

THE HISTORICAL NATURE OF LUKE'S VIRGIN BIRTH ACCOUNT:  
AN APOLOGETIC

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of the nature of the Lukan account of the virgin birth of Jesus. The purpose of this work is not primarily to exegete the passages in Luke 1-2 which deal with the virgin birth, nor to construct a theology of the incarnation. The writer here seeks to determine whether or not the account of Christ's virgin birth in Luke's Gospel should be regarded as historical in nature. The position defended here is that the most probable reason for Luke's inclusion of the virgin birth of Jesus in his Gospel is that it was well attested as a historical fact.

In chapter one, the subject is introduced. In chapter two, evidence for the acceptance of the historical fact of the virgin birth in the second century is examined, and the need to go to the first century to discover the origin of the virgin birth tradition is concluded. In chapter three prima facie evidence for the historicity of the virgin birth is established by a defense of the Lukan authorship of the third Gospel. In chapter four, the historical nature of Luke's Gospel is discussed, and the integrity of Luke's virgin birth account is maintained in chapter five. The most probable source of the virgin birth story as found in Luke is discussed in chapter six, and in chapter seven the failure of alternative theories of the birth of Jesus is concluded. In chapter eight the overall argument of the thesis is summarized, and an appendix discussing the significance of the virgin birth concludes the thesis.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Chapter

I.	INTRODUCTION. . . . .	.1
II.	SECOND CENTURY TESTIMONY. . . . .	.4
III.	THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE THIRD GOSPEL. . . . .	.13
IV.	THE HISTORICAL NATURE OF THE THIRD GOSPEL . . . . .	.31
V.	THE INTEGRITY OF LUKE'S VIRGIN BIRTH ACCOUNT. . . . .	.58
VI.	THE SOURCE OF LUKE'S VIRGIN BIRTH ACCOUNT . . . . .	.70
VII.	THE FAILURE OF ALTERNATIVE THEORIES . . . . .	.75
VIII.	CONCLUSION. . . . .	.93
IX.	APPENDIX. . . . .	.94
	BIBLIOGRAPHY. . . . .	.98

## I. INTRODUCTION

For over nineteen hundred years a large part of the human race has believed that Jesus Christ was conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary, without a human father, by a miraculous act of God.<sup>1</sup> During the first part of the twentieth century, conservative Christians battled for the truth of the virgin birth of Jesus alongside several other major Christian doctrines. They fought the onslaught of theological liberalism. The fundamentalist movement was born, which has sought to preserve the basic Christian doctrines which have been accepted by orthodox Christianity since the days of the Apostles, based on a literal interpretation of the Bible.

Today, there is no unanimous voice on the subject of the virgin birth. Some rigorously defend its historicity, including all the details of Luke's narrative, while others deny it completely, and some are undecided.<sup>2</sup>

While the naturalist may reject the virgin birth of Jesus without examining the historical evidence<sup>3</sup>, some

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<sup>1</sup>J. Gresham Machen, The Virgin Birth of Christ (New York: Harper & Row, 1930; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), p. 269.

<sup>2</sup>Raymond E. Brown, "Gospel Infancy Narrative Research from 1976 to 1986: Part 2 (Luke)," The Catholic Biblical Quarterly 48, No. 4 (October 1986): 660-680.

<sup>3</sup>For a philosophical defense of the possibility of miracles against the a priori rejection of miracle-claims, see C. S. Lewis, Miracles (New York: MacMillan Publishing

conservative Evangelicals may question the validity of an investigation of the historical evidence for the virgin birth as well. The Christian presuppositionalist will argue that the inspiration of Scripture should prove the truth of the virgin birth, and not vice-versa.

But does belief in the inspiration of Scripture guarantee belief in the historic fact of Christ's virgin birth? Some would answer with an emphatic negative. Brown suggests, "The thesis of inspiration may not be invoked to guarantee historicity, for a divinely inspired story is not necessarily history."<sup>4</sup> He proposes several possibilities, namely, that both Gospel accounts of the virgin birth of Jesus (Matthean and Lucan) may be historical, that one may be historical while the other is mythological, or that both accounts may be non-historical dramatizations.<sup>5</sup> The theologian, then, must decide which of these possibilities is correct.

The purpose of this work shall not be to formulate a Biblical doctrine, but rather to present the historical evidence for the fact of the virgin birth of Jesus, from the third Gospel. Though various explanations have been offered

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Co., 1947; reprint ed., 1978).

<sup>4</sup>Raymond E. Brown, The Birth of the Messiah (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1977), p. 33-34.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, p. 34. The nature of Matthew's birth account will not be discussed in this thesis.

regarding the birth narratives in Luke, the most probable reason for Luke's inclusion of the virginal conception of Jesus in his Gospel is the historical fact of the event.

## II. SECOND CENTURY TESTIMONY

When a Church historian or theologian traces the development of a doctrine, he normally starts with the earliest references to it, and proceeds from there. But an apologetic for the virgin birth should start with a look into the second century to see whether or not the doctrine had gained widespread acceptance by that time or not. Some have said that the teaching of Christ's miraculous birth originated in the second century. If this is the case, then the historicity of Luke's Gospel account of the same is repudiated. So an examination of second century testimony is in order to see if we must look to the first century for the origin of the teaching of Christ's virgin birth.

Speaking of the Apostles and their successors, Tertullian (c. A.D. 200) states,

These all start with the same principles of the faith, so far as relates to the one only God the Creator and His Christ, how that He was born of the Virgin, and came to fulfill the law and the prophets.<sup>1</sup>

Elsewhere he asserts:

The rule of faith, indeed, is altogether

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<sup>1</sup>Tertullian, Against Marcion, IV. 2. All quotations from Church Fathers throughout this thesis are taken from A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Edinburgh: The Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885; reprint ed., New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905).

one, alone immoveable and irreformable;  
 the rule, to wit, of believing in one  
 only God omnipotent, the Creator of the  
 universe, and His Son Jesus Christ,  
 born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under  
 Pontius Pilate, raised again the third  
 day . . . .<sup>2</sup>

Clement of Alexandria (c. A.D. 195) also testifies to  
 the virgin birth.

The Son of God . . . assumed flesh, and  
 was conceived in the virgin's womb (as  
 His material body was produced), and  
 subsequently, as was the case, suffered  
 and rose again . . . .<sup>3</sup>

Origen (c. A.D. 210), another voice from Alexandria,  
 likewise testifies to the acceptance of the fact of the  
 virgin birth alongside other cardinal doctrines.

Jesus Christ . . . assumed a body like to  
 our own, differing in this respect only,  
 that it was born of a virgin and of the  
 Holy Spirit . . . (he) was truly born, and  
 did truly suffer . . . He did truly rise  
 from the dead . . . .<sup>4</sup>

Writing against Celsus he declares:

For who is ignorant of the statement that  
 Jesus was born of a virgin, and that he was  
 crucified, and that His resurrection<sup>5</sup> is an  
 article of faith among many . . . .

Irenaeus (c. A.D. 180), in proving the uniformity of  
 doctrine throughout the Church states:

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid, On the Veiling of Virgins, I.

<sup>3</sup>Clement, Stromata, VI. 15.

<sup>4</sup>Origen, De Principiis, pref. 4.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, Against Celsus, I. 7.



The Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world . . . has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: she believes in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth . . . and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God, and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and His future manifestation from heaven . . . As I have already observed, the Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it . . . For, although the languages of the world are dissimilar, yet the import of the tradition is one and the same.<sup>6</sup>

He then proceeds to name all the geographical regions where the churches accepted this tradition as fact, including Germany, Spain, Gaul, the East, Egypt, Libya, and the "central regions of the world" (probably either Rome or Palestine).<sup>7</sup> It is of prime importance to note the mention of the virgin birth among such vital doctrines.

Justin Martyr (c. A.D. 150), in declaring its purpose, defends the virgin birth of Jesus against Trypho, the Jew.

Moreover, the prophecy, 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son,' was uttered respecting Him. For if He to whom Isaiah referred was not

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<sup>6</sup>Irenaeus, Against Heresies, I. 10. 1-2.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

to be begotten of a virgin, of whom did the Holy Spirit declare, 'Behold, the Lord Himself shall give us a sign: behold, the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son?' For if He also were to be begotten of sexual intercourse, like all other first--born sons, why did God say that He would give a sign which is not common to all the first--born sons? But that which is truly a sign, and which is to be made trustworthy to mankind, ----namely, that the first--begotten of all creation should become incarnate by the Virgin's womb, and be a child,----this he anticipated by the Spirit of prophecy, and predicted it, as I have repeated to you, in various ways; in order that, when the event should take place, it might be known as the operation of the power and will of the Maker of all things; just as Eve was made from one of Adam's ribs, and as all living beings were created in the beginning by the word of God. But you in these matters venture to pervert the expositions which your elders that were with Ptolemy king of Egypt gave forth, since you assert that the Scripture is not so as they have expounded it, but says, 'Behold, the young woman shall conceive,' as if great events were to be inferred if a woman should beget from sexual intercourse: which indeed all young women, with the exception of the barren, do; but even these, God, if He wills, is able to cause [to bear]. For Samuel's mother, who was barren, brought forth by the will of God; and so also the wife of the holy patriarch Abraham; and Elisabeth, who bore John the Baptist, and other such. So that you must not suppose that it is impossible for God to do anything He wills. And especially when it was predicted that this would take place, do not venture to pervert or misinterpret the prophecies, since you will injure yourselves alone, and

will not harm God.<sup>8</sup>

Justin Martyr also states that demons are to be exorcised in the name of the Son of God, who is

the First--born of every creature, who became man by the Virgin, who suffered, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate . . . who died, who rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven . . . .<sup>9</sup>

Aristides (c. A.D. 140) wrote a Christian Apology which contained a creed which has been restored by piecing together its various fragments. In it we read of his acceptance of the virgin birth of Jesus.

We believe in one God, Almighty  
Maker of Heaven and Earth  
And in Jesus Christ His Son.  
Born of the Virgin Mary.  
He was pierced by the Jews.  
He died and was buried.  
The third day He rose again.  
He ascended into heaven.  
He is about to come to judge.<sup>10</sup>

The so-called "Apostles' Creed" also bears witness to the virgin birth. The form of the creed which we use today is based on an old Roman baptismal confession, and some have dated it from the middle of the second century.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho, LXXXIV.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid, LXXXV.

<sup>10</sup>J. Armitage Robinson, ed., Texts and Studies, Vol. 1: The Apology of Aristides (Cambridge University Press, 1893; reprint ed., Nendeln: Kraus Reprint Limited, 1967), p.25.

<sup>11</sup>J. Gresham Machen, The Virgin Birth of Christ (New York: Harper & Row, 1930; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker

At that time, the virgin birth was a part of the creed used by the Roman Church. Belief in it was confessed solemnly by every convert before he was baptized.<sup>12</sup>

Ignatius is a key and early witness to the acceptance of the fact of the virgin birth in the beginning of the second century. Writing around A.D. 110 to the Ephesians, he states,

For our God, Jesus the Christ, was conceived in the womb by Mary according to dispensation, of the seed of David but also of the Holy Ghost . . . . And hidden from the prince of this world were the virginity of Mary and her child--bearing and likewise also the death of the Lord--three mysteries to be cried aloud--the which were wrought in the silence of God.<sup>13</sup>

Here he not only affirms his belief in the virgin birth, but states that it is to be publicly declared.

To the Smyrnaeans he writes,

The Lord Jesus Christ . . . is truly of the race of David according to the flesh, but Son of God by the divine will and power, truly born of a virgin and baptized by John . . . truly nailed up in the flesh for our sakes under Pontius Pilate and Herod

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Book House, 1975), p. 3; see also H. B. Swete, The Apostles' Creed: Its Relation to Primitive Christianity (London: C.J. Clay and Sons, 1894), pp. 42 ff.

<sup>12</sup>Machen, p.3.

<sup>13</sup>J.B. Lightfoot and J.R. Harmer, eds., "The Epistles of S. Ignatius," in The Apostolic Fathers (London: MacMillan and Co., 1891; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), pp. 141-142.

the tetrarch . . . .<sup>14</sup>

Machen points out that in combatting docetism, Ignatius did not need to prove the virgin birth of Christ; only his real, physical birth. "Born of a woman" would have sufficed, but "born of a virgin" was a natural expression for him.<sup>15</sup> Ignatius was bishop of the church in Syrian Antioch, the "mother church of Gentile Christianity."<sup>16</sup> The city of Antioch was the missionary headquarters of men like Paul, Barnabas, and Silas. During the days of the Apostles, there was much communication between this city and Jerusalem, the apostolic center.

Cooke points out, therefore, that Ignatius must have known the doctrinal stance of the church from apostolic days not long before. He also notes that not only does the possibility exist that Ignatius, as a young man, heard the great leaders of the Antiochian Church, but surely he would have been branded as heretical and his doctrine as spurious had he originated the teaching of the miraculous birth of Jesus.<sup>17</sup> Machen asserts:

The memory of such a person would of course stretch back for many years; and when we find him attesting the virgin

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid, p. 156.

<sup>15</sup>Machen, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Richard J. Cooke, Did Paul Know of the Virgin Birth? (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1926), p. 96.

birth not as a novelty but altogether as a matter of course, as one of the accepted facts about Christ, it becomes evident that the belief in the virgin birth must have been prevalent .<sup>18</sup> before the close of the first century.

