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THE VIRGIN BIRTH: A STUDY OF THE  
TESTIMONY OF THE ANTE-NICENE AGE

by

Vartan Diakran Melconian  
(A.B., Parsons College )

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## INTRODUCTION

1. The Purpose of This Dissertation

Among the many monographs on the Virgin Birth, there is none which has emphasised, organized, or adequately presented the various attempts of the early church to account for and explain it. This does not indicate that interest in the Virgin Birth has waned. Many valuable treatises on various phases of the doctrine are appearing. May it not be that a survey of the data found in the writings of the Church Fathers from the first century to the Council of Nicea will contribute to a better understanding of this problem?

If it is granted that belief in the Virgin Birth rests mainly on the records of the First and Third Gospels, might not important confirmation or refutation of their testimony be supplied by the testimony of the ante-Nicene Church?<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this dissertation, therefore, is to organize and to present the testimony of this age to the Virgin Birth, and to consider the significance of the witness. The treatment, then, will be purely historical. The historical setting will be considered first. Then follows a study of the doctrinal controversies, under which the various heresies of the period will be viewed with their proponents and opponents. From this negative testimony, the present study turns to the direct testimony to the Virgin Birth, of the Apostles, the early Church Fathers, the apocryphal writings, the Apologists, and the Apostles' Creed. Lastly, the contributions of this period to the Virgin Birth will be considered.

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1 The Ante-Nicene Age extends to the Council of Nicea, 325 A.D.

## 2. The Contribution of This Dissertation

The value of the proposed contribution should be apparent when one considers the problems which emerge. How early is the mention of the Virgin Birth outside of the New Testament accounts, and how generally received? How prevailing was interest in it, and in what particulars? If it was rejected, on what grounds and what were the arguments; if defended, how? Was interest in it local or general? Who were its opponents and proponents? What was the historical setting in which it first appeared? How similar is our present-day interest in the Virgin Birth to that of the first centuries? Is our controversy at all a repetition of the first questioning of the statement?

PART I

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE ANTE-NICENE AGE

## I. Expansion and Assimilation

It is necessary first to investigate the outstanding features of the period. In the first place, it was a period of progress for Christianity, not only in expansion but also in organization. That at the end of three centuries of the severest, organized opposition and persecution, Christianity should be acclaimed victorious and universal by its Imperial foe, is indeed a remarkable fact. It is noteworthy that at the same time with its rapid growth in the face of stringent opposition, it developed an episcopacy, the New Testament canon, and the Creed it still holds. And more remarkable still is the voluminous production of Christian literature by the Church Fathers and Apologists.

### A. Political Persecutions

At an early stage of the Church's history, the rapid spread of Christian faith aroused the opposition of the Jewish priesthood and rulers; and those who had rejected and crucified Jesus apprehended and imprisoned his disciples, resorting often to violence.<sup>1</sup>

The first notable persecution by pagan authorities was that of Nero, in A.D. 65-68. Tacitus, the Roman historian, attests both to the extent and the worse than brutal character of it.<sup>2</sup>

There followed a number of other severe persecutions until the last imperial one under the emperor Diocletian during the years 303 to 311 A.D. In 312 a Christian emperor reigned, and twelve years later Christianity was made the religion of the Empire.

. . . . .

1 Cf The Acts, chs.4-7. Peter and John's imprisonment and Stephen's martyrdom.  
2 The Works of Tacitus (Oxford Translation, Revised). Vol.I,p.423ff.



The widespread popular prejudice against Christianity as unsocial in habits, inimical to mankind, and even guilty of secret abominations, stimulated the growth of apologetic literature from the first. These writers pled for the recognition of Christianity by the State as a lawful and beneficent religion, elaborating its doctrines and principles. At the same time they wrote to warn Christians against disloyalty in view of the numerous heresies arising, and against the immorality of their environment.<sup>1</sup>

#### B. Intellectual Opposition

There was, moreover, contemporaneous with these persecutions, opposition of another kind, quite as severe as the political, which involved Christianity in its propagation and assimilation. This was its intellectual struggle with Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism, Greek philosophy and Gentile culture in general.

Christianity, being both a religion and a system of thought, came into contact at the outset with historic Judaism and the current philosophies of Greece. Historic Judaism, holding to the Law and Monotheism, centered in Ebionism which held to the deification of Christ but rejected his incarnation. The current Greek philosophies dealt with the Logos doctrine--the views of Plato, the Stoics and Philo; and dualism, under which were Gnosticism and Docetism.

The Church's equipment to face this opposition was meager. It had a collection of Holy Scripture which was simply the Old Testament canon, and the 'traditions,' that is, the teaching first given by its apostolic founders, and also some of the

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<sup>1</sup> An interesting example is an early apology by Aristides, a 'Philosopher of Athens.' Cf Ante-Nicene Fathers (Roberts and Donaldson, editors), vol.IX.

Apostles as well as others who had seen and heard Jesus. It had the four Gospels, though these were not canonized until about the middle of the second century, and also the apostolic epistles which were doubtless in circulation. So equipped, the young church started on its career in a world singularly well adapted to bewilder it. For the Hellenistic world was in a state of intellectual ferment. Intellectual interest was keen, and men were seeking some doctrine of 'whence' and 'whither'--some teaching of how the world which seemed very evil was made and is governed. The cities were full of teachers and lecturers each one of whom had a 'gnosis,' a scheme or world theory of his own. And there were a large number of these 'gnostics' or enlightened ones who were ready enough to adopt Christian ideas and sacred names, and twist them to fit their strange cosmic theories.<sup>1</sup>

And so the Church, finding itself in a bewildering world of speculation and of fusion between not merely differing but contradictory systems and traditions, was forced to clear up its ideas and be able to give a reason for its faith. This, too, called for apologies, and it is the Apologists of the second century in particular who attempted to present, in terms acceptable and intelligible to the outside world, an explanation of Christianity as a doctrine as well as a way of life.

The chief intellectual difficulties of the Church were with regard to the relation of the Son, conceived of as an eternal and divine person, to God the Father and to the Holy Spirit, and in

. . . . .

1 The leading exponents of Gnostic systems were Basilides and Valentinus of Alexandria, Saturninus of Antioch, and Marcion of Pontus. The chief literary opponents were Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian of Carthage, and Hippolytus of Rome. These will be discussed later.

maintaining its hold on his real humanity. On the basis of the essential evil of matter, the Gnostics denied any real incarnation of God, holding either that the divine Christ merely allied himself for a time with the human Jesus, or that the humanity of Christ was a phantom. The Church could not remain uninfluenced by this tendency. Thus we have a whole series of attempts--Docetism and all the varieties of Gnosticism--to explain away the reality of Jesus' physical manhood.

### C. The Early Christian Schools

The catechumenal schools were very important institutions in the very early Church.<sup>1</sup> They originated of necessity, as many of the converts to Christianity had been pagan, and as all were ignorant of the requirements of the Church as well as of the new doctrines. The purpose of these schools was to give instruction in the rudiments of Christianity and prepare converts for baptism.

Running parallel with these were the catechetical schools which were much higher in their course of study and in the intelligence and learning of their students and teachers. They differed, moreover, in that their aim was general culture as well as religious training; heathen as well as Christians were admitted to them; and they were rivals of the secular schools.

That these schools originated outside of Palestine in the large centers like Alexandria, Antioch, Odessa and Nisibis, helps one to understand their origin and purpose. These cities possessing libraries became the seats of philosophy to which students and sages from all parts of the world flocked. Under the stimulus of

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<sup>1</sup> They date substantially from the Apostolic times; cf Luke 1:4 and Acts 18:25, margin.

these surroundings, and with such an abundance of literary material at command, pagans and Christians vied with each other. Christian teachers were called upon to defend their faith against skilful opponents and subtle philosophies.

