

R. J. BERRY**The Virgin Birth of Christ¹**

The Bible describes Jesus as being born to Mary ‘by the power of the Holy Spirit’, implying (although not stating) that the Spirit was his father. This has been rejected by some as an unnecessary doctrine, separating Jesus from the rest of humankind and dependent on an intrinsically incredible miracle. Such an objection is wrong; some form of distinctiveness like a Virgin Birth is theologically required if Jesus is to be divine as well as human, and there are several mechanisms by which the virgin birth of a male child could occur. The reason for recognising these is not to suggest that God necessarily used any of them, but simply to point out that apparent scientific difficulty should not determine the acceptability of a theological concept.

Key words: virgin birth; miracle; parthenogenesis; chromosome; gene; Virgin Mary; incarnation

1. Introduction

All claims of miracles have to be accepted (or rejected) by faith, but some seem either easier or more important to believe than others. There is a danger that we confuse credibility with mechanism. Very rarely in Scripture is there any indication of the method God used to achieve his purpose. One exception is Exodus 14:21–22, where we read that ‘the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground . . .’ The actual site of the Israelite crossing is uncertain, but at the traditional place, near the Bitter Lakes, it was possible to ford the ‘Reed Sea’, particularly under certain weather conditions. The prevailing wind in Egypt is from the west, and an east wind is very unusual.² Thus God’s intervention in this case, although certainly providential, involved natural processes. Notwithstanding, it was truly a miracle. It involved a disturbance of the normal pattern of events by God

1 This is an expanded version of an article which first appeared in *The Independent* on Christmas Eve 1993.

2 K. A. Kitchen (in Bruce, F. F., Packer, J. I. & Tasker, R. V. G. (eds) (1962) *New Bible Dictionary*, p. 1078, London: IVF) cites Aly Shafei Bey (*Bulletin de la Société Royale de Géographie d’Égypte*, no. 21, August 1946) as experiencing the draining of a lagoon in the area of the Bitter Lakes and Lake Menzaleh under similar unusual weather conditions to those described in Exodus. Werner Keller (*The Bible as History*, p. 127, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1956) notes that at the northern end of the Gulf of Suez occasional strong winds used to drive the water back so far that it is possible to wade across. The Suez Canal has now significantly altered the hydrodynamics of the area. The uncertainty of the site where the crossing took place is summarised by Alan Cole (1973) in the Tyndale Commentary on Exodus (pp. 44–46).

in such a way as to draw attention to himself; the miracle lay in the place and timing of a physical event, not merely in the fact of its occurrence.

The mechanisms producing the plagues of Egypt are not given in the Bible, but all of them could have an entirely reasonable natural cause: deposits from upstream lakes not infrequently stain the Nile flood-waters a dark reddish brown colour similar to blood; they stir up flagellates toxic to fish; prolonged flooding can lead (and has done so) to enormous numbers of frogs and biting insects; flies often transmit epidemic diseases of domestic animals ('all the cattle of the Egyptians died'); locusts and sandstorms ('darkness') are common in the Near East. In situations like this it is fairly easy to suggest how God might have worked.³ The point of the story in Exodus is not simply to state God's control over the natural world—that is implicit throughout Scripture and is one of the main inferences from the creation accounts in Genesis—but to emphasize his care for his own people and his response to specific prayer.

In most cases, we know no apparent mechanism for particular miracles. For example, it is not clear why the Jordan should be more effective in healing leprosy than 'Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus' (2 Kings 5:12) or why Christ used a clay ball to rub the eyes of a blind man (John 9:6). If a modern pathologist had been present at any of the healing miracles he could in principle have described the histological changes that took place in the diseased cells of the sufferer as they became healthy, although he would not have been able to say why the changes were taking place. Whether we are able to say anything or nothing about the way a miracle was brought about is irrelevant to the purpose of the miracle, and does not affect or detract from the sovereignty of God. A causal explanation is usually on a different level from an explanation which describes divine activity.

The belief that Christ had no human father, but that he was a 'virgin birth', conceived in Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit is a miracle that seems to teeter on the edge of general credibility. It is certainly part of orthodox Christian belief. In early times it was questioned only by a few heretical sects (notably the Psilanthropists and Adoptionists). Within the last hundred years or so it has been attacked on the grounds of:

- i) A general suspicion of everything miraculous;
- ii) A challenge that the traditionally messianic verse that 'a virgin shall conceive' (Isaiah 7:14) should be read merely as a 'young woman is with child';⁴

3 See Hort, G. *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 69: 84–103, 1957; 70: 48–59, 1958, summarised by K. A. Kitchen (1962), loc cit. pp. 1001–3.