Raymond Brown considers these statements by Ignatius to be strong evidence of a widespread acceptance of the virgin birth in Asia Minor, Rome, and Antioch. He arrives at this conclusion for two reasons. First of all, Ignatius lists the virgin birth with other cardinal doctrines. Secondly, he only mentions it in two letters; therefore, Brown concludes that Ignatius knew the doctrine was already accepted, based on the importance Ignatius attached to it. In other words, Ignatius would have addressed the issue more if he had felt the need to do so.<sup>19</sup>

These testimonies represent the acceptance of the doctrine from widespread geographical locations. This consensus among all parts of the church would serve to show that the teaching of Christ's virgin birth was no new thing at the turn of the century.<sup>20</sup> Even Campenhausen, who clearly rejects the fact of the virgin birth, admits that

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<sup>18</sup>Machen, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup>Raymond Brown, The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus (New York: Paulist Press, 1973), p. 50.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, p. 3.

the origin of the tradition lies in the first century.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Hans von Campenhausen, The Virgin Birth in the Theology of the Ancient Church, trans. by Frank Clarke (Naperville: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1964), p. 15. Campenhausen's views will be discussed later.

### III. THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE THIRD GOSPEL

An examination of the evidence for the Lukan authorship of the third Gospel is important to the case for the historicity of the birth narratives contained therein. If Luke was indeed the author, then this fact quite possibly provides prima facie evidence for the historicity of the virginal conception, for it establishes the fact that the author was at least in a position to write accurate history regarding the life of Jesus.

#### External Evidence

A look at some examples of early attestation of Luke's authorship is appropriate before undertaking an analysis of the internal evidence for the same. While many examples of quotation from the third Gospel in the works of the Church Fathers could be given, the examples given here will be limited to those who specifically mention Luke as its author. Virtually all the external evidence supports Lukan authorship.

Around A.D. 320, Eusebius, the church historian, confidently asserted,

Luke, who was by race an Antiochian and a physician by profession, was long a companion of Paul, and had careful conversation with the other Apostles, and in two books left us examples of the medicine for souls which he had gained from them--the Gospel, which he testifies that he had planned according to the tradition received by him by



those who were from the beginning eyewitnesses and ministers of the word . . . and the Acts of the Apostles which he composed no longer on the evidence of hearing but of his own eyes.<sup>1</sup>

In writing against the Marcionite heresies, Tertullian (c. A.D. 200) specifically mentions Luke as the author of the third Gospel, and also defends its integrity.<sup>2</sup>

He says,

For if the Gospels of the apostles have come down to us in their integrity, while Luke's, which is received among us, so far accords with their rule as to be on a par with them in permanency of reception in the churches, it clearly follows that Luke's Gospel also has come down to us in like integrity until the sacrilegious treatment of Marcion.<sup>3</sup>

Writing around A.D. 195, Clement of Alexandria attributed this Gospel to Luke, while repeatedly quoting from it.<sup>4</sup> Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp, who had spoken with the eyewitnesses of Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Writing around

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<sup>1</sup>Eusebius, The Ecclesiastical History, III. 4. 6. Vol. 1, trans. Kirsopp Lake (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975). See also III. 24. 13.

<sup>2</sup>Tertullian, Against Marcion, IV. 5.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Clement, Stromata, I. 21.

<sup>5</sup>Kenneth S. Latourette, A History of Christianity, Vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1953; reprint ed., 1975), pp. 85, 131. See also W. H. C. Frend, the Rise of Christianity (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 244.

A.D. 185, he makes some very important statements regarding the third Gospel. He says, "Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him."<sup>6</sup> He goes on to defend the Lucan authorship and integrity of Luke-Acts by an examination of its internal evidence.<sup>7</sup>

Apparently, the first document to clearly ascribe the third Gospel to Luke is the Muratorian Fragment (c. A.D. 180).<sup>8</sup> Kümmel translates the appropriate passage as follows:

The third gospel according to Luke. After the ascension of Christ, Luke, whom Paul had taken with him as an expert in the way, wrote under his own name and according to his own understanding. He had not, of course, seen the Lord in the flesh, and therefore he begins to tell the story from the birth of John on, insofar as it was accessible to him.<sup>9</sup>

It is not perfectly clear whether or not the early external evidence for Luke is based on solid history apart from the internal evidence of the text. But this is a possibility. Many, like Guthrie, have pointed out the "remarkably consistent and widespread" acceptance of Luke, the companion

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<sup>6</sup>Irenaeus, Against Heresies, III. 1. 1.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, III. 14. 1-2.

<sup>8</sup>Henry C. Thiessen, Introduction to the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1943, reprint ed., 1985), p. 151.

<sup>9</sup>Werner G. Kümmel, Introduction to the New Testament, trans. H. C. Kee (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), p. 147.

of Paul, as the author of the Gospel.<sup>10</sup> Guthrie also points out that this widespread acceptance probably would not have so quickly developed if other options had been put forth.<sup>11</sup> A mere inference from the text alone would probably not have gained "undisputed sway" among the Church Fathers.<sup>12</sup> Other facts concerning the Gospel were disputed early, but not its authorship.<sup>13</sup>

### Internal Evidence

In what follows, the case for Lucan authorship of the third Gospel will be put forth based on evidence from the text, as well as the criticisms it has received. We shall first summarize the case and then investigate its strength. The internal evidence can be organized into six logical steps.<sup>14</sup> (1) A comparison of Luke 1:1-4 with Acts 1:1-2 shows that the author of Acts also wrote Luke. Therefore, the author of Acts needs to be identified. (2) The "we"

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<sup>10</sup>Donald Guthrie, New Testament Introduction (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), p. 104.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid, p. 100.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Henry J. Cadbury, The Making of Luke-Acts (London: S.P.C.K., 1968), pp. 355-356.

<sup>14</sup>Taken from William Hendriksen, New Testament Commentary-Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), pp. 3-7; and Thiessen, pp. 152-154.

sections in Acts (16:10-17; 20:5-21:18; 27:1-28:16) indicate that the author joined the Apostle Paul and accompanied him on his missionary journeys. Timothy, Sopater, Aristarchus, Secundus, Gaius, Tychicus, and Trophimus are disqualified based on Acts 20:4-5. And according to Colossians 4:14, Philemon 24, and 2 Timothy 4:11, Luke was with Paul during both of his imprisonments (presumably in Rome). Silas is excluded as a possibility because of his many appearances before the "we" sections, and although Titus is not mentioned in Acts and was a companion of Paul, there is no evidence in the New Testament or in the Church Fathers that he was the author. (3) The entire book of Acts was written by the author of the "we" passages. The linguistic style of the "we" sections is the same as that of the rest of the book, as shown by many scholars.<sup>15</sup> (4) The same characteristics of vocabulary, style, purpose, etc., are seen in both Luke and Acts. This is admitted by virtually everyone, even those who reject Lucan authorship. Kümmel admits that "they undoubtedly belong together in language, style, and theological position."<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the author of the "we" sections is not only the author of all of Acts,

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<sup>15</sup>See, for example, Adolph Harnack, The Date of the Acts and of the Synoptic Gospels, trans. J. R. Wilkinson (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1911), pp. 1-4; Cadbury, p. 358; Guthrie, pp. 106-107.

<sup>16</sup>Kümmel, p. 147.

but is the author of the third Gospel as well. (5) Luke, who accompanied Paul, was a medical doctor (Col. 4:14). There is evidence from the vocabulary in Luke-Acts that the author had a keen interest in health and medicine.<sup>17</sup> (6) The third Gospel possesses more Pauline characteristics than the other synoptics. This might be expected from a companion of Paul.

The preceding case for Lucan authorship of the third Gospel does not stand without criticism. As has already been stated, very few scholars have disagreed concerning points (1), (3), and (4). Most agree that an educated Greek wrote both the third Gospel and the Acts, whether or not they hold to Lucan authorship. Most of the arguments against Luke are related to the "we" sections in Acts, the medical language of Luke-Acts, and the supposed similarity with Paul.

The strength of the case for Lucan authorship is dependent upon the value of the "we" sections. For if it can be established that the author of Luke-Acts was indeed a first-century companion of Paul, then much can be said regarding the accuracy of the data recorded. In that case, what the author did not personally witness, he was able to ascertain from those who had. He would have had access to

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<sup>17</sup>See, for example, W.K. Hobart, The Medical Language of St. Luke (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1882).

the apostles who had walked with Jesus, and in regard to the virgin birth accounts, he could have gained information from the family of Jesus; his brothers and even possibly his mother. It is important to note that if the author was indeed a companion of Paul, and able to accomplish the above through contact with eyewitnesses, then whether it was Luke or some other companion of Paul is really irrelevant. Any argument from the medical language in Luke-Acts would simply strengthen the case for Lucan authorship, and would help to establish the key point (i.e. companionship with Paul during the middle of the first century). But if the medical argument should be found lacking, the strength of the argument from the "we" passages in Acts would still remain, if those passages establish the fact that the author was present in the narratives he relates.

#### Pauline Companionship

It has been argued that Luke-Acts could not have been written by a companion of Paul because it was written much later than Paul (i.e. second century). Loisy, for example, argues that the prologue to the Gospel presents a great time span separating the "original author" of the letters to Theophilus from the apostles. A later redactor supposedly changed the text and interpolated many passages (e.g. birth

stories in the Gospel, "we" sections in Acts).<sup>18</sup> This argument is based on two observations from the prologue. First of all, it is said that since "many" had already composed accounts of the events in Christ's life, much time would have been needed for this to have occurred. Secondly, it is said that the "facts" (πραγμάτων) had become "established" (πεπληροφορημένων) and had become the content of the Church's teaching (τοῦ λόγου), therefore, much time would have been needed for this to have happened.<sup>19</sup> But is this objection substantial? The author of the prologue does not say that those who had already composed narratives had covered the entire life of Christ. It is possible that each had recorded segments of the life and ministry of Jesus. But even if the narratives referred to were indeed as lengthy and all-encompassing as his, it certainly seems that by A.D. 50 or 60 enough time would have elapsed for this to have been done. And as far as "facts" having become established Church teaching, it must be said that no great time span is needed for this. That the various "facts" were seen early as having spiritual significance is shown by the preaching of the apostles in the early church. The life, death, and resurrection of

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<sup>18</sup>Alfred Loisy, The Origins of the New Testament, trans. L. P. Jacks (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1950), pp. 142-143.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

Christ were seen as central ingredients in God's plan of salvation for mankind.<sup>20</sup> The pre-New Testament creeds found in I Corinthians 11:23-25 ("This is my body which is broken for you," emphasis mine) and 15:3-5 ("Christ died for our sins," emphasis mine) give early evidence not only of concise reports of the facts of Christ's death and resurrection, but also of the theological significance attached to those facts by the earliest followers of Jesus.<sup>21</sup> But it should also be noted that *πεπληροφωργημένων* can simply be translated "accomplished," and that Luke may have been simply referring to the basic events of Christ's life.<sup>22</sup>

So it seems that the prologue does not demand a second century author for the Gospel. The "witnesses" walked with Jesus for several years (around A.D. 30), and then became "ministers" shortly after the resurrection of Christ (from about A.D. 30 to 50 or 60). The author could then have recorded these events sometime during the 50's or 60's, having accompanied Paul and ascertained the facts from many

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<sup>20</sup>I. Howard Marshall, The Acts of the Apostles (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), p. 57.

<sup>21</sup>While a full discussion of the creeds is clearly beyond the scope of this thesis, the interested reader may want to pursue such an investigation. See Joachim Jeremias, The Eucharistic Words of Jesus (London: SCM Press LTD, 1966; fourth impression, 1976), pp. 101-105.

<sup>22</sup>Arndt and Gingrich, p. 670.



eyewitnesses (using both oral and written sources).

It is also claimed that the theology of the author of Luke-Acts is different from that of Paul. A contradiction is said to exist between the Paul of Acts and the Paul of the epistles regarding Jewish Christianity.<sup>23</sup> Some think Paul could never have caused Timothy to be circumcised, nor could he have taken the vow at Jerusalem, based on his teaching concerning legalism (i.e. Romans, Galatians, Colossians). Harnack's solution was to minimize Paul's condemnation of the Judaizers.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, he believed Paul was inconsistent on this point, and that he did in fact, yield to the pressures of Judaism as recorded in Acts, " . . . not from cowardice or insincerity, but because the Jew in himself was still too strong."<sup>25</sup> According to this view, Paul condemned the teaching of salvation through the law but allowed Jewish Christians to observe the Mosaic law as obedient Jews.<sup>26</sup> If this is the case, no problem (based on theology) is encountered in the Acts passages regarding Paul and the law, and no case against Lucan authorship is built.

It must be kept in mind that while Paul indeed condemned

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<sup>23</sup>Harnack, p. 30.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, pp. 38-39, 60-61.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, pp. 60-61.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, p. 62.

Jewish practices as a means to salvation (i.e. legalism), he never condemns a Jew for practicing such things because he is a Jew. Paul would not condemn the practice of circumcision, for example, only the assertion that it was necessary for salvation. But are there any positive evidences of similarity in the theologies of the author of Luke-Acts and that of Paul? Pauline theology is seen throughout Luke-Acts in regards to such subjects as the universality of the offer of salvation, the necessity of prayer and faith, the Lordship of Jesus, the work of the Holy Spirit in men, the importance of joy in the life of the believer, and the institution of the Lord's supper.<sup>27</sup> "Among the three Synoptics it is especially the third that breathes the spirit of Paul."<sup>28</sup>

#### "We" Sections in Acts

Virtually all scholars admit that Luke-Acts was written by an educated Gentile. Kümmel, for example, who rejects Lucan authorship, maintains that "the only thing that can be said with certainty about the author, on the basis of Luke, is that he was a Gentile Christian."<sup>29</sup> But do the "we" passages in Acts prove something more about the author?

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<sup>27</sup>See Hendriksen, pp. 5-6.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup>Kümmel, p. 149.