Moreover, many pagans had been converted to Christianity, and it was necessary that they should be taught the reason of their faith, in order that they, too, might maintain their ground when in contact with unbelievers. This was particularly necessary if Christianity was to hold its own in cities where so many learned men gathered, and at the same time extend its faith/<sup>among</sup> these men of superior intelligence.

And so these schools made important contributions to the Church in its initial stages of development. They protected it from the "vain philosophies" of men; they preserved its doctrines; they propagated Christianity among all classes; they produced the Church leaders and apologists whose literary contributions are of such importance. The men who will be quoted below were leaders in these schools which were centers for the various heresies and debates.

#### D. Summary

The outstanding significance of this historical background for our purposes is that it reveals the Church at the outset of its contact with history as being severely opposed intellectually as well as politically. In its expansion and assimilation it had to commend, explain and defend itself to a world peculiarly fitted to baffle it. This gave rise to intellectual centers of study, where doctrinal battles were fought and where important literature was produced. The question, therefore, which at once arises as to how this contributes to an understanding of the Virgin Birth will be answered in an attempt which follows to show what part it played in this historical setting.

PART II

THE DOCTRINAL CONTROVERSIES AND THEIR TESTIMONY TO THE VIRGIN BIRTH

## I. Significance of the Controversies to the Virgin Birth

The history of the early Church reveals that value might well be attached to doctrinal controversies and that the results have been beneficial. There is a great variation in the types of contributions made by heretics.<sup>1</sup> In most instances they have mainly served the Church by awakening it from lethargy and stimulating it to thought and action. But more important is their contribution in indicating important truths and insisting on scientific treatment of them. And so doctrinal study of necessity includes the history of heresies.

The question of Christ's essential nature at once became an urgent matter in the early Church.<sup>2</sup> This was inevitable as soon as it became a central faith of the Church that Christ saves men. It was granted that only a divine being could impart salvation, but what was meant by "divine being"? The Greeks were familiar with demi-gods and semi-divine heroes. But these mythological fancies could not be harmonized with the Jewish faith in only one God. How could there be two divine beings? God is one, and indivisible. Here was a challenging problem that insisted on being solved, though it seemed logically insoluble. It emerged in the first century and became a paramount question for three hundred years--and still is for many a very live issue.

Dr. McGiffert, speaking of the Gentile Christians of the unphilosophical type who thought of Christ as the only divine

. . . . .

1 Cf Rufus M. Jones, *The Church's Debt to Heretics*, in which the writer reviews the history of Christianity by its heresies.  
 2 Tertullian indicates that the Virgin Birth cannot be separated from the Incarnation. Cf *Apology* 21, "I shall discuss His essential nature, and so the nature of His birth will be understood."

being they needed, having found salvation through him, says, "If it had not been for the Jewish Christians, with their matured conception of God, the creator of the world and the ruler of history, and for the philosophers with their intellectual views of an eternal spiritual principle, this early, simple, Christian idea would long have prevailed, and would have satisfied the minds of the rank and file. But the deeper questions could not be kept down. The philosophers and question-makers were busy, and would not allow the simple members to be content with a Savior-Christ whose origin was unexplained."<sup>1</sup>

Thus, in studying the heresies one is really at the heart of the testimony of the first three centuries to the doctrines of the Church. The work of the apologists was to defend Christianity against heresies, and in their writings we have the chief source of information concerning the heresies and their refutation. Tertullian, for example, lists and describes twenty-four heresies which he had elaborately refuted.<sup>2</sup> Hippolytus does the same with as many heresies.<sup>3</sup> However, the many heresies of the first two centuries might well be considered under two of the outstanding ones, namely, Ebionism and Gnosticism. Under the latter as a sub-topic will come Docetism. The others are slight variations of these and took their names from the leaders propagating them. The heresies of the third century will be considered under Modal and Dynamic Monarchianism.

. . . . .

1 McGiffert, God of the Early Christians, p.63.

2 Against All Heresies, chs.1-8.

3 Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol.V.

## II. The Heresies: Their Proponents and Opponents

### A. Ebionism

It is in Irenaeus' writings that we first find the name "Ebionaei."<sup>1</sup> The word is derived from the Hebrew, meaning 'poor,' and was not given, as Origen supposed, in reference to the Jews' "low views of Christ,"<sup>2</sup> but to their poverty. The name was given<sup>3</sup> to the Christians in Jerusalem as early as the Apostolic age. Then when a portion of the Jewish church became heretical and separate, the designation was used exclusively of it.

Concerning the Ebionites and their views, Hippolytus says, "The Ebionites acknowledge that the world was made by Christ who is in reality God, but they propound legends concerning the Christ similarly with Cerinthus and Carpocrates. They live conformably to the customs of the Jews, alleging that they are justified according to the law, and saying that Jesus was justified by fulfilling the law. And therefore it was that the Savior was named the Christ of God and Jesus, since not one of the rest of mankind had observed completely the law. For if even any other had fulfilled the commandments contained in the law, he would have been that Christ. And the Ebionites allege that they themselves also, when in like manner they fulfil the law, are able to become Christs; for they assert that our Lord himself was a man in a like sense with all the rest of the human family."<sup>4</sup>

There was a version in use among the Ebionites, called "the Gospel of the Ebionites." All our knowledge of this is derived from Epiphanius who describes it as "not wholly complete, but

. . . . .

1 Iren., I.26.2; III.11.7

2 Origen, Against Celsus, II.1.

3 Adolf Harnack, History of Dogma, vol. I, p.299

4 Bk. VI, 22; Cf also Iren., Against All Heresies, 22.



falsified and mutilated." We know that it omitted the first two chapters of Matthew, whose Gospel they claimed to receive. Epiphanius continues, "And on this account they say that Jesus was begotten of the seed of a man, and was chosen; and so by the choice of God he was called the Son of God from the Christ that came into him from above in the likeness of a dove. And they deny that he was begotten of God the Father, but say that he was created, as one of the archangels, yet greater, . . ."<sup>1</sup>

The first outstanding proponent of this heresy was a Jew of Alexandria named Cerinthus, whom the Apostle John opposed at Ephesus. He produced a type of religion which was a fusion of Ebionism, oriental faiths and ideas, and facts and ideas drawn from Christianity. Hippolytus calls him a "heretic like Ebion,"<sup>2</sup> and gives us his view of Christ, "And he supposed that Jesus was not generated from a virgin, but that he was born son of Joseph and Mary, just in a manner similar with the rest of men, and that Jesus was more just and more wise than all the human race. . ."<sup>3</sup> Following him and holding the same views was Carpocrates, about whom we are informed by Hippolytus, Irenaeus and Tertullian.<sup>4</sup>

At the close of the second century and beginning of the third, Theodotus and Artemon taught in Rome the doctrine of the mere manhood of Christ and were successively excommunicated. These views were developed by Paul of Samosata, metropolitan of Antioch, who was excommunicated in 269 A.D. Paul affirmed distinctly the mere

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1 Quotations from M.R. James, The Apocryphal New Testament, p.10.

2 Against him John wrote such passages as Gospel 1:14; 6:51-56, and First Epis., 1:1; 4:2-3; Second Epis., 7. With St. John the Incarnation was the core of theology.

