gave consent,” 211. This expression, too, goes back to Thomas Aquinas: “She was in some way impersonating the human race,” 209.

⁶ This is correctly noted by the Roman Catholic scholar M. Schmaus in his *Katholische Dogmatik, V: Mariology* (5 vols. in 7 books; Munich: Max Hueber Verlag, 1955) 312ff.; and by the Protestant scholar C. A. De Ridder, *Maria Medeverlosseres?* (Utrecht: Uitgeverij Evangelische Maatschappij, 1960) 122.

The whole conversation between the angel and Mary shows the same pattern. Mary is never asked for permission; she is confronted with a certainty.

In the second place, we have to pay attention to the question of Mary. She asks how she can bear a son since she is not yet living with Joseph. Then the angel does not divide his answer between the role of God and the role of Mary; he only speaks about God's work. God will do this through his Holy Spirit: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (v. 35). This conception is the work of God and of God alone.

In the third place, neither does Mary's final answer contain a note of cooperation or consent. She calls herself a servant, a slave. She is not in a position to say "yes" or "no." Undoubtedly, it will be difficult for her to give birth to this child. What will the people say? And what shall Joseph say? But her answer shows that she does not grudgingly submit to what she cannot escape anyway; she accepts God's decision over her in faith: "May it be to me as you have said" (v. 38).

The text of Luke 1 does not support the Roman Catholic doctrine that Mary cooperated in the conception of Jesus. But this does not deter the Roman Catholic Church from teaching it. Their doctrine is not based on Scripture alone, but on the understanding of Scripture in the process of tradition. The church through its tradition knows more today than is actually expressed in Scripture. And one of the best examples of the progress the church has made in understanding God's revelation is the doctrine of Mary. It is not really necessary for the Roman Catholic Church to prove its doctrine from Scripture. The Mariology of the Roman Catholic Church is usually proven from tradition.⁷ The Roman Catholic doctrine of "not by grace alone" is supported by their doctrine of "not Scripture alone."

Conclusion

What does the virgin birth mean for us? Mary asks the angel how her son, who will reign on David's throne, can be born. The angel answers that God will bring this about, through his Holy Spirit. The miracle of the vir-

⁷ See e.g. the answer given by Medina to the question: How could you illustrate the doctrine of tradition, because tradition plays an important part in Mariology? in Miller, ed., *Vatican II: An Interfaith Appraisal*, 329ff.; see also De Ridder, *Maria medeverlosseres?* 130, 144ff.

gin birth is exclusively the result of God's working in Mary.

This is a humiliating message for us. No one, not even the best of us, could bring about the birth of the Saviour. His coming is not the result of our work; it is the work of God alone. This hurts our self-esteem; no one wants to accept this from himself. We want to contribute something to our salvation, if only in Mary. We do not like to be totally dependent on God. It will never be easy to accept in faith the biblical teaching of the virgin birth.

But this doctrine, once it is accepted in faith, gives us great comfort. It shows the character of God's salvation work. God alone paved the way to the coming of the Saviour, and no man had an active part in it. God is the guarantee that it will infallibly be fulfilled. The work of salvation is in God's hands, but it is safe there. He will fulfill what he began.

The virgin birth leads us away from the praise of Mary and, for that matter, from every praise of man. God alone should receive all honour: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests" (Luke 2:14).

Joseph and the Virgin Birth

The two places in the New Testament that speak about the virgin birth display a remarkable difference. Comparison of the stories recorded in Matthew 1 and in Luke 1 brings to light that they focus on different persons. Luke describes the events through the eyes of Mary. An angel appeared to her and told her that she would have a son (Luke 1:31). Matthew, on the other hand, describes the events as Joseph experienced them.¹ An angel appeared to him in a dream to give him instructions. Even the birth of Jesus is described from Joseph's perspective: "But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus" (Matt. 1:25).

What is Matthew's purpose in focusing on Joseph? Is Joseph here described as a faith hero, a role model for Christian behaviour? This is of great importance for our understanding and use of this story. If Joseph is portrayed as a faith hero, then we should concentrate on Joseph as an example and try to become as faithful in our situation as Joseph was in his. On the other hand, if it is not Matthew's intention to show Joseph as a hero of the faith, why does he concentrate on him? Matthew even records Joseph's thoughts. We have to follow Matthew's description closely to see what he wants us to learn from these events.

