

THE VIRGIN BIRTH, "FOLKTALE" OR "FACT"?

Last Tuesday, somebody had to leave our Theology Reading Group early. As he reached for the door, I asked him "Do you believe in the virgin birth?" After a few seconds hesitation, he said thoughtfully "I can say it in the Creed." And he was gone....What made my question startling to the group was the fact that though we'd been dealing for an hour with the theology of the incarnation, including the birth-stories in Mt.1-2 & L.1-2 (as masterfully expounded in Paul Minear's THE BIBLE AND THE HISTORIAN [Abingdon/02], pp.86-119, where the words "virgin birth" nowhere occur), no member of the group previously in the session had used the words "virgin birth," an uncomfortable phrase for us "mainline" Protestants.

The session, & the incident, have given rise to this Thinksheet, one sheet on which I'm thinking about this problem-doctrine in the Creed.

STORY: In the home of the U. of C. Divinity School dean (1941), I heard Kirsopp Lake tell a virgin-birth story about his seminary roommate, whose candidacy for ordination was rejected because he could not honestly say that he believed in the virgin birth. How come, then, he was subsequently ordained (& Wm. Temple became one of the truly great among the Archbishops of Canterbury)? Kirsopp told him to ask for a re-examination, at which (at K.'s suggestion) he was to say "I can honestly sing 'born of the Virgin Mary'." When in worship we Christians sing together, we are the Body of Christ glorifying God & magnifying the whole faith of the whole Church: we are not into a critical intellectual activity.

Marcus Borg cannot say he believes either in Jesus' virgin birth or in his bodily resurrection, yet each Sunday in his Episcopal church he sings both.

Do I personally sing some things I can't say? No. Do I understand, & accept the reasoning of, those who sing some things they can't say? Yes.

1 During my brief fundamentalist period (1934-6), I used the V.B. as a shibboleth (Judg.12.5-6: 42,000 killed for a mispronunciation!). Me, I never doubted the V.B.: if my throat was big enough to swallow the idea that somebody who died didn't stay dead (& it was), it was big enough to swallow the idea that this peculiar fellow came into the world peculiarly (indeed, it would have been peculiarly inappropriate if he'd come into the world unpeccably). But as I emerged from my fundamentalist tunnel after doing business that could only be done underground, I became tolerant of those of my fellow-Christians who were unable to swallow the V.B., it being for them bigger (in the sense of harder to swallow) even than Jesus' bodily resurrection. Now? I've become more tolerant also of the fundamentalists, who have something in their insistence on the V.B. What that something is I'm attempting to sketch in this Thinksheet.

2 After the Gospel Corpus (the NT's 1st $\frac{1}{2}$), the NT literature's two big names are "Paul" (13 pieces, though not all directly by him) & "John" (5 pieces, though Rev. is by Jn. the Revelator rather than by Jn. the Apostle). Questioners of the V.B. often point to the facts that it's explicitly mentioned only in Mt. & L., not in M. or Jn. or "Paul" or "John". (Some scholars think it may have been originally in Mark.) I want to suggest that we may not be arguing entirely from silence if we see inklings of the possibility that both "Paul" & "Jn." assume their readers' familiarity with the birth stories, including the V.B.:

Paul: Ro.1.3-4. Jesus descended in two senses: "according to the flesh," from David; "according to the Spirit [NRSV margin]," from God. The HarperCollins Study Bible, here: "Paul...believed that God's Son became Jesus; see 2 Cor. 8.9; Phil. 2.6-11." The son/Son split here may reflect, certainly fits, the virgin/Spirit split of the Mt. & L. birth-stories. The only biblical parallel is Gn.6.4: "giants...descendants of human women and...supernatural beings [TEV]."

John: Jn.1.13. Christians are "born" (3.3-8; 1Jn.2.29;3.1;4.7;5.1) unnaturally ("not of blood, or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man"). Too big a stretch? Maybe. But also maybe in memory of Jesus' unnatural-birth stories.