3 Bk., VII, chap. 21.

4 Hipp., Ref of All Her., 20; Iren., Against Her., 25; Tert., Her., 3.

manhood of Christ. He held that the divine Logos was incarnate in him but he denied both the personality of the Logos and the reality of the incarnation in any other sense than that in which the wisdom and grace of God may be incarnate in any man.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, this Ebionitic heresy was consistent with Judaism, since its mission was to break up the pantheistic confusion of God, man and the world. And so it came between the heathen pantheistic or substantial identity of God and his creation, and the Christian theistic or personal unity of God and his creation. To Judaism, both alike blasphemed God in making him one with his creatures, or any creature one with him. And so Judaistic Ebionism accepted Christianity as the highest realization and expression of the law, and Christ as the highest man or prophet, but beyond this it could not go. To recognize the incarnation of God was beyond its range of thought.<sup>2</sup>

1 Cf Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol.VI, pp.169-170, 171-2; also Bishop Alexander's testimony, under whom about the year 318 Arianism broke out. He says, "You are not ignorant that this rebellious doctrine belongs to Ebion and Artemas and is in imitation of Paul of Samosata, bishop of Antioch, who was excommunicated, . . ." Quoted from Epiphanius by DuBose, vol.III, p.59, Ten Epochs series.

2 See Ten Epochs of Church History series, Vol.III, ch.3; volume by W. P. DuBose.

## B. Gnosticism

By the middle of the second century the Church found itself engaged in a severe intellectual struggle with the multitudinous forms of Gnostic philosophy. Gnosticism was an eclectic philosophy of the first Christian centuries, which constructed its systems out of Pagan, Jewish, and Christian elements, and clothed its ideas in mythological drapery. Rufus M. Jones speaks of the various forms of Gnosticism under the descriptive title "The Gnostic Complex," and says, "The word complex properly means organized tendencies or sentiments which are in some degree confused, morbid and abnormal."<sup>1</sup>

Gnosticism resulted from the contact of the Church with Pagan thought, and the attempts of philosophy to harmonize Christian revelation with its systems. It gave up the monotheism of the Scriptures, limited the canon, and allegorized away the great facts of Christ's work and person. It drew largely from the Greek systems of Plato and the Stoics, and from oriental religions, incorporating their bald dualism; while Greek philosophy, for the most part, favored the pantheistic conception of the universe.

To the Gnostic, therefore, the supreme interest was redemption, but redemption from evil more than from sin. They attempted to lead man by speculative knowledge to salvation. Tertullian tells us "the same subject matter is discussed over and over again by the heretics (i.e. Gnostics) and the philosophers; the same arguments are involved. Whence comes evil? Why is it permitted? What is the origin of man and in what way does he come?"<sup>2</sup>

. . . . .

1 The Church's Debt to Heretics, p.31.  
2 Prescription Against Heretics, 7.

To such questions the Gnostics gave very diverse answers. And so the classification of the various sects offers much difficulty. The present study will only treat the views of the outstanding Gnostics, after whom the sects took their names, as they relate directly to the subject of the Virgin Birth.

Basilides was a famous Gnostic who lived in Egypt in the first half of the second century (d. between 125 and 130 A.D.), and to whom Christians are indebted for the oldest testimony to the Gospel by John.<sup>1</sup> Tertullian lists the views of Basilides with other heresies and tells us he affirms "Christ to have been sent, not by this maker of the world, but by Abraxas;<sup>2</sup> and to have come in a phantom, and been destitute of the substance of flesh."<sup>3</sup>

Valentinus, after studying in Alexandria, had great influence in Rome between A.D. 135 and 160. He spoke of the birth of Aeons from the Primal Being and taught that one of the last of these was Christ, who became the Savior of the third sphere, this mundane world. Christ, he said, had no real birth, for he "passed through Mary just as water passes through a tube."<sup>4</sup> Tertullian tells us Valentinus taught that the body of Jesus was a heavenly psychical formation, and sprang from the womb of Mary only in appearance.<sup>5</sup> Hippolytus in Book Six gives "the opinions propounded by Valentinus, and that his system is not constructed out of the Scriptures, but out of Platonic and Pythagorean tenets."

. . . . .

1 Cf Abbot, Authorship of the Fourth Gospel, pp.85-87.

2 Numerical value of word in Greek is 365. First applied to God by Basilides, making him god of the 365 emanations. Cf article in Schaff-Herzog Encyc.

3 Against All Heresies, 3. Cf also Hipp., VII.14; X.5.

4 Iren., Against Heresies, I.7,2.

5 Against Valentinus, 39; On the Flesh of Christ, 30.

Saturninus of Antioch in Syria flourished in the early part of the second century and taught the sharpest antagonism of the unknown God and matter, which he claimed was dominated by Satan. Tertullian and Hippolytus describe Saturninus as teaching that Christ had not existed in a bodily substance, and thus rejected the Virgin Birth.<sup>1</sup>

Toward the close of the second century there existed a Gnostic sect called "Doketai."<sup>2</sup> Tertullian gives us the meaning of the name and informs of its famous proponent in the following passage, "Marcion, in order that he might deny the flesh of Christ, denied also his nativity, or else he denied his flesh in order that he might deny his nativity; because, of course, he was afraid that his nativity and his flesh bore mutual testimony to each other's reality, since there is no nativity without flesh, and no flesh without nativity. He who represented the flesh of Christ to be imaginary was equally able to pass off His nativity as a phantom; so that the virgin's conception, and pregnancy, and child-bearing, and then the whole course of her infant too, would have to be regarded as putative (τῶν δοκεῖν)."<sup>3</sup>

The Docetists, or Visionaries, therefore, believed Christ's bodily life a mere illusion of the senses. They said he never was truly born and had no real body of flesh; he only 'seemed' to have. They denied his death and resurrection, and caused Ignatius to burst into flame, crying, "He suffered truly, as also He raised himself truly; not as certain unbelievers say, that he suffered in semblance, being themselves mere semblance."<sup>4</sup>

. . . . .

1 Tert., Against Heresies, 3; Hipp., X.5.

2 Theodoret, Epis. 82; Clem. of Alex., Stromata 7, 17.

3 On the Flesh of Christ, V.1; Hipp., Apology, 8, 2.

4 Epistle II. See also Hipp., VIII "Opinions of the Docetae."

Marcion was the outstanding Docetist, and by far the most important individual who came under the influence of Gnostic ideas. His sect was one of the most dangerous rivals the Church ever had. This accounts for the abundant literature against him.<sup>1</sup>

Marcion was born between 85 and 100 A.D. in Pontus in Asia. Tertullian opens his attack on him with many figurative references to the place of his birth. "Nothing," he says, "in Pontus is so barbarous and sad as the fact that Marcion was born there, fouler than any Scythian, . . . What Pontic mouse ever had such gnawing power as he who has gnawed the Gospels to pieces?"<sup>2</sup> Justin, writing about A.D.150, says in his First Apology, "There is Marcion, a man of Pontus, who is even at this day alive, and teaching his disciples to believe in some other god greater than the Creator. And he, by the aid of the devils, has caused many of every nation to speak blasphemies and to deny that God is the Maker of this universe."<sup>3</sup>

In Tertullian's Five Books Against Marcion, the chapter headings are informing as to Marcion's views. Mention is made only of a few: "Absurdity of Marcion's Docetic Opinions: Reality of Christ's Incarnation."<sup>4</sup> "Christ Was Truly Born; Marcion's Absurd Cavil in Defense of a Putative Nativity."<sup>5</sup> "Marcion, Who Would Blot Out the Record of Christ's Nativity, is Rebuked for so Startling a Heresy."<sup>6</sup> These indicate the large amount of important information we have on the Virgin Birth, and also indicate a general and wide-spread interest in the subject in the second century.