Joseph Excluded

To understand the events we have to realize first of all that Joseph and Mary were already married at the time. The expression "betrothed" used by the RSV may give us a different impression today, just as the expression of the NIV, "pledged to be married." Matthew makes it very clear in this passage, however, that they were married. He calls Joseph "her husband" (1:19) and Mary "his wife" (1:20, 24). That Joseph considers divorce (1:19) puts it beyond doubt that Joseph and Mary were man and wife.

The situation described here was common in Israel but is no longer known in our Western world. When a marriage contract has been made between two parties, the boy and the girl were considered to be married before the law. Such contracts could be made when the girl was still young, possibly not older than twelve years old. A number of years would go by

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¹ See e.g. the commentary of J. Van Bruggen, *Matteüs: Het evangelie voor Israel* (Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament; Kampen: Kok, 1990) 34.

before the lawful husband would bring his wife to his house and they would live together. They were considered man and wife, however, from the moment the marriage contract was signed.

That is the situation between Joseph and Mary, as described in Matthew 1:18. It was during this period that it became apparent that Mary was expecting a child. Matthew uses an uncommon expression: “she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.” At first glance, this may give the impression that other people began to notice that Mary was pregnant. The difficulty is, however, that other people may have noticed that Mary was expecting, but they could not know that she was pregnant through the working of the Holy Spirit.² There is only one who could notice the pregnancy and at the same time know that it was the work of the Holy Spirit: Mary herself.

Matthew’s story, however, does not focus on Mary and her predicament, but on Joseph. Matthew implies that Mary told him that she was expecting a child. Did she also tell him that this was the direct result of the working of the Holy Spirit? There are two details in the story indicating that she did. There is, in the first place, the fact that Joseph considers to divorce her quietly. If he thought she had committed adultery, there would be no reason for him to leave her quietly. Joseph was planning effectively to divorce her, but not in such a way that she would be put to shame. This implies that he did not think Mary had done something dishonourable. In the second place, when the angel encourages him to bring Mary to his house, he makes the strange remark: “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife.” Joseph, obviously, was not angry at Mary or disappointed in her; he was afraid. Joseph, then, was aware that the Holy Spirit had required Mary for the important task of bearing a special child, and he did not dare to press his marital right.

In this situation where his rights had been overruled by the Holy Spirit, Joseph was looking for an honourable way out. He could have gone to the judges and received an official divorce on the basis of Mary’s pregnancy before she began living with him. Such a course of action, however, would expose Mary as a adulteress in the view of people. Or he could give her a private letter of divorce. In that case, Mary would be clear in the public

² This difficulty causes Davies and Allison to take the words “by the Holy Spirit” as an editorial comment. According to them, Matthew added for the benefit of his readers already at this point that there was no guilt in Mary but that the Spirit had caused this; see W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988) 200.

eye, but the blame would be laid on Joseph for leaving his young wife. And only Mary would have the proof that he had divorced her and that she was free from him.

The end result would be that Joseph would lose his wife Mary. Joseph was willing to make this sacrifice, since God had clearly shown that he needed Mary for his purposes. That brings us back to the question of whether Joseph showed a strong faith. Obviously, this cannot be denied. He was willing to do something that was both painful and shameful for him. Even if it was an arranged marriage, we should not suppose that he did not love her. Moreover, the way Joseph planned the divorce meant that he would end up bearing the blame for leaving his wife. And yet Joseph went ahead and gave Mary her freedom. Joseph's faith proved to be strong.

But we should also consider another question: Does Matthew in his description of Joseph portray him as a faith hero? Honest reading of the text shows that is not the case. To give an example, Matthew does not write at the beginning of 1:20: "As Joseph was agonizing about this..." Any feelings Joseph may have had are not described. His disappointment, his uncertainty, or his grieving over the end of a marriage before they had begun to enjoy it, none of this is mentioned. The spotlight is not on Joseph and his experiences and emotions.