4 The words for 'unmarried young woman' in the modern Middle East (*kiz* in Turkish, *bint* in Arabic) imply 'virgin' because young women are traditionally closely chaperoned in those cultures. Professor Torrance (*in litt*) points out that there would not be much point in the prophet stating that a 'young woman' was pregnant, since there would have been thousands of such people at the time. The verse makes much better sense if a 'virgin' is meant.

- iii) The apparent lack of references to the Virgin Birth in the epistles and John's gospel;⁵ and
- iv) A contention that it would have been more congruous for the full humanity of Christ for his birth to have been exactly like other men (see below, p. 109, note 32).

All these points can be more than adequately answered. The Virgin Birth is clearly taught in the New Testament. Matthew (1:18, 22–3) tells us,

Mary was betrothed to Joseph; before their marriage she found she was going to have a child through the Holy Spirit . . . this happened in order to fulfil what the Lord declared through the prophet: 'A virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and he shall be called Emmanuel,' a name which means 'God with us'.

In Luke (1:26–35) we read that an angel appeared to Mary with the news that she would conceive and give birth to a son 'and you are to give him the name Jesus.' Mary's reaction was 'How can this be? I am still a virgin'; the angel's reply was 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; for that reason the holy child to be born will be called the Son of God.'

The Apostle's Creed requires us to affirm 'Jesus Christ conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.' The problem seems to be that this is too much for many people to swallow. Virgins simply do not have babies; much less male babies. Even if parthenogenesis ever occurs in humans in the way it does, for example, in bees or aphids, a human male needs a Y-chromosome and this can only be contributed by a Y-bearing sperm from a man.

2. Belief and Disbelief

The Virgin Birth was part of Christian belief from the early centuries AD. The Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) produced the orthodox formula of Christ as One Person, recognized in two natures, 'without confusion, without change, without division, without separation . . . not as though He were parted or divided into two Persons, but one and the same Son and only-begotten, God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ.' The title *theotakos* (God-bearer) was applied to the Virgin Mary to indicate that the divine Person was not somehow added to a purely human baby; later this led to the unwarranted extrapolation that Mary was a perpetual virgin.

Ignatius (35–107) argued that the chief events in our Lord's life were his birth of a virgin, his passion and his resurrection. 'Everything we know of the dogmatics of the early part of the second century agrees with the belief

⁵ It is true that the virgin birth does not receive as much emphasis in the New Testament as Jesus's death and resurrection. However it is worth noting that Paul uses the Greek word for 'becoming' with relation to Christ, rather than the more normal one for 'being born', notably in Galatians 4:4 ('God sent his son, born ['became'] of a woman'), but also in Romans 1:3, Philippians 2:7. John (1:13) speaks explicitly of those 'born not of human stock, by the physical desire of a human father, but of God' (see Torrance, T. F. The doctrine of the virgin birth. *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, 12: 8–25, 1994).

that at that period the virginity of Mary was a part of the formulated Christian belief.⁶ But down the ages, Christians have stumbled at the belief. William Temple almost shied away from ordination on the grounds of his 'inability to give more than a tentative assent to the Doctrine of the Virgin Birth and the Bodily Resurrection of our Lord', although he was later firm in his acceptance of them.⁷ James Weatherhead, a recent Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, caused problems by seeking to appease both liberals and conservatives in saying 'It doesn't seem to me impossible that God could not choose a fully human birth as a way of entering the world'.⁸ The revisionist scepticism typified by David Jenkins⁹ is well known and although driven by a legitimate search for the reality of God, has the danger of throwing the baby out with the bath water.¹⁰ Even this demythologising pales into insignificance against the statement of the German theologian P. Soltan: 'Whoever makes the demand that an evangelical Christian shall believe in the words "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary", wittingly constitutes himself a sharer in a sin against the Holy Spirit of the true Gospel as transmitted to us by the Apostles and their school in the Apostolic Age.'¹¹

It is difficult to comprehend fully the reasons for the attacks on the Virgin Birth. Perhaps the best way to understand them is that they concern the person and nature of Our Lord rather than his works on earth, and thus strike at the heart of Christianity. It is worth remembering that, as John Robinson has written, 'The first and most indisputable fact about the birth of Jesus is that it occurred out of wedlock. The one option for which there is no evidence is that Jesus was the lawful son of Joseph and Mary. The only choice open to us is between a virgin birth and an illegitimate birth.'¹²

Rumours about Our Lord's illegitimacy seem to have been spread around as early as his public ministry, presumably in an attempt to discredit him. For example, when he declared that certain unbelieving Jews

6 Rendel Harris cited (p. 319) by Charles Gore (1928). The virgin birth of Our Lord. In *A New Commentary of Holy Scripture*: 315–320. Gore, C., Goudge, H. L. & Guillaume, A. (eds.). London: SPCK.