. . . . .

1 Nearly all ecclesiastical writers from Justin to Origen opposed him.

2 Against Marcion, I.1. Cf Marcion's reception by Polycarp, Iren., Against Heresies, 30.

3 Op.cit., 26. See also Tert., Against Marcion, V.19.

4 Bk.III, 8.

5 Chap.11.

6 Bk.V, ch.11.

The arguments of the Apologists for the Virgin Birth are interesting and informing. But one is quoted which indicates Marcion's method of argument. "Since, therefore, you do not reject the assumption of a body as impossible or as hazardous to the character of God, it remains for you to repudiate and censure it as unworthy of him. Come now, beginning from the nativity itself, declaim against the uncleanness of the generative elements within the womb, the filthy concretion of fluid and blood, of the growth of the flesh for nine months long out of that very mire. Describe the womb as it enlarges from day to day,--heavy, troublesome, restless even in sleep, chargeful in its feelings of dislike and desire. Inveigh now likewise against the shame itself of a woman in travail, which, however, ought rather to be honored in consideration of that peril, or to be held sacred in respect of the mystery of nature. . . This reverend course of nature, you, O Marcion, are pleased to spit upon; and yet in what way were you born? You detest a human being at his birth; then after what fashion do you love anyone? Yourself, of course, you had no love of, when you departed from the Church and the faith of Christ. But never mind, if you are not on good terms with yourself, or even if you were born in a way different from other people. Christ, at any rate, has loved even that man who was condensed in his mother's womb amidst all its uncleannesses. . ."<sup>1</sup>

Marcion's most able followers were Apelles, Prepon an Assyrian, and Lucanus. The Marcionites were divided into many sects, and in Epiphanius' time (d.403 A.D.), by his own statement, were scattered from Persia to Rome. Tertullian gives considerable space to the doctrines of Apelles and other Docetists.<sup>2</sup>

. . . . .

<sup>1</sup> Tertullian, Against Marcion, Bk.V, ch.4.

<sup>2</sup> On the Flesh of Christ, Bk.V, chs.4-20; especially ch.8.

In contrast with the heresies thus far described are the views of Celsus. He allows for a real birth but makes Christ an offspring of an adulterous connection. He says that as a boy Christ learned magical arts in Egypt, and that in middle life he died in ignominy on the cross. Origen is the defender of Christ against Celsus and attempted to prove that the Incarnation differed widely from the myths to which Celsus referred.

This Apologist's great work is a treatise "Against Celsus," in eight books. This is in refutation of Celsus' book, "A True Discourse," in which Celsus makes a Jew and Jesus to be in conversation. Origen tells us, "And since, in imitation of a rhetorician training a pupil, he (Celsus) introduces a Jew, who enters into a personal discussion with Jesus, and speaks in a very childish manner, altogether unworthy of the grey hairs of a philosopher. Let me endeavor to the best of my ability to examine his statements, and show that he does not maintain, throughout the discussion, the consistency due to the character of a Jew. For he represents him disputing with Jesus, and confuting him, as he thinks, on many points; in the first place, he accuses him of having "invented his birth from a virgin."<sup>1</sup>

Origen continues, stating Celsus' view of the Virgin Birth, "and upbraids him with being 'born in a certain Jewish village, of a poor woman of the country, who gained her subsistence by spinning, and who was turned out of doors by her husband, a carpenter by trade, because she was convicted of adultery; that after being driven away by her husband and wandering about for a time, she disgracefully gave birth to Jesus, an illegitimate child, who having hired himself out as a servant in Egypt on account of his poverty, and having there acquired some miraculous powers, on which the Egyptians greatly

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<sup>1</sup> Against Celsus, Bk.I, ch.27.



pride themselves, returned to his own country, highly elated on account of them, and by means of these proclaimed himself a god."<sup>1</sup>

Origen's reply is exhaustive and remarkable for its insight and reasoning. The following from chapter thirty illustrates this point, "Now, would not any one who investigated with ordinary care the nature of these facts, be struck with amazement at this man's (Jesus) victory?--with his complete success in surmounting by his reputation all causes that tended to bring him into disrepute, and with his superiority over all other illustrious individuals in the world?"

We are further informed concerning the above myth in chapter thirty-two where Origen quotes Celsus' Jew speaking of the mother of Jesus, saying "when she was pregnant she was turned out of doors by the carpenter to whom she had been betrothed, as having been guilty of adultery, and that she bore a child to a certain soldier named Panthera."<sup>1</sup>

Origen shows keen thought in indicating how this story framed by Celsus argues forcibly for the Virgin Birth. He says, "Let us see whether those who have blindly concocted these fables about the adultery of the virgin with Panthera, her rejection by the carpenter, did not invent these stories to overthrow his miraculous conception by the Holy Ghost: for they could have falsified the history in a different manner, on account of its extremely miraculous character, and not have admitted, as it were against their will, that Jesus was born of no ordinary human marriage. It is not to be expected, indeed, that those who would not believe the miraculous birth of Jesus would invent some falsehood. And their not

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<sup>1</sup> Name 'Panthera' is considered by many a corruption of *παρθένας*, 'a virgin.' See Swete, Apostles' Creed, p.47.

doing this in a credible manner, but their preserving the fact that it was not by Joseph that the virgin conceived Jesus, renders the falsehood very palpable to those who can understand and detect such inventions."

So arguing at length, Origen concludes, "And since Celsus has introduced the<sup>Jew</sup>/disputing with Jesus, and tearing in pieces, as he imagines, the fiction of his birth from a virgin, comparing the Greek fables about Danaï, and Melanippe, and Auge, and Antiope, our answer is, that such language becomes a buffoon, and not one who is writing in a serious tone."<sup>1</sup>

To conclude the discussion of Gnosticism and indicate how widespread was the interest in the Incarnation, Hippolytus is quoted in his conclusion, "There are, however, among the Gnostics diversities of opinion; but we have decided that it would not be worth while to enumerate the silly doctrines of these heretics, inasmuch as they are too numerous and devoid of reason, and full of blasphemy. Now, even those of the heretics who are of a more serious turn in reference to the Divinity, and have derived their systems of speculation from the Greeks, must stand convicted of these charges."<sup>2</sup> He mentions at this point the views of Nicolaus, Cerdon, Apelles and others. All of these rejected the Virgin<sup>3</sup> Birth specifically.

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1 Chap.37.

2 Bk.VII, ch.24. His dates are 170-236 A.D.

3 Others are Tatian, Hipp.,VIII.9; Hermogeses, Noetus, Elchasai.

### C. Monarchianism

An important movement which was a result of Gnosticism and the apologists' attempt to explain Christianity, was that which the opponents of heresy called "Monarchianism." The name first appears in Tertullian and was used to designate a conception of God which maintained His absolute oneness (monos). The Monarchians were essentially unitarian in their doctrine of Christ. Tertullian says, "They are constantly throwing out the accusation that we preach two gods, and three gods . . . 'We hold,' they say, 'the monarchy.'" <sup>1</sup> Again he says, "So it is either the Father or the Son, and the day is not the same as the night; nor is the Father the same as the Son, in such a way that both of them should be one, and one or the other should be both--an opinion which the most conceited Monarchians maintain." <sup>2</sup>

It was natural that Christians in a pagan world should be eager to make explicit their monotheism and assert unambiguously the sole monarchy of God. But in order to preserve and safeguard faith in one God, they risked the essentially divine nature of Christ.