Although the event is viewed from the position of Joseph, it focuses on someone else, as the very beginning of this passage indicates: "This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about..." Matthew is not so much describing how Joseph was tested in his faith and overcame the temptation as he is recounting the story of Jesus Christ's birth.

The point of the story is to prove beyond doubt that Joseph is not the father of Jesus. Jesus is truly born out of Mary, but Mary's husband before the law, Joseph, is not his father. No human agency could bring the Christ into this world, not even righteous Joseph. Jesus the Saviour came into this world through a divine miracle, through the extraordinary work of the Spirit of God. Joseph is not described as a faith hero; he is described as being excluded.

That affects all of us. We need a Saviour, but he cannot come into this world through our effort. We are sinners, and we cannot contribute anything to our salvation. Our Saviour had to come into this world through the Holy Spirit. Our salvation is from beginning to end the work of God. That pattern is visible here at the very beginning of the life of the Saviour. Even the righteous Joseph (Matt. 1:19) had to be excluded. Joseph is not an example for us as a faith hero; rather the exclusion of the faithful Joseph in the virgin birth is the living proof that we cannot contribute to our salvation.

Joseph Involved

While Joseph was considering secret divorce, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. He was commanded not to leave Mary but to take Mary to his home. The first, legal part of their marriage should now be followed by the second, personal part. Mary should leave her parents' home and move in with Joseph, her husband.

As a result, Mary's child will be born in Joseph's house. Joseph has to accept her son as his own son, and he must assume responsibility for him. Although the boy is not Joseph's son, he must receive the place of Joseph's firstborn.

The angel mentions yet another task for Joseph to fulfill: he has to call the child "Jesus." We need not now go into the meaning of this name, although the angel indicates that the meaning is important. The issue is that Mary should not name her son, but Joseph has to give this name to the boy. This underlines that Joseph publicly adopts Mary's son as his son.³

Joseph faithfully follows the two instructions given by the angel. He brought his wife home, "but he had no union with her" (Matt. 1:25). This was not something expressly commanded by the angel. Moreover, when Mary gave birth to her son, Joseph called him Jesus. Again we are confronted with the question of whether Joseph shows himself to be a faith hero. If faith is to accept what God has said and to act accordingly, then Joseph undoubtedly proves to be a believer. Yet it is difficult to judge how much heroism there was in his behaviour. Was it a struggle for Joseph to follow the command of the angel, or was he glad, at any rate, that he could marry Mary? What did he think and how did he feel? We have no way of knowing since the Bible does not give us insight into the struggles and triumphs of Joseph. The Bible appears to be focused on a different, far more factual aspect.

This is indicated in the way the angel addresses Joseph as "son of David" (1:20). David was Israel's great king. In the genealogy with which the gospel of Matthew begins, Jesus Christ is right away presented as "Jesus Christ the son of David" (1:1). Later, David is called the king (1:6). Jesus, as the adopted son of Joseph, is legally included in the royal line. He is the great king promised to the house of David (Isa. 9).

David's line, however, had gone into decline not long after David. Eventually, his offspring had become unknown and unimportant figures

³ See e.g. D. A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* (Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word Books, 1993) 21.

during the Babylonian captivity. Rather than producing a new king, David's line had fizzled out. The final proof that the promised king could not come from David is the virgin birth itself. Only through an adoption by Joseph could the Saviour become the legal heir to David's throne.

To be sure, Joseph had to act in faith to make this possible. But the emphasis in this section is not on the faith of Joseph but on the faithfulness of God. God had given great promises to the house of David; history had made it painfully clear that David's house could not make these promises come true. Then God remembered his promises and addressed Joseph, an unknown son of David. He sent an angel to order Joseph to bring Mary into his house and to adopt Mary's son. In this extraordinary way, God made all his promises come true.

The story of the virgin birth in Matthew does encourage us to live in faith. It does not, however, do that by holding out Joseph as a good example of a faith hero. Rather, it does this by showing us God fulfilling his word. Joseph's example would not help us much, since we do not know his struggles and triumphs. It is God's work here that is the real reason for us to live in faith. When we meditate on how much God did for us in the virgin birth, we will learn to trust him to continue his salvation work today in us.