Several theories have arisen in an attempt to show that the author did not necessarily become a companion of Paul in these sections. Some have advocated a diary theory. According to this view, Luke used a written source that included the use of "we"; a source recorded by an eyewitness of those particular events. A modified form of this theory states that a later author used Luke's source for these sections.<sup>30</sup> But the first view cannot explain why the first person plural was not changed to third person. "It is difficult to know why the author in using a source would retain the 'we' and yet otherwise assimilate its style to his own."<sup>31</sup> And in response to the charge that another author used a Lucan source, it must be said that the author of the "we" sections is clearly the author of the entire book, for scholars do not dispute the unity of the book of Acts. One must also wonder why the author would not have used Luke's name to add weight to his work.<sup>32</sup>

Another theory is that the first person plural was intentionally introduced into the text to make the readers believe the author was an eyewitness. But it seems highly unlikely that the author would have limited the use of this device to a few concluding incidents in the book, if they

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<sup>30</sup>See Guthrie, pp. 105-107.

<sup>31</sup>Cadbury, p. 358.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid, p. 106.

were indeed without historical basis.<sup>33</sup>

Most recently, a theory based on extra-biblical sea voyage accounts has emerged. This theory points out that in ancient Greek and Roman literature, sea voyage stories had become a distinct literary genre.<sup>34</sup> V.K. Robbins has done much research into these accounts and has concluded that one particular feature of the sea voyage genre was the usage of the first person plural narration.<sup>35</sup> He says,

Undoubtedly the impetus for this is sociological: on a sea voyage a person has accepted a setting with other people, and cooperation among all the members is essential for a successful voyage. Therefore, at the point where the voyage begins, the narration moves to first person plural.<sup>36</sup>

He goes on to conclude that

By the first century A.D., sea voyages, interrupted by storms, were an established part of Mediterranean literature outside of epic. And first person narration of voyages appears to be not only fashionable but preferred.<sup>37</sup>

Robbins' conclusion is that Luke did not participate in the

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid, p. 368.

<sup>34</sup>Vernon K. Robbins, "By Land and By Sea: The We-Passages and Ancient Sea Voyages," in Perspectives on Luke-Acts, ed. C.H. Talbert (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark Ltd., 1978), p. 216.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid, p. 221.

events described in the "we" sections, but that he utilized an accepted and desirable literary device.<sup>38</sup>

But in analyzing this conclusion, a problem is seen to exist. While it seems true that the first person plural may have been a common literary device in ancient sea voyage literature, it is not so obvious that an author who did not actually participate in the event itself could employ the device. In spite of the many examples given by Robbins, only one of those examples is an account of a voyage written in the first person plural by one not participating in the event. And it is unique in that it is a summary written by a copyist of the account, and not an actual part of the account.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, there does not seem to be any basis for concluding that Luke did not indeed travel with Paul based on this reasoning. The conclusion of James Smith, navigator and historian of the nineteenth century, is, in fact, quite the opposite. He concludes, from observing Luke's narrative, that the author must have been an eyewitness to the sea voyage and shipwreck.<sup>40</sup>

As a voyage-writer St. Luke is possessed  
of another most essential qualification,  
--he is thoroughly versed in nautical

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid, p. 241.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid, pp. 241-242.

<sup>40</sup>James Smith, The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul, 4th ed., Edited by Walter E. Smith (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1880; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), p. 20.

matters, and describes them in the appropriate language of seamanship. No man could by any possibility attain so complete a command of nautical language who has not spent a considerable portion of his life at sea--not, however, as a seaman, for his language,<sup>41</sup> although accurate, is not professional.

It must also be noted that while the "we" sections do include accounts of sea voyages, the first person plural is also used in other circumstances (see Acts 16:10; 21:17-18). In addition to this, the author records one sea voyage using the third person plural (Acts 13:4, 13), implying that he was absent.

While certain of the "we" passages exclude Paul (see 20:3-5, 21:18, 28:16), there are passages where Paul is obviously either a part of the group which included the author (such as 16:10) or nearby (see 16:17).

It seems that Guthrie is correct when he concludes that "the most obvious reason for the first person is that the author wishes to indicate that . . . he was himself present among the travelling companions of Paul."<sup>42</sup> The "we" passages in Acts remain a strong evidence to the Lucan authorship of the third Gospel.

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid, pp. 20-21.

<sup>42</sup>Guthrie, p. 367.

### The Medical Interest of the Author

W.K. Hobart wrote an entire volume on the medical language of Luke. He commented on many passages in the Gospel and Acts. Henry J. Cadbury is known as the one who overturned this particular argument for Lucan authorship. He maintains that the words that the author of Luke-Acts shares with the medical writers are found too widely in other kinds of Greek literature to be considered strictly medical.<sup>43</sup> His observations have caused conservatives to approach Hobart's findings with much greater care. Yet there does seem to be some truth to the claim that the interest in medicine of the author of Luke-Acts was greater than that of the other Gospel writers. Not only does the author uniquely apply some words medicinally, but he also describes certain medical situations in greater detail. Thiessen has compiled a list by contrasting certain medical passages from Luke with the corresponding accounts in Mark.<sup>44</sup> For example, Mark tells us that Peter's mother-in-law had a fever (1:30), while Luke describes it as a great fever (4:38). Mark speaks of the man who came to Jesus as a leper (1:40), but Luke says he was full of leprosy (5:12). In Mark 3:1, the man had a paralyzed hand;

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<sup>43</sup>Cadbury, p. 358.

<sup>44</sup>Thiessen, pp. 152-153.

Luke tells us that it was his right hand (6:6). Mark tells us that the girl whom Jesus healed arose and walked (5:42). But Luke tells us that Jesus commanded them to give her food (8:55).

So while Cadbury has shown that the argument from word usage is less than completely convincing, there still remains an element of descriptive interest in Luke that may point in the direction of a physician. But even if the conclusion shared by men like Cadbury and Kümmel (that the vocabulary of Luke-Acts only shows that the author was an educated Gentile) is all that is granted in relation to this part of the argument, it is still Luke who, among Paul's companions, best fits the description. For a physician would obviously be an educated man. And not only was he a physician (known by the statements of Paul and the Church Fathers), but he was also probably a Gentile (a conclusion based on an inference from Col.4:11-14).

Of the companions of S. Paul whose names are known to us no one is so probable as S. Luke; and the voice of the first eight centuries pronounces strongly for him and for no one else as the author of these two writings.<sup>45</sup>

Such a conclusion is to be found today in a variety of

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<sup>45</sup>A. Plummer, S. R. Driver, C. A. Briggs, eds., The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1896; reprint ed., 1975), Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke, by Alfred Plummer, p. 13.



circles. In 1984, the Expository Times printed an article by W. D. Thomas in which the author accepts Lukan authorship of the third Gospel and Acts.<sup>46</sup> Of this "Luke" Thomas says, "Luke was also a doctor . . . We obviously have a great deal to learn from Luke the beloved physician."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>W.D. Thomas, "Luke the Beloved Physician," The Expository Times 95, No. 9 (June 1984): 279-281.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid, p. 280, 281.

## IV. THE HISTORICAL NATURE OF THE THIRD GOSPEL

At this point it is necessary to determine whether or not Luke intended to write history, and if so, whether or not he accomplished his goal. A. N. Sherwin-White objects to the charge that the aim of the Gospel writers forbid them to record accurate history. He says,

That the degree of confirmation in Graeco-Roman terms is less for the Gospels than for Acts is due . . . to the differences in their regional setting. As soon as Christ enters the Roman orbit at Jerusalem, the confirmation begins. For Acts the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming. Yet Acts is, in simple terms and judged externally, no less of a propaganda narrative than the Gospels, liable to similar distortions. But any attempt to reject its basic historicity even in matters of detail must now appear absurd. Roman historians have long taken it for granted.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, for Sherwin-White, the Book of Acts is a clear example of Church dogma set forth in the context of accurate history. And in Luke's case, Acts is simply a continuation of the third Gospel. Sherwin-White identifies the basic problem of extreme form-criticism as being "the presumed tempo of the development of the didactic

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<sup>1</sup>A. N. Sherwin-White, Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House; 1978), pp. 188-189.

myths" which is unfairly applied to the Gospels.<sup>2</sup> The Gospel narrative sources were written down too quickly to pervert their historical content. There are parallels in other ancient writings. Sherwin-White points out that even in the writings of Herodotus (who was naturally predisposed to mythology) falsification of history did not absolutely prevail.<sup>3</sup>

The notions of form-criticism have not been applied systematically to Herodotus. His stories are obviously open to treatment of this kind. The investigation would cast much light on his literary method but would not affect seriously the basic historicity of his material, which is sufficiently established.<sup>4</sup>

Commenting on the work of Thucydides, he says,

The Thucydidean version is a salutary warning that even a century (emphasis mine) after a major event it is possible in a relatively small or closed community for a determined inquirer to establish a remarkably detailed account of a major event, by inquiry within the inner circle of the descendants of those concerned with the event itself.<sup>5</sup>

He concludes strongly that the disciples (and their successors) would have had no problem uncovering the details of Christ's words and deeds. "For this purpose it matters

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 189.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 191.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, p. 192.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

little whether you accept the attribution of the Gospels to eyewitnesses or not."<sup>6</sup>

In analyzing the historical reliability of Luke, Ramsay makes it clear that though a historian may err in minor details, he must be factual concerning the major incidents which he reports. <sup>7</sup> Luke's intention to write accurate history is seen in his prefatory paragraph.

Luke claims to have had access to authorities of the first rank, persons who had seen and heard and acted in the events which he records. He makes no distinction as to parts of his narrative. He claims the very highest authority for it as a whole.<sup>8</sup>

Luke's claim to accuracy is seen in verse three of his prologue as he states, "παρηκολούθηκότι ἄνωθεν πᾶσιν ἀκριβῶς." The participle "παρηκολούθηκότι" ("having followed") is in the perfect tense, indicating that all of his research had been completed for the writing of the Gospel. Ramsay believes the research had been done before Luke even intended to write; thus Luke's use of the perfect tense rather than the aorist.

We may safely assume that he had both the intelligent curiosity of an educated

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Sir William Ramsay, Was Christ Born at Bethlehem? (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1898; reprint ed., Minneapolis: James Family Publishing Co., 1987), p. 6.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, p. 11.

Greek, and the eager desire for knowledge about the facts of the Savior's life, natural in a believer who rested his faith and his hopes on the life and death of Christ.<sup>9</sup>

The word "ἀκριβῶς" ("diligently") indicates that accuracy and exactness characterized Luke's research. "Πάντων" covers each detail, and "ἀνωθεν" includes each time period in Christ's life. Also, Luke states that he is writing to provide Theophilus with "certainty or "truth" (τὴν ἀσφαλείαν) concerning the things in which he had been instructed.<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note that the birth stories are the first of "all things" recorded by Luke, which he had carefully researched.

Grant acknowledges, based on Luke's preface (1:1-4), that the author intended to write history. He also points out that Luke would have been unaware of the modern distinction between "faith" and "history." "In his view faith and history worked together, and one way of propagating the faith was to state what the history had been."<sup>11</sup> According to Grant, Luke was concerned with the historical setting of the ministries of John the Baptist and

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup>See William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957; reprint ed., 1979), pp. 33, 77, 118, 631.

<sup>11</sup>Robert M. Grant, A Historical Introduction to the New Testament (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 133-134.

Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

But Grant does not believe that Luke accomplished his goal. To support this claim, he lists certain errors which Luke supposedly made.<sup>13</sup> In what follows, an examination will be made of Grant's objections.

According to Grant, Peter could not have addressed three thousand hearers without a microphone. But this is such a weak argument that it really does not deserve much in the way of rebuttal. Many have addressed such crowds without the help of electronics. For example, in 1739 George Whitefield began preaching to thousands (possibly as many as 23,000 at one meeting) repeatedly under such conditions.<sup>14</sup>

Another objection to Luke's credibility is numerical. It is said that Christians could not have numbered five thousand (Acts 4:4) in Jerusalem where the population was only 25--30,000. But why is this so hard to believe? Could there not have been such a large number there? One must also realize that some (if not many) of those present may not have been from Jerusalem (see Acts 2:5, 9-11).

In Acts 5:36-37, we have a record of Gamaliel's speech to the Jewish Council. Grant accuses Luke of recording

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid, p. 137.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid, pp. 145-146.

<sup>14</sup>James H. Nichols, History of Christianity: 1650-1950 (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1956), p. 89.

Gamaliel's reference to Theudas and Judas in the wrong order. He also claims that Theudas actually rebelled about a decade after Gamaliel spoke.<sup>15</sup> This argument is based on the assumption that Luke misread Josephus, who tells of a magician named Theudas who gained a following from A.D. 44-46.<sup>16</sup> If this is the Theudas mentioned by Luke, then Grant is correct, for Judas of Galilee led his revolt in A.D. 6.<sup>17</sup> But should we associate the Theudas of Luke with the Theudas of Josephus? There seem to be no good reasons to do so. Grant's decision to do it is based on a biased assumption for he gives no reasons for doing so. Luke must be given the benefit of the doubt for Theudas was a common name, and many insurgent leaders arose in Palestine after the death of Herod in 4 B.C.<sup>18</sup> Neither has it been established that Luke had ever read Josephus. He most likely had not, for Josephus' Antiquities was not published until about A.D. 94.<sup>19</sup> Also, is it not possible that Luke

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<sup>15</sup>See also Johannes Munck, The Anchor Bible--The Acts of the Apostles (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967), p. 48.

<sup>16</sup>F. F. Bruce, Commentary on the Book of the Acts (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), p. 125.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>J. W. Packer, Acts of the Apostles (London: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 13; see also Bruce, Ibid, p. 125.

was correct and Josephus was wrong, if in fact the "Theudas" is one and the same?<sup>20</sup> And it must also be kept in mind that Luke simply recorded the statements of Gamaliel. He made no claim to their truthfulness. So, because of all these possibilities, this issue should not be used against the historical reliability of Luke.