7 Iremonger, F. A. (1948). *William Temple. Archbishop of Canterbury*, pp. 112, 488. London: Oxford University Press.

8 Cited in *The Scotsman*, 4 January 1994, p. 4. Dr Weatherhead's pronouncements resulted in an Open Letter signed by over 100 Church of Scotland ministers: 'We believe unreservedly in the historicity of the Virgin Birth and regard it as integral to our faith in the incarnate Christ.'

9 For example, 'The birth narratives are far more about the obedience of Mary and Joseph in response to the unique graciousness of God than about Mary's physical virginity.' Speech at the General Synod of the Church of England, 6 July 1986, reprinted in : Jenkins, D. E. (1987). *God, Miracle and the Church of England*. London: SCM.

10 Harold Nebelsick has described such an approach as 'a speculative device imposed on unsuspecting persons . . . based on false presuppositions about both science and the scientific world view.' *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 37: 239, 1984.

11 *Die Geburtsgeschichte Jesu Christi*, p. 32. Cited by Orr, J. (1907). *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, p. 2. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

12 Robinson, J. A. T. (1984). *Twelve More New Testament Studies*, pp. 3–4. London: SCM.

were the children of the devil rather than of Abraham, they retorted, 'WE are not illegitimate'¹³ which sounds like an innuendo that he was. Again, when his fellow-townsmen were offended by his teaching, they asked contemptuously, 'Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary?'¹⁴ As John Stott notes, this was a deliberate insult in a patriarchal society; the insinuation would not have been missed.¹⁵ And on another occasion Pharisees opposed to Jesus' claims denounced him after he had healed a blind man, since 'we do not know where he comes from.'¹⁶

Rumours of Jesus's illegitimacy persisted after his death. They were explicitly stated in the Talmud, whence they were repeated in early modern times by Voltaire and Haeckel.¹⁷ The second century Jew Celcus claimed Jesus was the result of a liaison between Mary and a Roman soldier called Panthera.¹⁸

Notwithstanding, the traditional faith of the Christian was, and is, that Jesus was born to a virgin. Challenged to reaffirm this, the bishops of the Church of England wrote in 1985:¹⁹

The amount of direct testimony (in the Bible) to the Virginal Conception is not significantly smaller than that for some other important facts in the story of Jesus. Thus, if we bear in mind the dependence of Matthew and Luke on Mark, there are only two independent witnesses in the New Testament to the institution of the Eucharist, namely Mark and Paul. That Matthew and Luke are independent witnesses to the Virginal Conception is strongly suggested by the fact that their Birth and Infancy narratives have nothing else in common except the names of Joseph and Mary, and Bethlehem as the place of Jesus' birth. This is also an argument for saying that both the later date of Matthew and Luke and the folk-tale character of the two quite different stories are not significant.

The truth or otherwise of the claim that Jesus was conceived by a divine creative act without a human father is, in any case, something that could never be settled by any testimony human beings could supply. In that respect it needs to be recognised that a critical weighing of New Testament indications is bound to be an inconclusive and even marginal exercise. In the end the decision has to be a matter of faith. But it is not without value to point out that the arguments at the critical level are by no means decisive, even so far as they go. In particular, the character of the two primary accounts can be seen on analysis to leave the tradition more strength than some scholars have been ready to allow.

13 John 8:41.

14 Mark 11:3.

15 Stott, J. R. W. (1985). *The Authentic Jesus*, p. 62. Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering.

16 John 9:29.

17 See Orr (note 11), p. 146.

18 q.v. Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 1. 32.

19 *The Nature of Christian Belief*, pp. 28–9. London: Church House Publishing.