3 Before arriving at p.2, I should explain this Thinksheet's title. For my answer to its question, change "or" to "and." Then note that both "folktale" & "fact" are in quotation marks, warning the reader not to assume the ontological street-meaning

of either term. In light of current science & philosophy, "fact" no longer has the lapidary, certain, undebatable status modernism's fact/value, fact/faith absolute splits gave it; & "folktale" (along with "myth") is treated with more respect, as conveyer of knowledge & wisdom, than it formerly had. Even the much touted left-brain "thinking" & right-brain "feeling" split has suffered from more recent brain research --indirectly confirming a bromide of Geo.Sell (at the time, conductor of the Cleveland Symphony): "Music thinks with the heart and feels with the brain." Nor has modernism's Jesus-of-history/Christ-of-faith split worn well. And the split between history-as-what-happened-by-cause/effect-in sequence (diachronically) & history-as-synchronic-(all-at-once)-memory has proven less productive than David F. Strauss (LIFE OF JESUS [1835]) & the current Jesus Seminar hoped it would. Because the Gospels are synchronic, with little regard for sequence of events, Minear (87) can rightly say that Jesus' table-talks "fuse together remembrance of the Passion and celebration of the Presence. Readers who separate them create confusion rather than understanding." In the birth-stories (93), "The hand of the Spirit wove all the separate incidents together on a single loom. All the happenings participated in the same miracle [viz., the birth of the divine-human Messiah]; all were transfigured by the light of a single mystery [viz., the incarnation]. Nothing appeared to have changed in the balance of human fortunes, but God's visit nevertheless produced a total change in the significance of all history. The story of the Son's descent to earth became for faith an epitome of how all history is permeated and directed by one invincible purpose, all incorporated into a single grand design." (My underlining.)

4 On pp.91-6, Minear deals with three birth-story questions: what was their life-setting, their faith-setting, & their worship-setting? (He wrote this section of his latest book in 1997, age 91, a venerable UCC scholar.) I suggest that the three compare roughly with what happened? what did it mean? what does it mean? Neither set of questions can be so separated into its parts that the parts can have separate meanings. The birth "narratives are the distillation of a community's experience, an articulation of the multiple memories and hopes of that community. The problem of identifying the authors is similar to that of tracing the origins of a Negro Spiritual or a Viking saga" (90). Then and now, "Having heard God speak through the tradition, through the total effect of the total story, the speaker in turn must tell the whole story so [i.e., in such a way] that others may hear the same voice [the Gospels' first hearers/readers heard], for the meanings of the story are inseparable from the story itself." (My underlining.)

5 In their THE MEANING OF JESUS: Two Visions (HarperSanFrancisco/99), Marcus J. Borg & N.T. Wright discuss (section VI) "The Birth of Jesus." Wright (chap.11, "Born of a Virgin?") rejects "miracle" as "not a biblical category. The God of the Bible is not a normally absent God who sometimes intervenes. This God is always present and active, sometimes surprisingly so....Because I am convinced that the creator God raised Jesus bodily from that dead, and because I am convinced that Jesus was and is the embodiment of this God, Israel's God, my worldview is forced to reactivate various things in the suspense account, the birth narratives included....The 'closed connection' of cause and effect is a modernist myth." God acts "sometimes shockingly" and "may well have been thus active on this occasion," the V.B. (171-3). His argumentation is, as always, tight & thorough....In chap.12 ("The Meaning of the Birth Stories"), Borg counters (179) that the birth-stories are not "historically factual" though "profoundly true": instead of being "historical reports," they are "literary creations....not history remembered but rather metaphorical narratives using ancient religious imagery to express central truths about Jesus' significance." As a modernist rejecting miracle, Borg ideologically rules out the incarnation, the virgin birth, & the bodily resurrection--cutting the legs off the Creed.

6 NOTE on modernism's rejection of miracle: (1) On a 1942 walk with me, great-Gospels-scholar E.C.Colwell wryly remarked that Mark, the earliest Gospel, has the most miracles--contrary to historicism's expectation. (2) Asked why he prays, since he rejects miracles & therefore expectation that God will "answer prayer," Pres. Pollack of Jewish Theological Seminary said recently in my sight/hearing (on the Net), "We are comforted to know someone is listening. I believe God listens to our prayers." Isaiah would/did reply (46.2): "The idols cannot save [even] themselves."