Grant voices an objection, also held by others, that Luke read his own idea of church government into the Pauline narratives in Acts. It is said that Paul would not have appointed "elders" (Acts 14:23) or "bishops" (Acts 20:28) in the churches for the term is from a later period. Grant's argument is based largely upon the fact that the word "presbyter" never occurs in the "major Pauline epistles."<sup>21</sup> (Grant rejects the Pauline authorship of the Pastoral epistles because of differences between them and Paul's other epistles). Also, "bishops" are not mentioned by Paul outside the Pastorals except in Philippians 1:1.<sup>22</sup> But is this a formidable argument? Grant himself provides a clue to at least one problem with this argument. He holds to the Pauline authorship of Philippians, wherein

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<sup>20</sup>Donald Guthrie, The Apostles (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975; reprint ed., 1978), p. 53.

<sup>21</sup>Grant, *Ibid*, p. 213.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid*.



is contained the "exception."<sup>23</sup> He says on the one hand that Paul could not have used the term but then unconsciously admits that he does! Also, it seems that this view reads too much into the definitions of "elder" and "bishop." While the terms most likely did evolve in meaning, there is no reason to believe that Paul could not have used them in their basic meanings. Peter even applies the term "bishop" to Jesus (I Peter 2:25). The word simply denotes the task of overseeing others and was so used even in pre-Christian literature.<sup>24</sup> Grant continues to criticize Luke by charging that Cornelius could not have been a "centurion of the Italian cohort" because during the reign of Herod Agrippa, no Roman troops were stationed in his territory. But the story of Cornelius probably took place before Agrippa came into power, while the Roman procurators were still governing Judea.<sup>25</sup>

Grant further objects to Luke's historical credibility by charging that Paul did not study with Gamaliel (as stated in Acts 22:3) because he was not in Jerusalem during his youth. He bases this objection on a statement in Galatians

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<sup>23</sup>Grant holds to a strong view of Pauline authorship of Philipians, even denying charges of interpolation in 3:2-4:1. He regards the book as a unity (see pp. 193-194).

<sup>24</sup>See Arndt and Gingrich, p. 299.

<sup>25</sup>I. Howard Marshall, The Acts of the Apostles (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), p. 183.

1:22 in which Paul declares that he was "unknown by face" to the churches in Judea. But is this not an absurd conclusion to draw from this statement? Does the fact that the Christians in Judea had never seen Paul face to face prove that he had not spent time in Jerusalem when he was younger? Certainly we would not expect the majority of people in the city itself to recognize Paul's face, much less those in the surrounding communities. There is, therefore, no necessary contradiction between Luke's statement and the statement of Paul himself.

Grant also thinks it is a blunder when Luke records Paul's trials before Felix and Festus as he does. It is said that one of these would have given judgment and that Paul would have waited for it without appealing to Caesar.

First of all, Luke records two reasons why Felix postponed judgment. He waited, hoping that Paul would offer payment for his freedom. He also desired to do the Jews a favor by leaving him bound. Secondly, Paul's appeal to Caesar before Festus is understandable when one realizes that Festus wanted Paul to stand trial in Jerusalem. Paul's reaction to this could have been caused by a number of things. He probably knew that he stood a greater chance of conviction in Jerusalem; he may have even feared for his life there. But there could have been an even greater reason for appealing to Caesar. Paul knew that God wanted him to preach the Gospel in Rome (Acts 23:11). Possibly he

saw this as an opportunity to do so.

Conzelmann maintains that Luke made geographical mistakes. He accuses Luke of assuming that Judea and Galilee were immediately adjacent, and that Samaria lay alongside them. He likens this to the geographical misconceptions of other ancient historians.<sup>26</sup> But Marshall has shown that from A.D. 44 onward Galilee and Judea were both under the Roman prefect whose seat of government was in Caesarea (Samaria). The same situation had existed under Herod the Great. It was only during the time after Herod's death (4 B.C.-A.D. 44) that Galilee had a certain amount of political freedom.<sup>27</sup> This would explain Luke's descriptions of Palestine.

Judea was a term used for the area which included Galilee, and this "wide" use is quite firmly attested . . . Conzelmann's picture of Jesus moving to and fro across an imaginary Judean-Galilean frontier proves to be an illusion.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Hans Conzelmann, The Theology of St. Luke, trans. Geoffrey Buswell (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 69. Conzelmann offers theology, namely Luke's eschatological conceptions, as the reason for Luke's historical inaccuracy. While a discussion of this issue is clearly beyond the scope of this thesis, the interested reader may want to pursue a study of Conzelmann's theological interpretation of Luke. See also, I. Howard Marshall, "Recent Study of the Gospel According to St. Luke," The Expository Times 80, No. 1 (October 1968): 5-7.

<sup>27</sup>I. Howard Marshall, Luke: Historian and Theologian (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), pp. 70-71.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid, p. 71.

Bruce points out that among all the New Testament writers, only Luke mentions a Roman emperor by name.<sup>29</sup> He specifically names Augustus, Tiberius, and Claudius. The beginning of John the Baptist's ministry is carefully dated by a series of synchronisms (in the Greek historical manner) much in the same way that Thucydides dates the beginning of the Peloponnesian War in his "History."<sup>30</sup> Luke (in 3:1-2) says that John's call came in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, that Pontius Pilate was the governor of Judaea, that Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, that Herod's brother Philip was tetrarch of Ituraea and Trachonitis, that Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, and that Annas and Caiaphas (who succeeded him) were the high priests. The mention here of Lysanias was previously used as a mark against Luke's historical accuracy. It was thought that Luke was referring to the Lysanias mentioned by Josephus, who was king of Abila until 36 B.C. But an inscription has been found on the site of the city of Abilene which includes the words "Lysanias the

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<sup>29</sup>F.F. Bruce, The New Testament Documents, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), p. 81.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*

tetrarch" and it belongs to the time to which Luke refers.<sup>31</sup> The historical setting for the ministry of John the Baptist (as well as its theological purpose) is, therefore, obviously important to Luke.

Other important names in history are also included in Luke's narrative. In addition to the emperors, Luke mentions the Roman governors Quirinius, Pilate, Sergius Paullus, Gallio, Felix, and Festus.<sup>32</sup> Herod the Great, Herod Antipas, Herod Agrippa, Bernice, Drusilla, and members of the Jewish priestly sect such as Annas, Caiaphas, and Ananias are also included in the narrative.<sup>33</sup> The Pharisaic leader and teacher Gamaliel is mentioned as Paul's instructor.

A writer who thus relates his story to the wider context of world history is courting trouble if he is not careful; he affords his critical readers so many opportunities for testing his accuracy. Luke takes this risk, and stands the test admirably.<sup>34</sup>

Luke's job was not an easy one in regard to such official titles and names. Bruce points out that these titles

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<sup>31</sup>A. T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, Vol. II: The Gospel According to Luke (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930), p. 37. See also Bruce, The New Testament Documents, pp. 87-88.

<sup>32</sup>Bruce, *Ibid*, p. 81.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid*, p. 82.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid*.

sometimes did not remain the same for an extended period of time. Provinces at times changed from senatorial government to administration by a direct appointee of the emperor. In a case like this, the province would be governed by an imperial legate rather than a proconsul.<sup>35</sup> Luke shows a remarkable historical accuracy in light of these circumstances. For example, Luke normally calls countries by their popular names rather than by their Roman designations. In Acts 20:2 he calls Achaia "Greece." Yet when referring to the governor's title, he calls Gallio the "proconsul of Achaia," not the "proconsul of Greece" (which would not have been the official title).<sup>36</sup>

It has been argued that Luke made a mistake in recording the town-clerk of Ephesus as having said "there are proconsuls" (plural), for normally only one proconsul ruled at a time.<sup>37</sup> But is this really a strange thing for the town-clerk to say? Could this not simply be a statement acknowledging the existence and purpose of the authorities? There is also evidence of temporary dual leadership in Ephesus during this time. For Tacitus tells us about the murder of the proconsul of Asia, Junius Silanus, who was killed a few months before the riot in Ephesus (Acts 19) by

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid, p. 83.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid, p. 83.

Celer and Helius.<sup>38</sup> First of all this would account for the generality in speech of the town-clerk. But the reference to "proconsuls" (plural) may very well be a reference to Celer and Helius who were in charge of Asia before a successor to Silanus was named.<sup>39</sup>

The description given to the city of Ephesus in Acts 19:35 is interesting. It is called the "Temple-Warden of the great Artemis" (*νεωκόρον οὐσαν τῆς μεγάλης Ἀρτέμιδος*). The word "*νεωκόρον*" (lit. "temple-sweeper") had become a title of honor for individuals and even cities.<sup>40</sup> Luke's ascription of the title to the city of Ephesus is corroborated by a Greek inscription which also calls this city the "Temple-Warden of Artemis."<sup>41</sup>

The theatre of Ephesus (Acts 19:29) has been excavated. So has an inscription found there which verifies the part played by the silversmith trade in the worship of Artemis.<sup>42</sup> Other titles given by Luke to government officials also show his interest in historical accuracy. For example, at Thessalonica the chief rulers are called

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<sup>38</sup>Tacitus, The Annals of Imperial Rome, XIII. 1, trans. Michael Grant (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1956, reprint ed., 1968). See also Bruce, p. 83.

<sup>39</sup>Bruce, *Ibid*, p. 83.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid*, p. 84.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid*.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid*.

"πολιτάρχης," a title once thought strange but once again corroborated by inscriptions describing Macedonian towns.<sup>43</sup> The chief official at the island of Malta (Acts 28:7) is called the "first man of the island" (τῷ πρώτῳ τῆς νήσου). This title is also corroborated by both Greek and Latin inscriptions as the proper designation for the Roman governor of that particular island.<sup>44</sup>

Luke's statement that a census was taken during the governorship of Quirinius and before the birth of Jesus, has been used as an argument against the historical accuracy of Luke. Emil Schürer has given five objections to the Lucan account. They are: (1) history knows nothing of a general census during the time of Caesar Augustus; (2) in a Roman census, Joseph would simply have registered in the major town of his residence, and Mary would not have registered at all; (3) during Herod's reign in Palestine, a Roman census would not have been taken; (4) Josephus does not tell of any Roman census during Herod's reign; rather, the census of A.D. 6-7 was new among the Jews; (5) Quirinius did not become governor until after Herod died.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid, p. 85.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Emil Schürer, The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ. Vol. 1, trans. Geza Vermes and Fergus Millar (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1973), pp. 329-427. See also Harold W. Hoehner, Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co.,



But though these seem like substantial arguments, they do not go unrefuted. In regard to the first objection, scholars have noted that Luke did not necessarily mean to say that a one-time general census was ordered and taken by Augustus. Sherwin-White points out that it was common practice for Augustus to issue "general explanations of the particular actions of the central government."<sup>46</sup> Ramsay had previously pointed out that

The decree of Augustus . . . is commonly interpreted as ordering that a single census should be held of the whole Roman world. This is not a correct interpretation of Luke's words. He uses the present tense (ἀπογράφεσθαι πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην), and he means that Augustus ordered enrolments to be regularly taken, according to the strict and proper usage of the present tense.<sup>47</sup>

According to this evidence, it is likely that the census in Judaea was one of many to have been taken. It is a fact that a taxation assessment of the entire empire was accomplished under Augustus for the first time in

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1977), p. 14.

<sup>46</sup>A.N. Sherwin-White, Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament (Oxford University Press, 1963; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), p. 168.

<sup>47</sup>W.M. Ramsay, Was Christ Born at Bethlehem? (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1898; reprint ed., Minneapolis: James Family Publishing Co., 1978), pp. 123-124.

history.<sup>48</sup>

Objection (2) deals with the journey to Bethlehem. Is it possible that Joseph and Mary would indeed have had to travel home for the census? Ramsay points out similar situations in Egypt.<sup>49</sup> And while caution must be taken in using Egyptian examples (for they were often unique),<sup>50</sup> it should be noted that it was not unusual for Rome to adapt itself to the particular customs of a country.<sup>51</sup> Because of this, Hoehner concludes that in all probability the Romans would have complied to the custom of laying claim to one's family estate for assessment purposes.<sup>52</sup> In this case, therefore, each person (i.e. Joseph and Mary) would have had to return home for questioning.<sup>53</sup> And even if Mary was not required to register, Joseph may have wanted to take her along for personal reasons unknown to us.

The third objection deals with a census having been taken during the reign of Herod. It is said that Herod had been given autonomous power, and that Augustus would not

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<sup>48</sup>Sherwin-White, p. 168.

<sup>49</sup>Ramsay, pp. 131-148.

<sup>50</sup>Sherwin-White, p. 169.

<sup>51</sup>Ramsay, p. 133.

<sup>52</sup>Hoehner, p. 15.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

have interfered.<sup>54</sup> But it was the practice of Rome to interfere for the purpose of taxation. Tacitus records one such instance in the client kingdom of Archelaus of Cappadocia.<sup>55</sup> Josephus also tells of a similar situation in Samaria.<sup>56</sup> Even though Herod normally collected his own taxes,<sup>57</sup> Josephus records that around 8 B.C. Herod came into disfavor with Caesar Augustus, and lost some of his autonomy as well as his friendship with Augustus. He says,

Caesar . . . grew very angry, and wrote to Herod sharply. The sum of his epistle was this, that whereas of old he had used him as his friend, he should now use him as his subject.<sup>58</sup>

Augustus then became more involved in Herod's realm.<sup>59</sup> Hoehner points out that this would have been an appropriate time for Augustus to have had a census taken (i.e. before Herod's death, in preparation for the future

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid, p. 16.

<sup>55</sup>Tacitus, VI.

<sup>56</sup>Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, XVII. 11. 4., in The Life and Works of Flavius Josephus, trans. William Whiston (Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Co., n.d.).