3. Scripture and/or Science

The testimony of the Bible ought to be sufficient grounds for accepting the miraculous conception of Jesus. A God who can heal ‘incurable’ diseases, raise the dead, still storms and change water into wine can surely fertilise the egg of an unmarried girl. Is there something intrinsically odd about the Virgin Birth? White²⁰ estimated that as many as one in a thousand animal species reproduce entirely by parthenogenesis²¹, although all the progeny in such cases are female since they must have the same genetic complement as their mother. (Parthenogenesis is distinct from asexual reproduction, in which new individuals are formed from somatic cells of the parent; this distinction is unimportant in the present context).

Mammalian eggs may begin to develop (i.e. to undergo cell division) either naturally or when stimulated.²² Such ‘embryos’ may have the same chromosome set as the egg (haploid) or two cells may fuse to form the normal adult (diploid) complement. However these cell masses fail to develop far, and die long before birth. No parthenogenetic mammalian embryos have ever been proved to go to term. One reason for this may be the constraint imposed by genomic imprinting in which genes (more correctly, chromosomal segments) from both parents must interact for normal development to take place. The best known examples in humans are where absence of a segment from one parent may lead to an embryo developing abnormally (clear-cut and very different examples are the Prader-Willi & Angelman syndromes, and probably the Beckwith-Wiedemann syndrome); it is likely that complete failure of imprinting is lethal. Imprinting is not required over the length of all the chromosomes; indications in mice where most is known about the phenomenon are that a fairly small number of genes may be involved.²³

The lack of experimental evidence has not inhibited the search for parthenogenesis, particularly in humans. The most well-documented investigation followed the setting out of criteria by which such births

20 White, M. J. D. (1978). *Modes of Speciation*. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman.

21 The term ‘parthenogenesis’ is due to Richard Owen (*On Parthenogenesis, or the Successive Production of Procreating Individuals from a Single Ovum*. London: John van Voorst, 1849), who defined it as ‘procreation without the immediate influence of a male’; previously it was described as *lucina sine concubitu*.

22 Reviewed by: Graham, C. F. (1974). The production of parthenogenetic mammalian embryos and their use in biological research. *Biological Reviews*, 49: 399–422. Mittwoch, U. (1978). Parthenogenesis. *Journal of Medical Genetics*, 15: 165–181. See also: Short, R. V. (1979). Sex determination and differentiation. *British Medical Bulletin*, 35: 121–127. Artley, J., Braude, P. & Johnson, M. (1992). Gene activity and cleavage arrest in human pre-embryos. *Human Reproduction*, 7: 1021–1041. Balakier, H. & Caper, R. F. (1993). Experimentally induced parthenogenetic activation of human oocytes. *Human Reproduction*, 8: 740–743.

23 Beechey, C. V. & Cattanach, B. M. (1996). Genetic imprinting map. *Mouse Genome*, 94: 96–99.

could be recognised by Helen Spurway (wife of J. B. S. Haldane).²⁴ This prompted a Sunday newspaper (*Sunday Pictorial*) to advertise for any mothers who genuinely believed that they had given birth to a parthenogenetic child. Nineteen claimants presented themselves. Eleven were eliminated after a preliminary interview because they were under the impression that a virgin birth meant simply that the hymen remained intact after conception. The other eight mother-daughter pairs were tested for up to 10 blood groups, polymorphisms, etc. One pair was identical for all systems but showed a degree of mutual incompatibility when skin grafts were attempted.²⁵ So parthenogenesis may possibly have occurred in this case, although it has to remain unproven.

One possibility is that the daughter was a chimaera with different cell lineages. Chimaeras seem to be rare; they are most easily recognised when both male (XY) and female (XX) chromosome complements are found in the same individual. One such case has been investigated with molecular genetic techniques.²⁶ He was a one year old boy with a mild learning disability, slight facial asymmetry and small testes. Some of his tissues had XX cells, others had XY cells. Examination showed that all the X chromosomes were genetically the same, as were all the maternally derived autosomes, in both the XX and XY cell lines. The most likely mechanism is that this boy was the result of parthenogenetic activation of an ovum, followed by fertilisation (by a Y-bearing sperm) of one of the early embryonic cells (blastomeres).²⁷

But parthenogenesis by itself cannot account for the birth of Jesus: human males carry a Y chromosome, and it is natural to assume that Mary did not carry a Y chromosome since this would have led to her possessing male characteristics as well as being sterile. This is a reasonable assumption, but it is not necessarily correct: there is a mutation which has the effect of preventing target cells 'recognising' the male hormone testosterone; such people are chromosomally XY (the male complement) but appear as completely normal females, albeit sterile and lacking a uterus.²⁸ However the differentiation of the sex organs in such people is very variable, and it is possible to envisage a situation where a person of this constitution developed an ovum and a uterus. *If* this happened, and *if* the ovum developed parthenogenetically, and *if* a back-mutation to testosterone sensitivity took place, we would have the situation of an apparently

24 *Lancet*, *ii*: 967, 1955.