And so the conflict of the third century was between Monarchianism and Trinitarianism, with the subtle danger of Tri-theism entering in. The fundamental to be concerved, argued the Church theologians, was the Divine Unity. It is true the Monarchians emphasised this unity, but they rejected the Personal Trinity. On the other hand, Trinitarianism held to one God, an indivisible essence, who existed eternally in three persons, equal in power and glory.

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<sup>1</sup> Against Praxeas, 3

<sup>2</sup> Against Praxeas, 10

There were two types of Monarchianism, the Dynamic or Ebionitic, and the Modalistic. To evade any appearance of polytheism, some of the Monarchians made Christ just a man, upon whom a divine power (dunamis) descended, so that ultimately he was adopted into the Godhead. Hence the term "Dynamic" as applied to them. Others sought in another way to express their belief in the unity of God, and were more powerful and influential because they at the same time attempted to hold to the full divinity of Christ. They argued, Why not speak of one God, and of Christ, and the Holy Spirit, as temporary modes of God? Hence they are called Modalist Monarchians.

The earliest form of Monarchian doctrine was the view of "the Adoptionists," who were so named from the fact that they held Christ to have been a man whom God adopted to be his son. At first they were called Theodotians from one Theodotus, a carrier of Byzantium, who taught in Rome and was excommunicated by Pope Victor about 200 A.D. Hippolytus says of him, "There was a certain Theodotus, a native of Byzantium, who introduced a novel heresy. . . Having taken his idea of Christ from the school of the Gnostics and from Cerinthus and Ebion, he considers that he (Christ) appeared in some such fashion as this: Jesus was a man begotten from a virgin according to the Father's will, living the common life of man. And having become most pious, he at length, on his baptism in the Jordon, received the Christ from on high, who descended in the form of a dove. Wherefore the powers within him did not become active until the Spirit which came down was manifest in him, which Spirit declared him to be Christ."<sup>1</sup>

Theodotus, a banker, as Hippolytus calls him, was a disciple of the former Theodotus.<sup>2</sup> He introduced the mysterious figure of

1 Cf for "two Theodoti" Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol.III, p.654  
2 Refutation of All Heresies, VII,23.

Melchizedek and says, "Theodotus, a banker, attempted to establish the doctrine, that 'a certain Melchizedek constitutes the greatest power, and that this one is greater than Christ. And they allege that Christ happens to be according to the likeness of this Melchizedek. And they themselves assert that Jesus is a mere man upon whom Christ descended.'" <sup>1</sup>

This heresy's ablest and most famous exponent is Paul of Samosata in Syria. He adopted and further developed the views of Artemon who taught in Rome and was excommunicated about the year 240. Paul was bishop of Antioch in Syria and at the time of his deposition, probably in the year 269, was Patriarch of Antioch. He maintained the humanity of Jesus and insisted He was born a man, grew up as a man and was a man baptised by John. At his baptism he was anointed by the Spirit, given divine power in a unique degree and the eternal Logos came to dwell in him as a resident dwells in a house. <sup>2</sup>

The Modalists were represented first in the East by Noetus, a native of Syria. Of him Hippolytus says, "That Noetus affirms that the Son and Father are the same, no one is ignorant. But he makes his statement thus: 'When indeed, then, the Father had not been born, he yet was justly styled Father; and when it pleased him to undergo generation, having been begotten, he himself became his own son, not another.'" <sup>3</sup>

According to Tertullian, Praxeas was the first to import this heresy into Rome. He says, "He drove out the Paraclete and crucified the Father." <sup>4</sup> Praxeas' views can be derived from Tertullian's treatise "Against Praxeas." He tells that Praxeas taught that "in

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1 Refutation of All Heresies, VII.24.

2 Cf Hipp., vol.VIII; Jones, Church's Debt to Heretics, pp.72ff.

3 Bk.IX, ch.5.

4 Against Praxeas,1.

the course of time, the Father was born and the Father suffered, God Himself, the Lord Almighty, whom in their preaching they declared to be Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup> Hence the nickname Tertullian gives them in his treatise, "Patripassians."

The chief Modalist at the beginning of the third century was Sabellius whose name was given to this heresy. Little is known of him except that he had a long career in Rome and was deposed in 220 A.D. by Pope Callistus.<sup>2</sup> Hippolytus, his opponent, is the main source for his opinions. From him we learn that Sabellius insisted that God is absolutely one indivisible substance, but with three fundamental activities. He has appeared in temporal history under three successive aspects: as Father, who created the world and gave the Mosaic law; as Son, who came to be world-Redeemer; as Holy Spirit, the invisible divine Presence with men. God, he said, has shown himself to the world in these three modes somewhat as our own life shows itself as body, soul, and spirit. And thus he confounded the Trinity.

That this heresy was a positive step toward the final conflict at Nicea is evident. Before the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., the lines of definition were vague. Neither heretics nor orthodox believers were on sure ground. They all seemed to find it difficult to guard at the same time both the unity of God and the humanity of Christ. The latter part of the third century was one of comparative quiet in which the Church theologians were mostly busy organizing and systematizing their theology. Before leaving the above discussion of the heresies, emphasis must be made of the weight of their testimony to the Virgin Birth, indicating as they do that for three centuries the Incarnation held the field of universal thought.

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1 Against Praxeas 2. Cf entire treatise; also Tert., Against Hermogenes, another Modalist.  
2 Ref. of All Heresies, IX, 2.

PART III

THE CHURCH'S TESTIMONY TO THE VIRGIN BIRTH

The present study turns now from the witness of the doctrinal controversies, centering as they did in outstanding heretics and their orthodox opponents, to the direct testimony to the Virgin Birth of the Church of the first three centuries. What was said against it has been discussed and some of the counter-arguments of the churchmen have been given. The present discussion will take us to the testimony of the Apostles and the Fathers of the sub-Apostolic age; to the apocryphal and other writings primarily of the second century; to the Apostles' Creed; and to the Apologists--the early schismatic defenders of the Faith and the later systematic organizers of its beliefs. This study again will contribute this much--that we shall know how early and continuous was the belief in the Virgin Birth; how general and widespread was the interest in it; what was said for it and by whom.

### I. The Apostles

Turning to the Church's witness, we find ourselves naturally going first to the birth narratives in the New Testament. This Apostolic witness must be treated only summarily, as most treatises on the Virgin Birth discuss this phase thoroughly.<sup>1</sup>

The only two canonical accounts of Christ's birth in our possession, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke,<sup>2</sup> furnish two independent apostolic witnesses. They tell their story from different points of view and group their facts from a different motive and for a different purpose, and evidently have different sources. Yet in the fact that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of Mary, a virgin betrothed to Joseph, they are one.

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1 See especially L. M. Sweet, The Birth and Infancy of Jesus Christ, According to the Gospel Narratives.  
2 Matt., chs.1,2; Luke chs.1,2,3:23-38.



It is generally agreed that these chapters containing the narratives of the Virgin Birth are attested by all available evidence as genuine parts of their respective Gospels. They are found in all the earliest unmutilated MSS and in the earliest Versions.<sup>1</sup> Besides, these chapters were quoted much by the writers of the second century as will be indicated further in quotations used. This indicates that these chapters were in the "Gospels" which Justin tells us were read week by week in the assemblies of the Christians.<sup>2</sup> It is further generally accepted, even by scholars of differing schools, that these Gospels are genuine documents of the Apostolic Age.<sup>3</sup>

Numerous arguments might be listed in answer to the alleged silence of the rest of the Apostolic writers on this doctrine. That Mark, John, Peter and Paul make no specific mention of the Virgin Birth cannot be urged as an argument against the reality of it. Two historically sound documents contain it. Sufficient reasons can be given why the fact was kept esoteric. Besides, the completeness of this alleged silence is disputable. Moreover, the belief of the Church as a whole, in the closing years of the first century and early part of the second, more than counterbalances the exaggerated argument of the silence of the Apostolic Age.