<sup>57</sup>Hoehner, p. 17.

<sup>58</sup>Josephus, Antiquities, XVI 9. 3.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid, p. 505. See also Hoehner, p. 17.

rule of his territory).<sup>60</sup>

The fourth objection includes an argument from silence. It is said that since Josephus only mentions the census of A.D. 6-7, and it included a Jewish rebellion, it must have been the first of its kind. But Josephus may not have recorded an earlier census because there was nothing outstanding about it.<sup>61</sup> The revolt in A.D. 6-7 is probably the major reason why Josephus recorded that particular census.<sup>62</sup> Hoehner suggests that the reason for the revolt was not the census per se, but the implications of greater Roman rule now that Herod was gone.

Now that Herod's kingdom was divided, the census would be according to the normal Roman style . . . that the property owner had to register in the district in which his land was situated rather than going back to his ancestral home. The rebels would consider this another move on the part of the Romans to break down the national fiber of the Jews . . . Therefore, it is easy to see why most likely there would have been a peaceable census under Herod's rule.<sup>63</sup>

The most substantial argument against Luke's accuracy is the time of the reign of Quirinius. It is argued that a census during the reign of Quirinius could not have taken

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<sup>60</sup>Hoehner, p. 17.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Josephus, XVIII 1. 1. See also Hoehner, p. 17.

<sup>63</sup>Hoehner, p. 18.

place before Christ's birth for Quirinius was not governor until after the death of Herod.<sup>64</sup>

But Stauffer has completely rejected any such chronology.<sup>65</sup> According to his calculations, Quirinius took charge in 12 B.C. and never completely lost power until A.D. 17. Even though others governed Syria from 9 B.C. to A.D. 4, Stauffer argues that Quirinius served as a sort of vice-emperor for the East, sometimes governing alone, and sometimes with the aid of an imperial provincial governor.<sup>66</sup>

Sulpicius Quirinius must be reckoned not only among the series of Syrian provincial governors, but also--and this chiefly--in the proud list of the Roman Commanders-in-Chief of the Orient. In this capacity he governed the Roman Orient like a Vice-Emporer from 12 B.C. to A.D. 16, with only a brief interruption (Gaius Caesar). In this capacity he carried out the 'prima descriptio' in the East. Thus, he was in a position to begin the work of the census in the days of King Herod, to continue it without regard to the temporary occupancy or vacancy of the post of Syrian governor, and finally to bring it to a peaceful conclusion.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

<sup>65</sup>Ethelbert Stauffer, Jesus and His Story, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), pp. 29-31.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid, p. 30.

Though this option is possible, Ogg questions its appropriateness here, especially in light of the geographical limitation placed on it by the text; namely, that Quirinius ruled Syria in particular.<sup>68</sup>

It is also possible to understand Luke 2:2 as saying, "This census took place before Quirinius was governor of Syria," on grammatical grounds.<sup>69</sup> The "πρώτος" is so used in John 15:18. But Brindle argues that an even better option is to understand the "πρώτη" in an adjectival sense. In other words, the census in Jesus' day was "before that" taken by Quirinius. If Luke did not mean to refer to the census of Quirinius, then he would not have been mentioned at all.<sup>70</sup> Thus, Luke was referring to a relatively unknown census which he did not want his readers to confuse with the well-known census of Quirinius.

This theory may be supported by Tertullian's statement regarding a census having been taken before the birth of Jesus by Sentius Saturninus.

There is historical proof that at this very time a census had been taken in Judea by Sentius Saturninus, which might have satisfied their inquiry respecting

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<sup>68</sup>George Ogg, "The Quirinius Question Today," The Expository Times 79, No. 8 (May 1968): 232.

<sup>69</sup>Hoehner, p. 22.

<sup>70</sup>Wayne Brindle, "The Census and Quirinius: Luke 2:2," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 27, No. 1 (March 1984): 43-52.

the family and descent of Christ.<sup>71</sup>

Therefore, it must be concluded that the Quirinius question cannot be considered an argument against the historicity of Luke, simply because there are several possible solutions to the apparent problem. The issue may still be considered unresolved.

Ancient coins have also shed light on the chronological accuracy of Luke's writings.<sup>72</sup> For example, there is evidence that a new coinage was brought to Judea in Nero's fifth year (A.D. 59). Bruce points out that the most natural occasion for such an introduction of coinage would be a change of procurator. The much debated replacement of Felix with Festus fits the timetable.<sup>73</sup>

With the . . . inscription from Delphi, fixing the date of Gallio's proconsulship of Achaia (and therewith the chronology of Paul's evangelization of Corinth). . . and this numismatic evidence for dating Festus' arrival . . . in A.D. 59, we are in a position to date some of the most crucial landmarks in Paul's career. The framework thus provided is one into which the statements of Acts fit perfectly.<sup>74</sup>

Luke does a remarkable job of recording the general

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<sup>71</sup>Tertullian, Against Marcion, IV. 19.

<sup>72</sup>Bruce, The New Testament Documents, p. 88.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.

atmosphere of many cities. The intolerant crowds of Jerusalem stand in contrast to the inter-racial and pluralistic multitude in Syrian Antioch (where we unsurprisingly find the first Gentile church which also included Jews).<sup>75</sup> The academic disputations of the people of Athens (known from secular history) is certainly captured accurately by Luke.<sup>76</sup> The reputation of Ephesus for superstition and magic was so widespread in the ancient world that a common name for written charms was "Ephesian Letters."<sup>77</sup> It is interesting to note that, according to Luke, the converts in Ephesus publicly burned their books of magic (Acts 19:19).

The sea voyage accounts in Acts (including the shipwreck at Malta) were the objects of scrutiny by James Smith, a navigator of the nineteenth century who spent the winter of 1844-1845 at Malta and began his series of investigations there.<sup>78</sup> He concluded that Luke did a superb job in describing each stage in the voyage, especially in light of the fact that Luke was not himself a seaman. For example,

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid, pp. 88-89.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid, p. 89.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

<sup>78</sup>James Smith, The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul, 4th ed., Edited by Walter E. Smith (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1880; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), pp. xxvii-xxviii.



Smith verifies the accuracy of Luke's claim that the navigators anchored from the stern. He says,

If St. Luke had been a seaman, we can scarcely suppose that he would have omitted to have mentioned the reasons for this particular mode of anchoring . . . as usual he is contented with a bare statement of facts . . . .<sup>79</sup>

Smith, being himself a seaman, offers the explanation for this. But the point here is that Luke recorded the facts accurately.

Luke's description of the damage done to the ship is shown by Smith to be extremely accurate based upon geography. Luke tells us that the front of the ship was stuck, while the back of the ship was broken (Acts 27:41). "This is a remarkable circumstance, which, but for the peculiar nature of the bottom of St. Paul's Bay, it would be difficult to account for."<sup>80</sup> He specifically verifies the account by concluding,

A ship, therefore, impelled by the force of a gale into a creek with a bottom such as that laid down in the chart, would strike a bottom of mud graduating into tenacious clay, into which the forepart would fix itself and be held fast, while the stern was exposed to the force of the waves.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup>Ibid, p. 135.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid, p. 143.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid, p. 144.

Luke's account of the shipwreck contains enough accurate geographical details for Smith to conclude with a large amount of certainty the spot on the island where the shipwreck must have taken place.<sup>82</sup> He concludes that Luke was a "true and faithful historian of events which either fell under his own observation or which he derived immediately from those who were engaged in them."<sup>83</sup>

Even among modern day scholars, it is not surprising to see the third Gospel accepted as an accurate account of Christ's life by Luke the physician. For example, W. D. Thomas asserts,

Luke was a skilled writer and a meticulous diarist. Whether he was writing on the information gathered from others or from his own observation, Luke displayed a consistent skill in vivid description.<sup>84</sup>

In summarizing his evaluation of Luke as a historian, Bruce concludes,

All these evidences of accuracy are not accidental. A man whose accuracy can be demonstrated in matters where we are able to test it is likely to be accurate even where the means for testing him are not available. Accuracy is a habit of mind . . . Luke's record entitles him to be

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid, pp. 142-143. See also Bruce, Ibid, pp. 89-90.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid, p. 60.

<sup>84</sup>W.D. Thomas, "Luke, the Beloved Physician," The Expository Times 95, No. 9 (June 1984): 280.

regarded as a writer of habitual accuracy.<sup>85</sup>

Callan has identified four types of ancient histories.<sup>86</sup> They are:

- 1) History written to preserve the memory of the past.
- 2) History written poetically to touch the reader's emotions.
- 3) History written to provide material which is useful and educational.
- 4) History written to present the truthfulness of past events.

Based on Luke's preface, Callan places the third Gospel in the fourth category, a conclusion with which the evidence agrees,<sup>87</sup> as does much of today's critical scholarship. After tracing the results of scholarship from the 1960's through the 1970's, Earl Richard has concluded that the attitude today toward Luke is generally positive.

As a result of the great number of high quality studies produced by Lukan scholars during the last decade, Luke-Acts can no longer be considered 'a storm center' of controversy. Instead, Luke's work is now viewed as one of several major contributions to Christian theology and

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<sup>85</sup>Bruce, p. 90.

<sup>86</sup>Terrance Callan, "The Preface of Luke-Acts and Historiography," New Testament Studies 31, No. 4 (October 1985): 578-579.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid, p. 580.

history.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup>Earl Richard, "Luke--Writer, Theologian, Historian: Research and Orientation of the 1970'S," Biblical Theology Bulletin 13, No. 1 (January 1983): 12.

## V. THE INTEGRITY OF LUKE'S VIRGIN BIRTH ACCOUNT

Thus far, we have attempted to demonstrate the Lukan authorship of the third Gospel, and the historical nature of the same Gospel. An examination of the birth account itself is now in order to determine whether or not the virgin birth was an original part of Luke's history and therefore already a part of his completed research described in his preface.

Hans Von Campenhausen explains the development of the doctrine of Christ's virgin birth in the early Church as follows. He starts with the texts of Matthew and Luke and believes that the original sources of the birth of Jesus contained no reference to a virginal conception. The virginal idea was a later development which was then incorporated into the birth narratives by Matthew and Luke. Later, Ignatius dogmatically declared the doctrine as essential, and by the time of Irenaeus, the doctrine was universally regarded as central in Christology.<sup>1</sup> Campenhausen's argument is based on the testimony of Mark and John, who not only do not include any virgin birth narratives, but who also, in his opinion, show evidence to the contrary. For example, he points out that Mark's opening statement ("The beginning of the gospel of Jesus

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<sup>1</sup>Hans von Campenhausen, The Virgin Birth in the Theology of the Early Church, trans. by Frank Clarke (Naperville: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1964), pp. 11-21.

Christ") would seem to indicate that nothing of real significance had happened in the life of Jesus before the beginning of his ministry. And in regard to John (who, according to Campenhausen, must have known about the virgin birth tradition), Campenhausen notes the statement of Phillip (recorded in John 1:45) in which he calls Jesus the "son of Joseph" and concludes John's apparent agreement.<sup>2</sup>

Campenhausen also uses Paul against the virgin birth. While admitting that the "badly overworked" text of Galatians 4:4 (where Paul describes Jesus as having been "born of a woman," not "born of a virgin") is not clear evidence against the virgin birth, Campenhausen nevertheless sees no room in what he calls the "Pauline two-stage Christology" for the virgin birth.<sup>3</sup> For Paul, the birth represents Christ's humiliation, which preceded his exaltation. Therefore, there could be nothing "miraculous" in the birth of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Each of these arguments (from Mark, John, and Paul) are worthy of consideration, but in the final analysis they are arguments from silence. Whether these writers knew of the virgin birth tradition and what their attitudes were towards it is a matter of disagreement among scholars.

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid, pp. 12-14.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, pp. 17-18.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, p. 18.

For example, Raymond Brown, after discussing the same argumentation from the "silence" of the rest of the New Testament, concludes that we cannot be sure of the attitudes of men like Mark, John, and Paul. For Brown, the question is an open one.<sup>5</sup>

Luke, being a careful historian, makes it clear from the outset that he is using both oral and written sources which had their origins in eyewitnesses (1:1-4). As a companion of the apostle Paul, Luke would have had the opportunity to have conducted interviews with the apostles, some of the seventy disciples (see Luke 10:1), the women who assisted Jesus (see Luke 8:2-3), early converts like Mnason of Cyprus (see Acts 21:16), the half-brothers of Jesus, and possibly even Mary the mother of Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

As a doctor it would have been logical for Luke to have checked out the belief in the virgin birth, a concept that his medical education had regarded to be impossible. Since the record of the virgin birth was included by him, he must have regarded it as one of 'those things which are most surely believed among us'.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Raymond E. Brown, The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus (New York: Paulist Press, 1973) pp. 56-59. After discussing arguments both for and against the virginal conception, Brown remains agnostic and urges further discussion among both Catholics and Protestants. See pp. 66-68.

<sup>6</sup>Robert G. Gromacki, The Virgin Birth (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), p. 70.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, p. 71.

Gromacki points out the difficulty Theophilus would have had in believing Luke regarding Christ's adult years if he had made such a blundering mistake on the origin and birth of Jesus.<sup>8</sup>

Some have sought to discredit the virgin birth by maintaining that Luke 1:34-35 is a later interpolation into the text. This camp is divided into two groups: those who believe the author to be Luke (who learned of the virgin birth tradition after beginning or completing his original Gospel), and those who attribute the interpolation to some unknown writer. Taylor defends Lukan authorship on the grounds of linguistics and style, after he argues in favor of the interpolation theory.<sup>9</sup> So to accept the theory is by no means to discredit Lukan authorship, as Taylor has shown. But is this theory substantial?