The Virgin Birth: Stumbling Block for Feminist Theology

Mary in Feminist Theology

Feminist theology has become a force to be reckoned with in the world of theology. A feminist approach to theology is now taught all over North America and Europe. It can be found in the Roman Catholic Church as well as in the Protestant churches. Everywhere, women are studying how the Bible can be related to issues that are liberating for them. One of the main sources for inspiration are the women portrayed in Scripture. When they see how these women, in their time, stood up for their rights, they are encouraged to continue their struggle for recognition of their place and rights. At stake is nothing less than liberation after centuries of oppression.

Mary, the mother of the Lord, was one of the women looked to for inspiration. That led to a disappointment, however. Mary appeared too submissive; she appeared unsuitable to be used in the context of feminism. In fact, Mary was rejected by early feminist theologians as a possible identification figure.¹

In feminist circles today, however, the attitude toward Mary is more positive. They now see that Mary was not at all a passive and meek person; rather, she was a heroine. Lavinia Byrne points out that Mary supported her son during his crucifixion when all his male disciples had fled. Mary followed her son's adventurous life, says Ivone Leal. Even though she realized that Jesus' attempt was doomed to failure, Mary continued to support him. And another theologian, Mary O'Driscoll, refers to Mary's song to prove that Mary stood up for the poor and the oppressed.²

Together with other women, Mary is now used as an example to be followed by women today. At this point, we have to resist the temptation to deal with the exemplaric character of this explanation and show the importance of the redemptive-historical approach.³ There is something else that deserves

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¹ See C. Halkes, "Mary and Women" in *Mary in the Churches* (ed. H. Kung and J. Moltmann; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983) 66.

² These examples are taken from R. N. Ostling's article "Handmaid or Feminist?" *Time* (December 30, 1991) 55–56.

³ See for this, e.g. H. J. Schilder, "Praesidium libertatis," *De Reformatie* 51

our attention. The best-known part of Mary's life remains unmentioned. It is that part which caused her name to be included in the Apostles' Creed in connection with the virgin birth. Mary herself said, "From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me" (Luke 1:48–49). But many women feel they cannot call the Mary of the virgin birth "blessed." The question arises why this most important part of Mary's life does not function in feminist theology.

Two Problems

The reason why the virgin birth is neglected is that at this point in her life Mary provides no inspiration whatsoever for women. Feminist theology, as a variation of liberation theology, wants to liberate women from the subservient position they have occupied in society and church for many centuries. Women were under male dominance and therefore were unable to be themselves. Feminist theology attempts to free women from their traditional submissive position. Women should be allowed to establish their own identity. Their outlook and approach should be recognized as legitimate. They should be recognized as themselves and not as some man's wife or somebody's mother.

From this perspective Mary, in particular the Mary of the virgin birth, appears to be a hindrance rather than an asset. She occurs at this point in the Bible only in connection with Jesus. She is not described in her own right but as the mother of Jesus. As long as Mary is only pointing toward Jesus, as long as she is the receptive woman in contrast to her son who is the creative person, she cannot inspire women.⁴

Another problem for feminist theology is the emphasis on Mary as mother. This leads to a glorification of motherhood, as if that is the only real destination of women. The story of the virgin birth is yet another example of a story about women who are no more than homebodies, women who have no influence in a male-dominated society. Roman Catholic theology is seen as even worse than Protestant theology since it emphasizes that Mary is the ever-virgin. This is seen as a denial of female sexuality.⁵ For feminist theology it is imperative to do away with the virgin birth for

(1975–1976) 121ff.

⁴ See Halkes, "Mary and Women," 68–69.

⁵ Uta Hanke-Heinemann, a feminist theologian from Germany, states that the perpetual virginity of Mary was an invention of a celibate clergy that demeaned women by robbing Mary of sexuality and normal motherhood, as noted in Ostling, "Handmaid or Feminist?" 56.

the reason that it hinders the liberation of women.

Two Solutions

Several attempts have been made to remove this offensive part of Christian theology. The less disruptive solution is to reinterpret its meaning. The virgin birth should be interpreted from the last words of Mary: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38). These words show that Mary is not just the simple handmaiden who meekly submits to whatever is happening to her. She is active in her response to God's offer. If there is a dependence, says Halkes, it is on the side of God. God has made himself dependent on a person who was receptive to him. What Mary does is not passive submission but active receptivity.⁶ It is noteworthy that feminist theology here approaches Roman Catholic theology with its idea that in Mary humanity participated in the work of salvation by bringing forth the Saviour.