Each of the Apostolic writers testifies in unmistakable terms to the divinity, the pre-existence, the mysterious becoming of flesh, the incarnation of Christ. Mark says at the beginning of his Gospel that Jesus Christ is the son of God,<sup>4</sup> and forthwith

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- 1 Found in Tatian's Diatessaron, famous old Syriac 'Harmony of the Four Gospels', made about 160 A.D. Cf text in vol.IX, Ante-Nicene F
- 2 First Apol.,66,67; Dial with Trypho,10,100,103.
- 3 Cf Harnack on Luke; Godet, Biblical Studies in N. T., and commentary on Matt and Luke; Plummer, Meyer, and others on these gospels.
- 4 Mark 1:1.

shows him as such. Mark was contemporary with Christ, a disciple of Peter, and an acquaintance of the mother of Jesus who met with the Christians in his mother's home in Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> John, the most intimate of Christ's disciples and the one to whom was entrusted his mother, says, "The Word was God" and "became flesh," thus suggesting, at least, a superhuman advent.<sup>2</sup> Paul teaches Christ's entrance into the world from the point of view of His pre-existence. He represents that Christ was "born of a woman;"<sup>3</sup> that he was "born of the seed of David according to the flesh," but also "declared to be the Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead."<sup>4</sup> Such, then, is the clear testimony of the Apostolic age dealt with summarily.

## II. The Fathers of the Sub-Apostolic Age

The sub-Apostolic age is usually reckoned as extending from the death of the Apostle John about 100 A.D. to the death of Polycarp of Smyrna, his disciple, in 155 A.D. The writers of this half century were younger contemporaries of Apostles or other personal followers of Jesus, and therefore may be regarded as reflecting the primitive faith of the Church. We turn now to their testimony to the Virgin Birth.

The earliest of these is Ignatius of Antioch who suffered martyrdom in the Coliseum at Rome about 115 A.D. He informs us that he is more distressed over the threatening dangers of Docetism than over his approaching contest with lions in the arena.<sup>5</sup> In every

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1 Acts 12:12

2 Cf John's entire prologue, 1:1-18. See Biblical Review for October 1925, article by A.T. Robertson indicating from early texts on Jn.1:13 John's undeniable testimony to the Virgin Birth. See also Jn.2:3,5 where Mary expects some wonder from Jesus.

3 Epis to Galatians 4:4

4 Epis to Romans 1:3-4

5 To the Trallians, 10.

one of his seven letters he refers to the peril of this heresy.

"Stop your ears," he says to the Trallians, "when any one speaks to you at variance with Jesus Christ, who was descended from David, and was also of Mary;"<sup>1</sup> and to the Ephesians, "For our God, Jesus Christ, was according to the appointment of God, conceived in the womb of Mary, of the seed of David, but by the Holy Ghost."<sup>2</sup>

He speaks of the birth from the virgin as one of the "three mysteries of renown which were wrought in silence by God."<sup>3</sup> Still more distinctly in the Epistle to the Smyrneans, Christ is declared to be "of the race of David according to the flesh, but the Son of God according to divine will and power, truly born of a virgin."<sup>4</sup>

A passage which is important because of the mention of Mary and a quotation from the Apostle John's prologue to his Gospel, is found in Ignatius' letter to the Ephesians, "We have also as a Physician the Lord our God, Jesus the Christ, the only-begotten Son and Word, before time began, but who afterwards became also man, of Mary the Virgin. For 'the Word was made flesh.'"<sup>5</sup>

Aristides, who designated himself "a philosopher of Athens,"<sup>6</sup> wrote an Apology, originally addressed, according to Eusebius, to the Emperor Hadrian in 125 A.D.<sup>7</sup> He bears the following remarkable testimony, "The Christians trace the beginning of their religion from Jesus the Messiah; and He is named the Son of the Most High. And it is said that God came down from heaven, and from a Hebrew virgin assumed and clothed himself with flesh; and the Son of God lived in a daughter of man. This is taught in the gospel, as it is called, which a short time ago was preached among them; and you

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1 To Trallians 9

2 To Ephesians 18

3 To Ephesians 19

4 ch.1. Note ἀληθώς, 'truly' born, followed by prep. ἐκ παρθένου.

5 Eph.11

7 History of the Church, written by Eusebius during reign of Constantine, a.D. 306-337. Bk. IV, ch. 3

also if you will read therein, may perceive the power which belongs to it. This Jesus, then, was born of the race of the Hebrews; and had twelve disciples in order that the purpose of his incarnation might in time be accomplished."<sup>1</sup>

Almost contemporary with Aristides was Justin Martyr, an important witness because of his frequent mentioning of the Virgin Birth. He tells us he is a Samaritan born in Neapolis which is within forty miles of Nazareth.<sup>2</sup> In his Apology addressed to the Emperor Antoninus which is dated about 140 A.D., Justin refers to Jesus as "born without sexual union," and "conceived by a virgin through the power of God."<sup>3</sup> Again, in a dialogue with a notable Jew, Trypho, held at Ephesus, Justin speaks of Christ being "born of a virgin" as something believed by Christians generally and as known by the Jews to be thus believed.<sup>4</sup> In all, he refers some thirty times to the Virgin Birth, mentioning twice Mary's name,<sup>5</sup> and indicating his acquaintance with Matthew and Luke's accounts. Quotations from his arguments with the heretic Marcion have previously been cited.<sup>6</sup>

Hermas of Rome, about 130 A.D., wrote a work entitled "The Pastor" in which the Virgin Birth appears to be allegorically declared.<sup>7</sup> He refers to "ten unhewn stones" constituting the foundation of a Tower which represents Jesus, the Son of God; and these stones are carefully distinguished from other "stones hewn by men which were fitted and built into the Tower." Irenaeus (c.180 A.D.) tells us that the unhewn stones point symbolically to the Virgin Birth of

1 Apology II

2 First Apology 1

3 First Apology 21,32,33,63

4 Dialogue with Trypho 48,66,84

5 Dial with Trypho 78

6 See under The Heresies

7 For date cf Schaff-Herzog Encyc., article 'Hermas.'

Christ. He expressly states that the Stone in the Book of Daniel, "cut out without hands," prefigured Christ's advent "with the sole cooperation of Mary, independently of Joseph."<sup>1</sup>

### III. The Apocryphal and Other Writings

It seems appropriate at this point to introduce the testimony of apocryphal writings of this period. These are undoubtedly the work of men who were beyond reach of authoritative knowledge, except what had been given in the Gospel narratives, and who were not scrupulous concerning the obligation of strict and absolute truthfulness. They did not hesitate to omit, include, or change the texts to make them fit their particular beliefs. The apocryphal infancy narratives are especially fanciful and childish, and so sharply in contrast with the canonical accounts that one does not wonder they were rejected. And yet their testimony to the Virgin Birth is important. They indicate how early and general the doctrine was believed and upon what it was based. This was illustrated in the above discussion of the Gospel of the Ebionites.