The arguments against the two verses center around the immediate context. But before examining them individually, we must note that all the arguments fail if the text of Luke 2:5, as we have it, is accurate. This point cannot be overstressed. Luke 2:5 states that Mary was still Joseph's

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Vincent Taylor, The Historical Evidence for the Virgin Birth (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1920; reprint ed., Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1978), pp. 46-48.



espoused wife after conception and just before the birth of Jesus. Only four manuscripts leave out the word "espoused" and they are translations--in other words, they are not even Greek. They are the Sinaitic Syriac, and the aur, b, and c manuscripts of the Old Latin version.<sup>10</sup> Taylor prefers this reading (without "espoused") because of "transcriptional probability."<sup>11</sup> He maintains that scribes would be more apt to change "Mary, his wife" into "Mary, his espoused wife" because of a supposed contradiction with the doctrine of virgin birth. He cannot conceive of any scribe changing "espoused wife" to "wife".

First of all, we can state some possible reasons why a scribe might omit the word "espoused." Maybe he thought the case for the virgin birth was sufficiently established in chapter one. Maybe he felt "espoused" was incompatible with the fact that Joseph had already taken Mary into his house, the normal sign of total marital relationship. But a more significant problem with Taylor's conclusion is his textual-critical method. To decide in favor of a reading with so little textual support is to fly in the face of textual critical scholars, who give very little consideration to ancient versions.

The versional evidence . . . must always  
be employed with a caution since the

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid, p. 32.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid, p. 33.

very process of translation frequently obscures its textual basis, and resemblances can be merely accidental, especially if a translation is relatively free. Because of its uncertain character, it is not unfrequently cited with a question mark. . . . <sup>12</sup>

As we stated earlier, all the arguments for the interpolation theory rely on the poorly attested variant reading discussed above. Even Taylor admits this.<sup>13</sup> But even if we grant that reading (and it does not seem that we should), the virgin birth doctrine is not automatically suspect and the contextual arguments for the interpolation theory must be shown to be convincing. The following arguments are used against Luke 1:34-35, which is the strongest statement regarding the virgin birth in Luke 1-2. <sup>14</sup>

1) Verse 36 follows naturally after verse 33. This is, of course, no proof of interpolation but must be true if indeed verses 34-35 are later insertions. Standing alone, this argument proves nothing. And against this argument it has been said that the "sign" given in verse 36 is meaningless and unnecessary if nothing miraculous was to

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<sup>12</sup>Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Carlo M. Martini, Bruce M. Metzger, and Allen Wikgren, eds., The Greek New Testament (New York: American Bible Society, 1966; third edition, 1975), p. xxxii.

<sup>13</sup>Taylor, p. 32.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid, pp. 41-46.

happen in Mary's womb.<sup>15</sup> Mary would not need a sign from God if the child in her womb was to be the natural result of a marriage.

2) Verse 34 follows quite unnaturally after verses 30-33. It is argued that there is nothing in the angelic announcement in verses 30-33 that implies immediate conception (i.e. while still a virgin) as Mary's question in verse 34 requires. But is Mary's response so hard to understand? If a natural birth was announced by the angel, why should he not have waited until after Joseph and Mary had come together? It seems that to inform a virgin of a conception is to imply something out of the ordinary. Also, the fact that the child would be the "Son of the Highest" would bring further wonder to Mary's mind concerning who would be the father. Mary's response in verse 34 does not seem strange coming from a frightened young virgin.

3) The sign in verse 36 is inappropriate for the promise of verse 35. This line of reasoning maintains that the sign must be greater than the promise to be of value. In this case, so the argument goes, how would the sign of Elizabeth's conception (which was amazing, yet not "impossible") assure Mary of the far greater "miracle" of virgin conception?

The first problem with this argument seems to lie in its

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid, p. 41.

understanding of a sign and its purpose. Elizabeth's old age conception would, no doubt, have reminded Mary, a godly Jew, of similar instances in Old Testament times when God showed His power in the womb (such as the case of Sarah). Why should we expect a sign to be "greater" than the promise anyway? Signs are given simply to assure men that God will perform whatever He has promised.

Another problem with this argument is the assumption it makes. The content of verse 36 is not necessarily a sign. It could be, but it could also be a mere revelation to Mary concerning the origin of her child's forerunner. Mary's question in verse 34 does not necessarily express doubt. It could simply be a desire for details. She wanted to know how God would bring this about. An answer is given in verse 35.

4) Zacharias is punished for expressing doubt while Mary is not. This argument calls attention to the similarity between the two responses and difference in divine (angelic) action. Therefore, Mary's response is artificial, and is to be regarded as a later insertion to support the doctrine of virgin birth.

This "problem" sounds substantial at first glance but fails on at least two points. First of all, the critic cannot play God and determine the appropriateness of divine responses. But a stronger rebuttal of this argument emerges upon careful examination of the two human responses. A

literal translation of each response (Lk. 1:18, 34) is helpful in seeing the difference between the two:

Zacharias -- *κατὰ τί γινώσκειαι τοῦτο;*  
literally -- "according to what shall I know this?"

Mary -- *πῶς ἔσται τοῦτο;*  
literally -- "how shall this be?"

The differences may be outlined as follows:

#### Zacharias

1. He knew "how" it would happen--it would happen naturally.
2. He asked for proof (a sign), not explanation.
3. He implied that God's word could not be trusted (key word: "know").

#### Mary

1. She had received no explanation prior to her question, as Zacharias had.
2. Her use of the word "how" was, therefore, in order, especially since she did not "know a man."
3. Mary responded in faith (see verses 38, 45).

In light of the above findings, it does not seem strange or contradictory that the angel would respond differently in each case. It in fact seems very appropriate.

Luke's parallelistic style is also an argument against the interpolation theory. Ellis has pointed out the parallelism between Zacharias and Mary, and between Elizabeth and Mary. Luke includes Mary's question (1:34) to

the angel because it corresponds with Zacharias' question (1:18). And Mary's special conception is seen in comparison to the conception of Elizabeth. Referring to the interpolation theory, Ellis suggests that ". . . such a rendering destroys the parallelism between this announcement and the one to Zechariah . . . it makes pointless the comparison with Elizabeth's miraculous conception. . . ." <sup>16</sup> Therefore, we conclude that there is no good reason to regard Luke 1:34-35, which clearly teaches the idea of a virginal conception, as a later interpolation into a Gospel which originally knew nothing of it.

While acknowledging that Luke 1-2 is a unit composed by the same hand, Drury has tried to show that the entire section is a non-historical midrash. <sup>17</sup>

The disciplined freedom of Jewish midrash, combining a devout attention to ancient scripture with a conviction of its contemporary relevance, provided the literary technique. Luke's first two chapters are an exercise in the same genre. <sup>18</sup>

Drury gives examples of similarities between Luke 1-2 and the Old Testament (LXX). He notices similarities between the

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<sup>16</sup>E. Earle Ellis, ed., The Gospel of Luke (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, LTD, 1966), p. 71.

<sup>17</sup>John Drury, Tradition and Design in Luke's Gospel (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), pp. 46-60.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, p. 48.

births of John the Baptist and Jesus, and many births of Old Testament heroes. He also notes a similarity in language (words and phrases employed) between Luke and the Septuagint. Also, the songs of Elizabeth, Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon (found in Luke 1-2) are Old Testament-type psalms. Furthermore, Drury uses Josephus as an example of the contemporary tendency of Jewish authors to embroider the details of the Old Testament stories.<sup>19</sup>

Though Drury has made some very interesting analogies, it seems that he has overlooked a very important and basic point, namely, that there is nothing regarding Luke's literary technique that prevents the events he has recorded from actually having occurred in history. What if Simeon really did sing (or recite) his hymn and Luke wanted to record it? What would Luke have done differently than he did from a literary standpoint? Also, it is possible that the historical sayings of these Jewish characters were influenced by their knowledge of and commitment to the Old Testament. There seems to be an underlying a priori rejection of historicity in Drury's argumentation.

Furthermore, it should be noted that Luke does not seem to embellish any particular Old Testament text, as did the Jewish midrashists. Drury also seems to ignore the extremely large step Luke would have had to take from the

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid, p. 47.

births of Old Testament heroes (which always included the participation of the human father) to the idea of a virginal conception.<sup>20</sup> And finally, it is disappointing to see how little attention is given to Luke's prologue (Luke 1:1-4) by Drury.<sup>21</sup> There is no midrashic element in this introductory statement where Luke discloses his research and intentions.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, we conclude that Luke included the virgin birth narratives in the original version of his Gospel, and that he intended his readers to accept the event as historical fact.

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<sup>20</sup>See chapter VII for more discussion on this point.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, p. 82.

<sup>22</sup>It should also be remembered that Luke was not a Jewish author. He was a Gentile. Drury does not deal with the person of Luke; he merely argues for the Jewishness of Luke's writings. See Drury, pp. 6-9.



## VI. THE SOURCE OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH ACCOUNT

There is evidence from the birth narratives in Luke that the historian may have gained his information from Mary, the mother of Jesus. As Ramsay pointed out, our first clue comes from two statements made by Luke in 2:19,51: "Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart," and "his mother kept all these sayings in her heart."<sup>1</sup> Obviously, only Mary could have revealed what had gone on in her own mind and heart. "The historian who wrote like that believed that he had the authority of the Mother herself."<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, some intimate facts concerning Elizabeth are mentioned in 1:24, 41. The text explains how Mary knew these facts (1:36, 41); she had been told by the angel that her cousin was already six months pregnant. But the text does not speak of intimate facts concerning Mary having been revealed to Elizabeth.<sup>3</sup>

The narrative has the form which is natural only if Mary is understood to be the authority throughout; she simply states what concerned herself, while, in what concerned Elizabeth, she not merely states the facts but also explains that

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<sup>1</sup>W. M. Ramsay, Was Christ Born at Bethlehem? (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1898; reprint ed., Minneapolis: James Family Publishing Co., 1978), p. 74.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, pp. 74-75.

she has the first-hand authority. The historian, by emphasizing the silence and secrecy in which she treasured up the facts, gives the reader to understand that she is the authority.<sup>4</sup>

This should be seen in contrast to the details of John's birth (1:65) which were "noised abroad" throughout the hill country of Judea.<sup>5</sup> "In that marvelous picture . . . only he that deliberately shuts his mind against all literary feeling can fail to catch the tone of a mother's heart."<sup>6</sup> The tenderness with which Luke portrays Mary must have either come directly from her (who lived with John from the time of Christs' death, presumably until the time of her own death), or from one who could have captured from her the attitude of her heart as well as the facts.

More recently, Geldenhuys has also argued for Mary as the source behind most of the material recorded in Luke 1-2. He believes that the statements in Luke 2:19, 51 are clear indications that Mary had revealed "these things" to Luke, or to an intimate friend or friends who later communicated these things to Luke, because only Mary could be the source of such intimate and personal statements.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid, p. 75.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, p. 77.

<sup>7</sup>Norval Geldenhuys, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eermans Publishing Co., 1951; reprint ed., 1975), pp. 114, 129.

Tolbert agrees. "The description of Mary's response to the shepherd's revelation implies that Luke thought of her as the original source of the information on which his account was based."<sup>8</sup>

Brown objects to this thesis for several reasons. First, he argues that Mary does not seem to have been close to the disciples of Jesus during his ministry (see Matt. 12:46-50; Mk. 3:31-35; Jn. 2:4).<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, he maintains that Mary is concerned with the theological interpretation of the birth of Jesus. Brown notes that Mary is the only figure who constitutes a bridge from the infancy narrative to the ministry of Jesus. She is the only adult mentioned in chapters 1-2 who reappears in the body of the Gospel. Therefore, Brown concludes that Luke mentions Mary's ponderings as an introduction to the ministry of Jesus, which revealed what was initially declared to Mary.<sup>10</sup> Fitzmyer agrees with Brown, and accuses Plummer of missing the point, when the latter hints at Mary as the

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<sup>8</sup>Allen, Clifton J., ed., The Broadman Bible Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970). Vol. 9: Luke--John, by M. O. Tolbert and W. E. Tull. This view is also suggested as a possibility by Harrington in A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture, Reginald C. Fuller, ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., Publishers, 1975), p. 999, and by Thompson in The Gospel According to Luke (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 67.

<sup>9</sup>Raymond Brown, The Birth of the Messiah (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc. 1977), p. 33.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, pp. 429-430.

source behind the birth account.<sup>11</sup>

But are these objections substantial? Although Mary may not have been close to the disciples during the ministry of Jesus, it is clear that after the crucifixion she was closely involved with the ministry of the disciples (see Jn. 19:25-27; Acts 1:14). And although Brown and Fitzmyer are certainly correct when they assert that the emphasis is on Mary's theological questioning, and that Mary's ponderings serve to introduce the ministry-section of the Gospel, their points really do not at all answer the issue at hand. The question is, how did Luke know what was going on in Mary's mind? For that matter, how did he know that she had responded to the angelic annunciation with a question? The point made by Ramsay, Geldenhuys, and Tolbert, is that whatever Luke's reason was for the inclusion of Mary's thoughts, no one could have revealed them except Mary herself.

In accord with his midrashic hermeneutic, Drury likens the statement regarding Mary (in Luke 2:19) both to the reaction of the people who heard about John's birth (1:66), and to the response of David in I Samuel 21:12. When Zacharias' neighbors witnessed the healing of his tongue, Luke states that they "kept in mind" the things that they

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<sup>11</sup>Joseph A. Fitzmyer, The Anchor Bible--The Gospel According to Luke (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1981; reprint ed., 1982), p. 398. See also Plummer, p. 60.

had heard. And, when David felt threatened by the things he had heard, the text says that he "took them to heart" and feared the king of Gath. Therefore, Drury dismisses the historicity of Mary's ponderings and attributes them to Luke's midrashic literary style.<sup>12</sup>

But should these three situations be likened to one another? The statement regarding David simply reveals that he took seriously what was being said by those around him, as is seen by his response. It seems quite fanciful to connect this passage with the statement in Luke 2:19, and more fanciful to believe that Luke did so. And, the statement in Luke 1:66 regarding the neighbors of Zacharias differs from the action of Mary in that the neighbors did not keep these matters to themselves, as Mary had, but rather they discussed their questions among themselves.