The text itself contradicts this explanation. The word "servant," with which Mary summarizes her position, indicates her submission to God. The words indicate Mary's humble acceptance of the will of God.⁷ There is no indication that God made Himself dependent and asked for Mary's permission. The angel did not wait for Mary to consent that a son be born of her; he announced that she would give birth to a son (Luke 1:31). It would, however, not bother many feminist interpreters that their interpretation is not given in the text. They are not in the first place interested in what the Bible says, but in what they can use for their feminist agenda.

For other theologians, the explanation that Mary gives permission to the angel is not sufficient to accept this story. Mary would still be secondary; her importance depends on the importance of her Son. More radical measures are needed. They come with the following reasoning. The virgin birth is mentioned only in two passages in the Bible—in the introductory chapters of Matthew and Luke. These chapters do not record historical events; they were added to the story of Jesus at a later time. They were "included because it was felt necessary to reflect in faith about the mystery of the incarnation."⁸ In plain words, this means that no angel appeared to Mary. He did not announce to Mary that a son would be born to her. Nei-

⁶ Halkes, "Mary and Women," 68–69.

⁷ See J. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 72.

⁸ Halkes, "Mary and Women," 67; see also Ostling, "Handmaid or Feminist?" 55–56.

ther did he make known the mystery that the Holy Spirit would work the miracle of the virgin birth. The early church added all these elements to the greater glory of Jesus.

As if that were not enough, the virgin birth takes on a new meaning. Halkes appeals to the results of the study of comparative religion. According to her, the veneration of Mary should be explained against the background of the worship of the virgin goddess. “The dogma of Mary’s virginity is connected with the very early mystery of the great goddess who was a virgin.”⁹ This goddess is independent and self-contained. She does bear children but is not dependent on a man. The virgin birth becomes the story of the independent woman who does not need a man, not even for childbirth.

The Necessity

This is, of course, a bizarre interpretation. It is utter nonsense to explain the biblical story of the virgin birth as a variation on the theme of the great goddess, Mother Earth, giving birth to every living thing. If one wants to believe in a fertility goddess, why not reject the record of the virgin birth altogether rather than going to such ridiculous lengths in reinterpreting the biblical story.

We should do more, however, than shrug this off. We have to ask why feminist theologians cannot accept the biblical account of the virgin birth as it is recorded. We have to go back to the beginning. What do these theologians use the Bible for? They only seek support for their opinion that women should be liberated from their position of submission. In their quest, they come across one of the most prominent women in the Bible, Mary, and the central event in her life, the virgin birth. This story does not help them, however, in their pursuit of realizing liberation for women. That is the reason why the story of the virgin birth had to be reinterpreted, excised, or turned into its opposite, the affirmation of female sexuality.

The root of their difficulties with the virgin birth is that feminist theology has identified the wrong problem. According to these theologians, the basic problem of humankind is female oppression and submission. When that problem is solved, the world will be a better place to live. The real problem of this world, however, is sin—sin in men as well as in women. And since the feminist theologians begin with the wrong problem, they also come with the wrong solution. For the real solution is not the liberation of women but the removal of sin. Men as well as women have sinned

⁹ Halkes, “Mary and Women,” 72.

and stand condemned before God, and mankind is unable to solve this problem. The solution has to come from outside. The Son of God has to come into this world for the salvation of sinners. The story of the virgin birth does not concentrate on Mary who brings a child into the world, but on God who uses her to bring the Saviour into this world.

Feminist theologians stumble over the story of the virgin birth for the very reason that they want to bring about their own salvation. But the story of the virgin birth shows us rather that salvation for men as well as for women is from God. We can only reject the virgin birth at the cost of cutting the heart of God's grace out of the gospel.

We will call Mary blessed (Luke 1:48), not because she stood up for herself, but because God has done great things for her. She fulfilled that small but glorious task in the history of God's salvation work: becoming the mother of our Saviour.