25 Balfour-Lynn, S. (1956). Parthenogenesis in human beings. *Lancet*, *i*: 1071–2.

26 Strain, L., Warner, J. P., Johnston, T. & Bonthron, D. T. (1995). A human parthenogenetic chimaera. *Nature Genetics*, *11*: 164–169.

27 Surani, M. A. (1995). Parthenogenesis in man. *Nature Genetics*, *11*: 111–113.

28 Reviewed by Wachlet, S. S. & Selden, J. R. (1983). The X chromosome in abnormal sexual development. In *Cytogenetics of the Mammalian X-chromosome. Part B. X Chromosome Anomalies and their Clinical Manifestations*: 87–114. Sandberg, A.A. (ed.) New York: Alan Liss; Griffin, J. E. (1992). Androgen resistance—the clinical and molecular spectrum. *New England Journal of Medicine*, *326*: 611–618.

normal woman giving birth without intercourse to a son. I am not proposing that this was the mechanism behind Christ's conception, but merely suggesting a method by which it could have occurred (recognising that the possibility would be extremely unlikely and arcane—but that is what the Virgin Birth was).

There are still more possibilities. For example, some men are apparently XX (the female complement). Examination shows that in them the male determining factor of the Y (a single gene, Sry) has been translocated onto another chromosome.²⁹ *If* the translocation was to an X chromosome and *if* that chromosome was inactivated in early development (one X chromosome is always inactivated or Lyonised; this inactivation is random, so normally half of the cells will express one X and half the other one), the carrier will have a female appearance, but have the capacity of transmitting the male determining gene. Men with XX chromosomes are sterile, but Jesus never married and we do not know if he was fertile (although he was, of course, 'perfect man' in the theological sense).

I must emphasise that there is no certain record of parthenogenesis in humans, nor of a male being conceived without fertilisation by a Y-bearing sperm. My point is that the possibility is not completely outside the realms of biological imagination. It would be wrong to extrapolate from the existence of an embryological pathway to an assertion that God worked in a particular way. That is not my intention. The mechanisms I have outlined are unlikely, unproven, and involve the implication that either Jesus or Mary (or both) were developmentally abnormal. My purpose in describing them is simply to reduce the assumption of incredibility that seems to dog the doctrine of the Virgin Birth.³⁰

It should not be necessary to do this: if God is a God of miracles, the credibility or probability of any particular miracle should be wholly irrelevant. Speculating about the possible cause(s) of extremely rare events (miracles, if you like) does not prove or disprove them. Nor does it help us to make a definitive judgement on the more general question as to whether or not miracles ever occur. It is an act of faith that a particular miracle has happened; it is no less a statement of faith to assert that miracles never happen. The oft-repeated argument by David Hume that there are no grounds for a rational belief in the miraculous since the probability of a

29 See Wolman, S. R. David, R. & Koo, G. C. (1985). The 'Y' Chromosome in the female phenotype. In *The Y Chromosome. Part A. Basic Characteristics of the Y Chromosome: 477–505*. Sandberg, A. A. (ed). New York: Alan Liss; Berry, R. J. & Berry, A. C. (1977). *The Virgin Birth. Faith and Thought, 107: 90–92*.

30 As an ironic aside, James Orr, who wrote a definitive defence of the orthodox doctrine of the Virgin Birth at the beginning of the Twentieth Century (see notes 11,17) was the author of four articles in *The Fundamentals*, which form the basis of the eponymous fundamentalism. In them he argued that the bible must not be read like a textbook of science, indeed 'Evolution' is coming to be recognised as a new name for "creation" . . . It is, however, creation none the less.' (cited by Numbers, R. L. *The Creationists*. p. 36, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1992).

miracle is less than the probability of a false report about it, is a tautology.³¹