Therefore, in view of the fact that Luke 1-2 is told from Mary's perspective throughout, and because certain statements are made by Mary that only she could have revealed, we conclude that the most probable explanation for this is the view that acknowledges Mary as the ultimate source behind the virgin birth account in Luke.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>John Drury, Tradition and Design in Luke's Gospel (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), p. 62.

<sup>13</sup>Though a dogmatic conclusion is certainly impossible based on the text alone, it seems that the Mary-source theory best explains the evidence of the text, especially in view of the general historical nature of Luke's writings.

## VII. THE FAILURE OF ALTERNATIVE THEORIES

For those who deny the factual basis of the virgin birth of Jesus, an explanation of such a tradition must be proposed. Though many stories have arisen in our world which no one believes and for which no explanations of their origins have been proposed, the virgin birth is different in that it has been the subject of scholarly research for a long time, the conclusion of which is of great importance.<sup>1</sup> If the naturalistic theories proposed do not truly explain the development of such a tradition, then it seems that more weight has been added to the positive evidence for the historicity of the Lukan account of Christ's birth.<sup>2</sup> An examination of the alternative theories is now in order.

Naturalism

The naturalistic approach to Scripture strips the supernatural elements in the text of any real historical value. Therefore, only those elements which may be explained according to the known laws of nature are to be considered factual. When applied to the birth of Christ,

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<sup>1</sup>J. Gresham Machen, The Virgin Birth of Christ (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1930; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), p. 270-271.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

this approach has offered various conclusions.

One view concludes that Mary was adulterous and that Jesus was the son of an unknown man, born out of wedlock. There is good evidence that such a story had begun to spread among the Jews even during the life of Jesus. In Mark 6:3, we find that Jesus was called the "son of Mary" by the unbelieving Jews in Nazareth. A Jew was always named after his father unless his father was unknown, in which case he was named after his mother.<sup>3</sup> Stauffer explains:

Therefore, the Jews mentioned in Mark 6:4 were saying: Jesus is the son of Mary and only the son of Mary, not of Joseph. This, of course, was meant to defame him. The people of Nazareth had hitherto held their peace, out of consideration for the feelings of Jesus. But now when the man turned out to be an apostate who was making all kinds of blasphemous claims, they spoke out. The intention was to drive the apostate from his native town by shaming him. For the present the dishonoring name sufficed: Jeshua ben Miriam.<sup>4</sup>

Campenhausen denies any negative accusation in Mark 6. He simply concludes that Joseph was dead, and therefore Jesus was identified with his mother. His conclusion is based on three good reasons.<sup>5</sup> First of all, Jesus'

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<sup>3</sup>Ethelbert Stauffer, Jesus and His Story, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), p. 16. The same custom existed among the Arabs and Egyptians.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup>Hans von Campenhausen, The Virgin Birth in the

response is more meaningful if the Nazarenes were offended at the claims of someone whose family was known as common, not immoral. His response was that a prophet is not welcome in his home town. Secondly, Campenhausen argues that if Mark had understood the implication to be one of immorality, then he would have dealt with it in more detail. But Campenhausen's strongest reason comes from a contrast of Mark 6 with the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke. Matthew (in 13:55) records the Jews as having called Jesus "the carpenter's son," and Luke (in 4:22) records them as having called him "Joseph's son." Therefore, we conclude with Campenhausen that Mark 6:3 cannot be used to support the idea that rumors had begun to spread about the illegitimacy of Jesus' birth. But there is other evidence that indicates that these rumors had, indeed, begun to spread. The Pharisees, in John 8:39-41, contrasted their origins with the origin of Jesus by stating that they were not "born of fornication." And after the death of Jesus, the stories became even more prevalent.<sup>6</sup> The Church Fathers argued against such stories. Origen, for example, writing against Celsus, denounces such an explanation of the

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Theology of the Early Church, trans. by Frank Clarke (Naperville: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1964), pp. 12-13.

<sup>6</sup>Stauffer, p. 17. It is interesting to note that these rumors would serve to show that there was something unusual claimed about Christ's birth.



birth of Jesus, and argues for the reasonableness of Christ's miraculous birth.<sup>7</sup>

In recent days, Bostock has argued against the virgin birth of Jesus because of the need to present Jesus as fully human.<sup>8</sup> He maintains that the "presence of the Holy Spirit" at Christ's conception does not necessitate the conclusion of virginal conception, for it was an accepted Jewish belief that the birth of any child required participation from a man, a woman, and the Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, Bostock concludes that Jesus was the son of Mary and Zacharias (the elderly priest and father of John the Baptist), because Luke states that Mary immediately went to the house of Zacharias after the angelic annunciation (and apparently in response to it) and remained there for three months, which was generally regarded as the period of time necessary to establish the fact of pregnancy.<sup>10</sup>

Not only is this pure speculation, but Machen points out that the attitude of Jesus' contemporaries towards him, and the character of the polemic against him, militate against

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<sup>7</sup>Origen, Against Celsus, I. 32.

<sup>8</sup>Gerald Bostock, "Virgin Birth or Human Conception," The Expository Times 97, No. 9 (June 1986): 260-263.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid, pp. 261-262.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, p. 262.

the plausibility of such an idea.<sup>11</sup> It is unlikely that Jesus would have gained such a following as a teacher if such a story was true. Also, though slanderous remarks were made "off-the-cuff" by Jesus' adversaries, the public accusations against him centered around his works and his claims, not around any illegitimacy of his birth. He was accused of breaking the law and of blasphemy. It was the latter charge which sent him to the cross.

Another form of the naturalist approach proposes that Jesus was the natural son of Joseph and Mary. This was the view of some of the Jews in Jesus' day who did not accept him as Messiah (Matt. 13:55). The offer of Mary's awareness that her child would be the "Son of God" as a reason for the development of the virgin birth tradition can be traced back to Schleiermacher.<sup>12</sup> Again, the problem lies in linking this theory to the rise of the virgin birth tradition. Would the Jewish or the Gentile community accept such an idea from the child's parents just because Mary thought her child was special?<sup>13</sup> They most likely would not. And because of the rumors which had begun to spread among some of the Jews in Christ's day regarding the illegitimacy of

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<sup>11</sup>Machen, pp. 273-274.

<sup>12</sup>Friedrich Schleiermacher, A Critical Essay on the Gospel of St. Luke, trans. W. Bowen (London: Thomas Davison, 1825), p. 49.

<sup>13</sup>Machen, p. 274.

Jesus' birth, Stauffer concludes that whoever Jesus was, he was definitely not the son of Joseph.<sup>14</sup>

### De-mythologization

The de-mythologization approach to the virgin birth of Jesus differs from the naturalistic approach in that it does not seek to discover the historical element or to separate the "supernatural" from the "factual." In this section we shall not deal with all the issues involved in the de-mythologization of the Gospels, but we shall discuss the possible sources of the idea of virginal conception. Those who advocate this approach argue that the Gospels are an expression of theological ideas in supposedly historical terms. Brunner explains the virgin birth idea as an early ecclesiastical expression of the mystery of the "Person of Jesus."<sup>15</sup> But while such an approach may at first seem plausible, it is hard to see how theology alone could produce such detailed accounts of the birth of the founder of Christianity. There is certainly no evidence of such a connection.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Stauffer, p. 18.

<sup>15</sup>Emil Brunner, Dogmatics, Vol. 2: The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption, trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1952; reprinted., Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, n.d.), p. 356.

<sup>16</sup>Hans Von Campenhausen, The Virgin Birth in the Theology of the Ancient Church, trans. by Frank Clarke

Boslooper maintains that the word "virgin" originally had a more general meaning, and that the later Roman Catholic idea of perpetual virginity, together with certain ascetic and Docetic ideas, has clouded the original significance of the word.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, he argues that the New Testament narratives simply say that the conception of Jesus took place in a young betrothed woman, and, therefore, within the marriage bond. He believes that the emphasis is on divine participation in the conception, not the lack of paternal participation.<sup>18</sup> For Boslooper, the description given to the birth of Jesus by the Gospel writers was their way of emphasizing both the divine and human characteristics of Jesus.

What Paul expressed in the mythic phrase 'born of a woman' and John recorded in the religio-philosophical terminology 'the Word became flesh' was put by the authors of the First and Third Gospels into a mythical formulation. . . .<sup>19</sup>

Boslooper's theory sounds plausible but fails on at least two accounts. Primarily, it ignores the evidence from Lukan text (chapters 1-2), which certainly claims that

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(Naperville: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1964), p. 24.

<sup>17</sup>Thomas Boslooper, The Virgin Birth (London: SCM Press, LTD, 1962), p. 228.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid. Boslooper believes the emphasis shifted to the idea of virginity in patristic and Roman Catholic tradition.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, p. 233.

Jesus was virgin born. According to Luke, Mary was a "παρθένος" (which can hardly be said to mean anything other than "virgin") at the time of the annunciation (1:27), and was still "betrothed" to Joseph during the trip to Bethlehem (2:5).<sup>20</sup> And Mary's response to the angel's annunciation only makes sense if the conception is to be supernatural (1:34). Boslooper also fails to take into account the historical nature of Luke-Acts as a whole, which is seen both in Luke's stated purpose in the prologue of the Gospel (1:1-4), and in the historical confirmation of much of the book of Acts.

While the above approach sees the origin of the virgin birth tradition to be within the Christian community itself, many de-mythologization theories claim that the virgin birth idea was derived from Jewish or pagan sources. Rudolf Bultmann, an early proponent of form criticism and the de-mythologization approach to Scripture, sees in the birth accounts ideas from both Jewish and pagan sources.<sup>21</sup> These theories generally understand the major

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<sup>20</sup>Arndt and Gingrich have shown that "παρθένος" clearly refers to one who has never experienced intercourse, whether male or female. See Arndt, W. F., and Gingrich, F. W., A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979) p. 627. This definition applies both in biblical and extra-biblical usage.

<sup>21</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, The History of the Synoptic Tradition, trans. John Marsh (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1931; translated ed., New York: Harper & Row,

theological idea behind the accounts to be the greatness of Jesus' person. In an effort to represent the superiority of Christ's nature, it is said that the Christian community borrowed from one of these cultures to formulate the virgin birth story. Even Machen admits,

The most obvious suggestion unquestionably is that the idea arose on Jewish Christian ground. The narratives that contain the idea are . . . strikingly Jewish and Palestinian in character; what is more natural, therefore, than to suppose that the idea was formed on the basis of Jewish elements of thought?<sup>22</sup>

The Jewish derivation theory points out that there were many other Old Testament accounts of special births. Great men like Isaac, Samson, and Samuel were born to aged parents or barren women. And in Jesus' own day, a similar tradition had arisen regarding the birth of John the Baptist. But the step from these types of births to a virgin birth is not at all an easy one to take, especially for a Jew. Not only is the miracle so much greater, but a Jew would naturally be reluctant to devise a "myth" that would exclude the father from the procreation process; for a father's pride was connected with his fruitfulness, as this was considered to be a sign of divine favor.<sup>23</sup>

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Publishers, 1968), pp. 291-301.

<sup>22</sup>Machen, p. 280.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid, p. 281.

Michael Grant recognizes the failure of the Jewish derivation theory because of the important procreative role of the father and the honor associated with fatherhood, in the Jewish mindset.

According to their [the Jews] tradition, God's intervention in a birth . . . could never be a substitute for normal parenthood, so that miraculous births always involved a human father . . . But the Christians adopted a new idea altogether.<sup>24</sup>

The plausibility of this approach is likewise rejected by Raymond Brown, for the same reason.<sup>25</sup>

There are two additional objections to any form of the theory of Jewish derivation. First of all, the Jew, with a strict concept of God's transcendence, would certainly have had a hard time accepting the notion that God could take the place of a human father and beget children.<sup>26</sup> Secondly, the emphasis on the Messiah's Davidic descent would rather stress Joseph's involvement in the birth of Jesus.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the virgin birth tradition should not be traced to Jewish thought in its origin.

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<sup>24</sup>Michael Grant, Jesus--An Historian's Review of The Gospels (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), p. 70.

<sup>25</sup>Raymond Brown, The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus (New York: Paulist Press, 1973), p. 62.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, p. 282.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid, p. 286.

The third possibility for those who advocate a de-mythologization approach to the virgin birth is the theory of pagan derivation. It is said that the early church borrowed from the many pagan stories of supernatural and divine births. There are countless legends about the supernatural births of both historical and non-historical personages. Many are said to have been born through the intervention of a god.<sup>28</sup>

For example, it has been told that Plato was the offspring of Periktione (his mother) and the god Apollo.<sup>29</sup> A similar story was told regarding the birth of Alexander the Great.<sup>30</sup> Augustus was said to be a son of Apollo, and Apollonius of Tyana was looked upon by his countrymen as a son of Zeus.<sup>31</sup> Pfleiderer has argued for the theory of pagan derivation as follows.<sup>32</sup> The Gentile

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<sup>28</sup>See, for example, Edwin S. Hartland, Primitive Paternity (London: David Nutt, 1909), and Thomas Boslooper, The Virgin Birth (London: SCM Press, LTD, 1962).

<sup>29</sup>See Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Vol. 1, trans. R. D. Hicks, Loeb Classical Library, G. P. Goold, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925; reprint ed., 1980), p. 277.

<sup>30</sup>Plutarch's Lives Vol. 7, Alexander, II. 1-5, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library, E. H. Warmington, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1919; reprint ed., 1971), p. 227.