Another which testifies to the Virgin Birth is the apocryphal Book of James, believed to have been composed in the earlier half of the second century. Origen mentions it specifically, thus placing it in the second century.<sup>2</sup> The book contains a detailed account of the Annunciation by the Angel and of Mary's and Joseph's testimonies, founded partly on the records of the First and Third Gospels. The miraculous conception and birth are distinctly declared.<sup>3</sup>

Still another is the Gospel of Peter which is quoted by writers of the latter part of the second century and is dated about 150 A.D.<sup>4</sup>

1 cf Hermas, Pastor, Similitude IX, chs.3,4,14,16; Iren., Against Her., III.27. Also unpublished paper in possession of W.W.White on Testimony of the Sub-Apostolic Church, by Henry Cowan.

2 Origen on Matt.10:17. Cf Apocryphal N. T. translated by M.James, p.38.

3 For texts cf James, Apocryphal New Testament.

4 Origen mentions it with Apoc James. Cf James, p.90.

It uses all four canonical Gospels, and is the earliest uncanonical account of the Passion that exists. It throws doubt on the reality of Christ's sufferings, and by consequence upon the reality of the human body. It is, as Serapion of Antioch indicated, of a Docetic character.<sup>1</sup>

Mention only need be made of the Infancy Gospels, the recent papyri findings at Oxyrhynchus and the Fayoum, and other valuable material important in our present discussion, all of which is accessible in complete and organized form in M. R. James' book referred to below in the notes.

Mention, however, must be made of Tatian's Diatessaron, composed by this disciple of Justin Martyr about 170 A.D.<sup>2</sup> It is as the name suggests a harmony of the Four Gospels. By the time it was written, accordingly, our four Evangelists must have been recognized as the main authorities for the Gospel history. It contains the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke, which contain the records of the Virgin Birth, and proves they must have been accepted as authoritative by the Church of that time. Tatian's testimony to the Virgin Birth is the more valuable because at the time when he composed the Diatessaron he had become a Gnostic and regarded the inherent evil of matter and other views which might naturally have led to his rejection of the Incarnation and the omitting of the narratives.<sup>3</sup>

#### IV. The Apologists

The apologists of the sub-Apostolic age wrote while Christianity was winning its way to recognition in the Roman Empire. Their work was threefold: first, to disprove the gross charges current about Christians; second, to enlighten rulers and magistrates as

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1 Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol.VIII, p.775.

2 For text see Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol.IX.

3 Cf Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol.II, p.63.

to the real character of the new religion and the conduct of its adherents; and third, to commend Christianity to the educated by showing it to be a philosophy as well as revelation. This group of apologists has as its leaders Aristides and Justin Martyr.

Following this period until the beginning of the third century was a time of acute crisis in the Church's history. The Church was by now almost entirely Gentile. Like the cultivated pagans of the time, many of the Christians too believed that knowledge was superior to faith, and, within the Church, a half-Christian and half-pagan Gnosticism menaced the very existence of Christianity. There came to the aid of the Church at this crisis the Anti-Gnostic apologists whose task it was to defend it against the varying forms of heterodoxy and to gain a hearing for the Christian message. Their writings indicate confusion, compromise, and incorporation of pagan phraseology and ideas. Their work was not systematic organization of dogma, rather they were logically compelled to work out some of the implicates of their Faith. The work of systematizing dogma was left to the group that followed.

Thus the third group of apologists is sometimes spoken of as the theologian. They faced primarily the various forms of Monarchianism, which heresy itself reveals the attempt to formulate accurately essential dogma. So in this entire period of three centuries the Incarnation was the center of discussion, and was finally decided on in 325 A.D. at Nicea.

Having already discussed the heresies facing the Church, much has been quoted from the outstanding Apologists. It only remains to list them here and give any additional testimony to the Virgin Birth, and facts concerning themselves.

## A. Irenaeus (c.120-202 A.D.)

Irenaeus was a native of Asia Minor, and a pupil of Polycarp of Smyrna, the pupil of St. John. About 178 A.D. he became bishop of Lyons in Gaul. At this time he wrote a treatise entitled "Against All Heresies," "one of the most precious remains of Early Christian Antiquity."<sup>1</sup> This is devoted to an account and refutation of heresies of the second century, and to an exposition and defence of Christianity. Irenaeus travelled considerably, and about the year 175 wrote this testimony which indicates the geographical distribution of the interest in the Virgin Birth, "The Church though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the Apostles and their disciples this faith: she believes in . . . the birth of Jesus from the Virgin."<sup>2</sup> His further witness to the Rule of Faith is dealt with later.

## B. Athenagoras

About 177 A.D. Athenagoras, an Athenian philosopher, after embracing Christianity, attempted to present it to the emperors Aurelius and Commodus in his treatise: A Plea for Christians. In this as well as in his Treatise on the Resurrection of the Dead, he emphasised the Incarnation. In one instance he says, "We acknowledge also a Son of God. Nor let anyone think it ridiculous that God should have a Son. For though the poets, in their fictions, represent the gods as no better than men, our mode of thinking is not the same as theirs, concerning either God the Father or the Son. But the Son of God is the Logos of the Father; for by him and through him were all things made, the Father and the Son being one."<sup>3</sup>

1 Cf editor's introduction to text, Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol.I, p.309.

2 Iren., I.10; cf III.4; IV.35.

3 "A Plea for Christians," ch.10; note entire chapter.



Concerning the importance of Athenagoras, the translator<sup>0</sup> of his works says, "Athenagoras is by far the most eloquent, and certainly at the same time one of the ablest, of the early Christian apologists."<sup>1</sup>

#### C. Clement of Alexandria (c.150-220 A.D.)

This learned apologist comes into view first in 190 A.D. as head of the Chatechetical school in Alexandria. During his earlier years he was a traveller and searcher after truth in Greece, Italy, and the East. He may reasonably be assumed therefore to voice the convictions of an earlier generation as well as his own, when he writes of the "Son of God who took flesh and was conceived in a Virgin's womb."<sup>2</sup> He was a man of wide learning who was able to meet the cultivated pagans of the famous intellectual center on their own ground. He stands out also in importance as the teacher of the great Origen.

#### D. Tertullian (c.145-220 A.D.)

Tertullian was born in Carthage in Northern Africa of pagan parents, and was trained as a lawyer. After his conversion to Christianity, which he tells us he owed to the courage of Christian martyrs, he took up his work in Rome where he became one of the most distinguished men. He is considered the founder of Latin Christianity, for he was the first to write Treatises in Latin. Tertullian was essentially a writer, and his sentences were filled with meaning. The subjects of his outstanding treatises are informing, "The Prescription Against Heretics," "The Five Books Against Marcion," "Against Hermogenes," "Against the Valentinians," "On the Flesh of Christ,"<sup>3</sup> "On the Resurrection of the Flesh," "Against Praxeas."

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1 Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol.II, p.125. Texts follow.

2 Stromata, VI.15,127.

3 Texts in Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol.III-IV.

The following passage on the Virgin Birth is characteristic of Tertullian, "It was not fit that the Son of God should be born of a human father's seed, lest, if he were wholly the son of man, he should fail to be also the Son of God. . . . In order, therefore, that He who was already the Son of God--of God the Father's seed, i.e., the Spirit--might also be the son of man, he only wanted to assume flesh, of the flesh of man, without the seed of a man; for the seed of a man was unnecessary for one who had the seed of God."<sup>1</sup>

Another quotation to illustrate his mode of argument, bearing on the Virgin Birth, is taken from his Apology. "God's own Son," he says, "was announced among us, born--but not so born as to make him ashamed of the name of Son or of his paternal origin. It was not his lot to have as his father, by incest with a sister, or by violation of a daughter or another's wife, a god in the shape of serpent, or ox, or bird, or lover, for his vile ends transmuting himself into the gold of Danaus. They are your divinities upon whom these base deeds of Jupiter were done. But the Son of God has no mother in any sense which involves impurity; she whom men suppose to be his mother in the ordinary way, had never entered into the marriage bond. . . . This ray of God as it was always foretold in ancient times, descending into a certain virgin, and making flesh in her womb, in whose birth God and man united. The flesh formed by the Spirit is nourished, grows up to manhood, speaks, teaches, works, and is the Christ."<sup>2</sup>

. . . . .