As far as virgin births are concerned, everyday experience is that they must be very rare, if they occur at all. But it would be improper in the light of our knowledge of genetics and embryology to claim that they can never happen. However even this statistical argument does not help when we come to the particular Virgin Birth which traditionally took place on the first Christmas Day, because it was an explicitly supernatural event; Mary had conceived ‘through the Holy Spirit’, the son born to her ‘came down from heaven’, ‘was sent by (God) the father’, and ‘came into the world’. The real issue is not whether a virgin birth is outside credibility, but whether there is a God who creates and upholds the world and all that is in it. If there is, there need be no limit about the way he chooses to act, beyond being consistent with his own character. Indeed if the Christ-child was to be truly man and truly God, it would be surprising if he did not mark his continuity with humankind by normal birth after normal gestation, while at the same time emphasising his discontinuity by some event like a virgin birth.³²

4. The Significance of the Virgin Birth

Augustine and some of the early fathers argued that the Virgin Birth was necessary for the sinlessness of Jesus Christ. This followed from their beliefs about original sin and that all intercourse by fallen men and women involves lust. On this interpretation, the Virgin Birth clearly protects Christ from being the product of sinful activity. However, such an exegesis implies that both sin and God’s image are transmitted by sexual reproduction in the same way as Mendelian genes. This does not agree with either anthropology or scripture.³³

Notwithstanding it is certainly correct to see the Virgin Birth as a theological necessity rather than an existential puzzle. Thomas Torrance

31 C. S. Lewis put it thus: ‘We must agree with Hume that if there is absolutely “uniform experience” against miracles, in other words that they have never happened, why then they never have. Unfortunately we know the experience against them to be uniform only if we know that all the reports of them are false. And we know the reports to be false only if we know already that miracles have never occurred. In fact, we are arguing in a circle’ (*Miracles*, p. 106. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1974).

32 Peter Forster (*Church Times* for 23 December 1994) points out that the key question for Virgin Birth sceptics is, ‘why should the early Christians have invented the idea?’ An explicit justification is that ‘the role of Christ requires that there should be both continuity and discontinuity between him and us; that he should be one of us (Hebrews 2:10–18) and yet also different from us. Jesus is the second Adam—one of the human race, yet inaugurating a new redeemed humanity. The virgin birth points to this combination of continuity and discontinuity’ (Andrew Lane in *New Dictionary of Theology*, p. 710. Ferguson, S. B., Wright, D. F. & Packer, J. I. (eds.). London: IVP, 1988). For this reason, the criticism of John Robinson and others that the virgin birth makes Jesus different from us and therefore not truly human is misplaced (Robinson, J. A. T. *Honest to God*, p. 65f. London: SCM, 1963).

33 I discuss this in ‘the theology of DNA’, *Anvil*, 4: 29–39, 1987; and in *God and Evolution*, p. 70f. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988.

has listed ten elements in an interlocking nexus tying the Virgin Birth into the mystery of Christ's person and redemptive work, indicating God at work, not merely a theory explaining how the Son of God became human.³⁴ He underlines the point that the real Christmas miracle is the Incarnation, not the Virgin Birth. God took human form that he might redeem us and make it possible to come to him. In their reflections on the *Nature of Christian Belief*, the Church of England bishops commented that 'faith begins from the Resurrection of the Crucified, and the significance for the individual and the community of that event and the life that led up to it. But there is no life without a birth, no birth without a womb. If the life as a whole was the work of a divine initiative for human salvation, then the point at which to look for the start of that initiative within history is the beginning of life in the womb; and the nature of the initiative is foreshown in the manner of that beginning as interpreted by divine revelation'.³⁵

The Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ was a secondary miracle. The most important fact of Christmas is God humbling himself to come among us, Emmanuel. If the creator of heaven and earth, the author of the Big Bang, the sovereign Lord of all, is on earth, a mere virgin birth becomes virtually inevitable—as do all sorts of other miracles.³⁶ It is right to examine faith and dogma with all our faculties; baseless credulity is a sin—a disservice to the God of truth. But in such examination, we have to take into account the possibility of a God who acts. Polkinghorne has pointed out: 'The test of credibility will lie in whether one can articulate a coherent understanding of the world in which such phenomena can find a fitting place.'³⁷

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34 Torrance, T. F. (1994). The doctrine of the virgin birth. *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, 12: 8–25.

35 See note 19, p. 30.

36 A full theological examination of the virgin birth was undertaken by Machen, J. G. (1930). *The Virgin Birth of Christ*. London.

37 Polkinghorne, J. C. (1983). *The Way the World Is*, p. 55. London: SPCK.