<sup>31</sup>Otto Pfleiderer, Christian Origins, trans. Daniel A. Huebsch (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1906), p. 225.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid, pp. 224-226.



Christians of the first century misunderstood the concept of Jesus' divine sonship. They could not understand this idea apart from procreation, having no Jewish Old Testament mindset. As the "Son of God," Jesus must have been physically begotten of God. Further motivation was provided by the need to show the birth of Jesus as superior to the somewhat supernatural birth of John the Baptist, his forerunner. These Gentile Christians then replaced the pagan anthropomorphic idea of a divine-human sexual act with a more noble and sublime one of mere divine creative power within the womb of Mary.<sup>33</sup>

Thomas Boslooper is a proponent of the Christian-myth theory of the virgin birth tradition, and yet even he rejects the theory of pagan derivation, and claims that the Christian myth has something to say to other religions.<sup>34</sup> There are three basic steps to his argument. First, he points out that proponents of the theory give no substantial supportive evidence.

Contemporary writers invariably use only secondary sources to verify such claims. The scholars whose judgment they accept rarely produced or quoted the primary sources. Sweeping generalizations based on questionable evidence have become dogmatic conclusions that cannot be

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<sup>33</sup>Pfleiderer also argues that Isaiah 7:14 was conveniently misinterpreted by Gentile Christians, who were ignorant of proper Old Testament interpretation. This issue belongs to a discussion of Matthew's birth account.

<sup>34</sup>Boslooper, p. 136.

substantiated on the basis of careful examination.<sup>35</sup>

Secondly, the Christian form of divine conception is totally without the sensuality and moral irregularity of the pagan myths. This is found nowhere in the literature of the world except in the canonical narratives.<sup>36</sup> His third criticism of the theory points out the fact that the Christian story reflects Christian belief. It portrays a concept of God which is strictly monotheistic, promotes the worth and dignity of man, displays the necessity of moral purity, and communicates the conviction that the nature and person of Jesus should be described in terms which include both the divine and human aspects.<sup>37</sup>

After analyzing supposedly analogous myths from Buddhist, Krishna, Assyro-Babylonian, Zoroastrian, Mithraic, Egyptian, and Graeco-Roman traditions, Boslooper concludes that the virgin birth of Jesus is similar to these stories only in the most general idea of a supernatural birth. In

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid, p. 135. Boslooper is referring to the conclusions of men like Bauer, Drews, Steinmetzer, Gressmann, Norden, Wendland, Seydel, Pfleiderer, de Bunsen, Cheyne, Gunkel, Jeremias, Feibig, Petersen, Hartland, Usener, Soltau, Wernel, and Bundy, who maintain that the Biblical idea of a virginal conception had its origin in a non-Christian religion, and made its way into the story of the birth of Jesus through the Gentile-Christian community.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid, p. 185. See also Brown, Virginal Conception, p. 62.

<sup>37</sup>Boslooper, p. 186.

precise form and content there is no similarity.<sup>38</sup>

Orr argues against the theory of pagan derivation by pointing out that none of these myths are virgin births, that the births are the results of sexual activity, that the parents of historical persons who were supposedly the offspring of gods were well known, and that the "better-minded" in Rome and Greece were ashamed of such tales.<sup>39</sup> Machen maintains that

Everywhere it is the love of the god for the mortal woman, and not merely the exclusion of a human father of the child, which stands in the forefront of interest.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid. Boslooper follows Strauss in his belief that the de-mythologization approach to Scripture is the best approach and should be applied to the entire New Testament. His reasoning is both philosophical and theological. He believes that a strict historical interpretation of the New Testament violates our understanding of how nature and nature's laws operate (especially in regard to miracles). He also believes that the de-mythologization approach to the New Testament produces the highest morality. In regard to the virgin birth, Boslooper maintains that a historical interpretation of the virgin birth destroys the idea that the moral order is to be established within the marriage bond. Boslooper believes that Matthew and Luke accepted the myth of a virginal conception because it taught a high Christology, and in their minds was not irreconcilable with other traditions about the birth of Jesus. Therefore, Boslooper concludes deductively that the story of Christ's birth in Luke must be mythological, for that is the best interpretation of Scripture in general. For Boslooper, the origin of the myth lies within the Christian community and may be attributed to their high Christology. See Boslooper, pp. 21, 94-95, 207, 222.

<sup>39</sup>James Orr, The Virgin Birth of Christ (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), pp. 168-169.

<sup>40</sup>Machen, p. 338.

The true atmosphere of these myths is shown by the mother of Alexander who, according to one report, denounced Alexander for spreading such slander.<sup>41</sup> Gromacki points out that

The incarnation of Christ was bathed in holiness. He was conceived in order to die redemptively for the sinful condition of men. The pagan birth stories revealed the greed and the sexual lust of the gods toward mortal women.<sup>42</sup>

The Abingdon Bible Commentary points out that the two New Testament birth accounts are "free from the coarseness so often characteristic of the myths and sagas that tell of the births of great heroes from gods and goddesses."<sup>43</sup> Brown points out that, to the best of our knowledge, no exact parallel existed in the literature available to first-century Christianity.<sup>44</sup> He also wonders where the idea of a virginal conception originated, if it did not happen.<sup>45</sup>

It must be concluded that the separation of the early

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<sup>41</sup>Plutarch's Lives, p. 229.

<sup>42</sup>Robert G. Gromacki, The Virgin Birth (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974; reprint ed., 1981), p. 180.

<sup>43</sup>F.C. Eiselen, E. Lewis, and D.G. Downey, eds. The Abingdon Bible Commentary (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1929), p. 957.

<sup>44</sup>Brown, *Ibid*, p. 62.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid*, p. 65. This is a question which Campenhausen has failed to answer.

Christian church in general from the pagan world militates against the plausibility of the theory of pagan derivation,<sup>46</sup> and overshadows the minimal amount of evidence for such.<sup>47</sup> First century Christianity denounced pagan morality and ideology. And it is precisely the most detestable elements of polytheism which are said to be the source of the virgin birth tradition.<sup>48</sup> As Harnack asserts,

The conjecture . . . that the idea of the birth from a Virgin is a heathen myth which was received by the Christians, contradicts the entire earliest development of Christian tradition which is free from heathen myths . . . .<sup>49</sup>

#### Natural Parthenogenesis

Is it possible that the virgin birth of Christ did in fact happen, but was merely a freak of nature and not a supernatural event? Davidheiser has described many

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<sup>46</sup>Machen, p. 319.

<sup>47</sup>See Orr, pp. 173-175. Some have seen Babylonian elements in Matthew's account, such as the star and the wise men. The journey and subsequent adoration of the new-born have been linked to the visit of the Parthian king, Tiridates, and his magicians to the court of Nero in A.D. 66. Orr maintains the unlikelihood of transferring the worship of Nero (who was so anti-Christian) to Jesus. Also, he points out that the story contained no idea of a virgin birth.

<sup>48</sup>Machen, p. 319.

<sup>49</sup>Adolf Harnack, History of Dogma, Vol. 1 (London: Williams & Norgate, 1894), p. 100.

instances within certain animal species of natural parthenogenesis, or birth apart from male impregnation.<sup>50</sup> For example, the unfertilized eggs of honeybees develop into drones, or males. In 1886 A. Tichomiroff brought about the development of unfertilized silkworm eggs. Between 1896 and 1900, Thomas H. Morgan and A. D. Mead demonstrated that the eggs of sea urchins as well as the eggs of certain marine worms could be made to develop by placing them in numerous salt solutions, or in concentrated sea water. In 1900, Jacques Loeb was the first scientist to produce larvae from sea urchins by treating their unfertilized eggs chemically. Various scientists have obtained frogs from unfertilized eggs by activating them through puncture with a fine needle. And in 1940, Gregory Pincus produced several parthenogenetic rabbits through the use of temperature control and chemicals.

Do these examples of natural parthenogenesis provide an adequate basis for proposing such a possibility in regards to the birth of Jesus? One encounters two problems in doing so. First, this has never happened within the human race. Secondly, geneticists have demonstrated that if a natural parthenogenesis were ever to occur, the fetus would have to be female, because female mammals have two X chromosomes and

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<sup>50</sup> Bolton Davidheiser, To Be As God (Nutley: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1977), pp. 8-10.

male mammals have one X chromosome and one Y chromosome.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, when an unfertilized egg cell would duplicate its chromosomes in response to some artificial stimulation, the resultant being would have to be female.<sup>52</sup>

Therefore, we must conclude with Gromacki that these examples provide no basis for the theory of natural parthenogenesis in relation to the virgin birth of Christ.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Gromacki, p. 96.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid. This was true of the Pincus rabbits.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

It now becomes necessary to organize the preceding material into a basic apologetic for the historicity of the virgin birth of Jesus. The following logical steps comprise the argument.

- 1) Second century testimony shows the universal acceptance of the fact of the virgin birth during that time, and also indicates that the origin of the tradition lies in the first century.
- 2) Luke, a first century educated Gentile physician and companion of the apostle Paul, wrote the third Gospel, which contains one of two New Testament accounts of the virgin birth.
- 3) Luke's prologue clearly shows his intention to write history, and his general accomplishment of this goal has been verified by examination of his two-volume work (Luke-Acts), and comparison of the same with the known facts of history.
- 4) Luke's virgin birth account, being an original part of his Gospel, not only falls under the claim of the prologue, but is the first point in the history which he records (along with the birth of John the Baptist).
- 5) The source of the birth account in Luke was probably Mary, the mother of Jesus, as the narratives themselves would seem to indicate.
- 6) No alternative theory of the birth of Jesus is satisfactory. Each one is seen to be flawed to the point of rejection.
- 7) Therefore, we conclude that the most probable reason for Luke's inclusion of the virgin birth of Jesus in his Gospel is that it was well attested as a historical fact.



## IX. APPENDIX

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH

A few words ought to be said regarding the theological and apologetic significance of the virgin birth of Jesus, especially since scholars disagree as to the exact significance of the miracle. There are three basic views as to the relation between the virgin birth and incarnation of the pre-existent Christ.

Some conservatives see a necessary connection between these two ideas. This view is propounded by Gromacki. He asserts,

To confess the virgin birth is to confess the deity of Christ; to confess the deity of Christ is to confess the virgin birth. They are inseparable, Siamese twins. Conversely, to deny the virgin birth is to deny the deity of Christ . . . No person can logically accept one and reject the other.<sup>1</sup>

Brunner not only disagrees with the above notion, but he uses the incarnation as an argument against the virgin birth.<sup>2</sup> He suggests that the incarnation is so strong in Paul (Rom. 1:3, "born of the seed of David according to the flesh"), and in John (Jn. 1:14, "the Word became flesh and

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<sup>1</sup>Robert G. Gromacki, The Virgin Birth (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974; reprint ed., 1981), p. 189.

<sup>2</sup>Emil Brunner, Dogmatics, Vol. 2: The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption, trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1952; reprint ed.,

dwelt among us"), that Christ must have been born of a natural conception to have been fully human.

The usual reasons given for the conservative view include the sinlessness of Christ and the divine nature of Jesus. For example, it is sometimes asserted that sin is passed on through the man. But while Adam is certainly held responsible for the fall of the human race, one must wonder if it necessarily follows that only the man passes on the sin nature in procreation. Also, it seems questionable whether the Evangelical should attribute the divine nature of Jesus to the virgin birth, for Jesus was not the son of the Holy Spirit. Brunner's theory is flawed in that he ignores the supernatural creative ability of God, who does not have to depend on human procreative ability to create a fully human body.

A third option is offered by Guthrie who rejects both of the above approaches.

It cannot be said that the incarnation demands the virgin birth, for God could have accomplished it in another way. But it can and must be said that the virgin birth of Jesus is entirely appropriate to the nature of the one who became flesh although he was equal with God (Phil. 2:6).<sup>3</sup>

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Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, n.d.), pp. 355-356.

<sup>3</sup>Donald Guthrie, New Testament Theology (Downer's Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), p. 374.

Guthrie attributes the divine nature, sinlessness, and conception of Jesus to the work of the Holy Spirit, not the virginity of Mary.<sup>4</sup>

Kantzer agrees. He asserts that the deity of Christ does not depend on the virgin birth, and yet refuses to speculate as to any other possible options.<sup>5</sup> There are a number of issues surrounding the theology of the virgin birth with which Evangelical scholars still need to interact, such as the essence of the sin nature, the manner in which it is passed on from generation to generation, and the role of the Holy Spirit in the birth of Jesus. It may be that we should not speculate as to the possibility of other options for the incarnation. Even if the deity of Christ is not dependent on the virginal conception, it is clear that the choice of an omniscient, all-wise God is certainly the best, if not the only option. Therefore, the theological significance of the virgin birth may lie in the fact that this is the method God chose to wrap His Son in human flesh. It is interesting to note that Taylor, after discussing the historical evidence for the virgin birth, concludes that the evidence is good but not sufficient to prove the historical fact of the event. He remains agnostic

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Kenneth Kantzer, "The Miracle of Christmas," Christianity Today 28, No. 18 (DE 14, 1984): 15.

and concludes that ultimately the question belongs to the realm of theology, and not merely to history.<sup>6</sup>

There are also a number of issues surrounding the apologetic significance of the virgin birth which demand further investigation, such as the private nature of the miracle, the apparent silence of the New Testament outside the first and third Gospels on the subject, and the apparent absence of the virgin birth in the early preaching of the apostles. But whether the virgin birth is simply a sign of the Messiah or a necessary part of the incarnation, it does seem entirely appropriate that the One who ended His life with a miracle such as the resurrection, should have begun His life with a miracle such as the virgin birth.

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<sup>6</sup>See Vincent Taylor, The Historical Evidence for the Virgin Birth (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1920; reprinted ed., Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1978), pp. 115-133.

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