1 On the Flesh of Christ 18.

2 On the Flesh of Christ 21.

## E. Origen (c.185-254 A.D.)

Clement's successor was born in Alexandria, of Christian parents. At the age of eighteen he became head of the Catechetical school in this intellectual center of the world. He was primarily a theologian and marks the group of apologists who systematized the Church's doctrines. And so in him we find a great teacher who deliberately set himself to the task of explaining the Scriptures. Hence his many commentaries and the cause of his being a voluminous author.<sup>1</sup> Sufficient quotations have been given above from his writings to show his emphasis and views on the Virgin Birth.

## F. Hippolytus (c.170-236 A.D.)

This disciple of Irenaeus reflects in the spirit of his life-work his teacher. He made Rome his center, though he was a native of Greece. His treatises have been used much in this study; especially "The Refutation of All Heresies," which indicates its value in furnishing an appreciation of the Ante-Nicene period.<sup>2</sup>

## G. Cyprian (c.200-258 A.D.)

Cyprian was born in North Africa and educated at Carthage where he became a teacher of rhetoric. He was very wealthy, but after his conversion gave his wealth to the poor and devoted his time to the study of the Scriptures. He was a pupil of Tertullian. About 250 A.D. he became bishop of Carthage. He also has left behind important testimony to the Virgin Birth.<sup>3</sup>

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1 See texts in Ante-Nicene Fathers, vols.III-IV.

2 Texts in Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol.V.

3 Texts in Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol.V.

## V. THE APOSTLES' CREED

We left purposely the Apostles' Creed to be discussed last in our study of the Church's testimony to the Virgin Birth because it was used throughout the ante-Nicene period on the basis of apostolic authority. It gave to the Church's leaders authority in utterance and argument, and furnished a standard for faith and with which to detect heresy. And so its influence in a period of confusion of thought was of great importance. The Creed is a brief and simple statement of essentials. Its significance with reference to the Virgin Birth will be studied now.

The Apostles' Creed derived its name from a tradition of the fifth century that it was drawn up by the Apostles at the ascension as a symbol of the faith they were to preach. The earliest references to it, however, apply the term "Rule of Faith."<sup>1</sup> Though it was not a work of the Apostles, the indications are that it has its roots in apostolic times. That it embodies apostolic teaching is evident.

The Creed exists in two forms, a shorter and a longer. The former, which will be discussed here, is earlier in date than the latter, going back certainly as early as the middle of the second century, as is seen from the references to it in Irenaeus and Tertullian. References to it are also found in Justin Martyr and Ignatius,<sup>2</sup> taking us back still earlier. From its origination and purpose, the date is pushed back still farther to the Apostolic age. It is generally agreed that the Creed originated on the basis of the triune formula of baptism given by Christ at his ascension.<sup>3</sup>

. . . . .

1 "Regula fidei," Tert., Prescr.13; Iren., Heresies, I.9,4.

2 Justin, 1st Apol., 21, 22, 46; Dial. Trypho 63. Ignatius To Smyrn.1.

3 Gospel by Matthew 28:19

Its intent was confessional, being used by converts in the reception of the rite of baptism. St. Paul speaks of the "form of teaching" delivered to converts<sup>1</sup> and reminds Timothy of "the good confession" he had made in sight of many witnesses,<sup>2</sup> thus perhaps referring to it.

The following is the form of the Creed as arranged by Dr. Briggs<sup>3</sup> and based on the references to it in Irenaeus,<sup>4</sup> Tertullian,<sup>5</sup> Cyprian,<sup>6</sup> and Origen:<sup>7</sup>

"I believe

I. In one God the Father Almighty:

II. 1. And in Jesus Christ God's Son:

2. Born of Mary the Virgin:

3. Under Pontius Pilate was crucified and buried:

4. The third day risen from the dead:

5. Ascended into Heaven:

6. And seated on the right hand of the Father

7. From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

III. 1. And in the Holy Ghost:

2. The holy Church:

3. The forgiveness of sins:

4. The resurrection of the flesh.

Amen."

Additional witness to the Creed is borne by Justin Martyr who gives articles one to four in order four times,<sup>8</sup> and Ignatius who mentions the same four articles in order.<sup>9</sup> All of this indicates how early and general the Creed was known and accepted. This fact is stated by Irenaeus writing from Gaul about 175 A.D., "The Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the Apostles and their disciples this

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1 Epistle to Romans 6:17

2 First epistle to Timothy 6:12

3 "Theological Symbolics" p.41

4 Against Heresies I.10.1; III.4,1,2; IV.33.7

5 On Veiling of Virgins 1; Against Praxeas 2; Prescr.13

6 Epistle 69,70,76

7 De Principiis I.4-6

8 First Apology, 21,22,46; Dial with Trypho 63

9 Epistle to the Smyrneans 1

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 advent, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead. . ."<sup>1</sup> He enumerated as uniting in this faith the churches of Germany, Spain, Gaul, the East, Egypt, and Libya.

In view of all this, Dr. Remensnyder fittingly says, "That the Apostles' Creed has stood unchanged in a single article for nearly two thousand years, the banner of Christians of every age, and still stands at the head of every evangelical church, is the surest proof that it is a correct expression of the perfect, infallible truth of God."<sup>2</sup> This at least is its own remarkable history and its important witness to the Virgin Birth.

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1 I.10; cf Tertullian's similar testimony, Prescr.,36

2 The Biblical Review (Quarterly, New York) for Jan. 1923, article on "The Apostles' Creed."

PART IV

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TESTIMONY OF THE  
ANTE-NICENE AGE TO THE VIRGIN BIRTH.

### I. The Incarnation and Virgin Birth are Inseparable

The outstanding significance of the witness of the Ante-Nicene Age is that it reveals the Incarnation to be of vital importance to Christianity, and the Virgin Birth as inseparable from it. This period's climax centered in the ecumenical council held at Nicea in 325 A.D., in which the Incarnation of Christ was the issue. That this particular phase of the Christian faith should be first to the fore, severely criticized, tenaciously defended, and finally vindicated, declares it to be of paramount importance to the Church. And is not the person of Christ today the center of controversy? Orthodoxy declares itself not so much concerned about periphery dogmas, but it will not release its hold on the Christ whom it declares is as divine as God and as human as ourselves.

And so the Virgin Birth was not severed from its context, but was considered important and treated as a part of the question of the Incarnation. It should not be difficult to see their integral relationship. Yet many insist that while the Incarnation is of supreme importance and affirm their faith in it, the Virgin Birth may be set aside as an unessential belief. Were this true, it would not have persisted through so severe criticism to which it was subject for two thousand years; and great minds today would not insist on keeping it an issue. Moreover, it must be important, insists Dr. Sweet, for "no fact in which the relationship of Jesus to His ancestors according to the flesh, to His mother, to the laws of life in the race at large, are so evidently and so deeply involved can possibly be a matter of indifference."<sup>1</sup>

. . . . .

<sup>1</sup> L. M. Sweet, article on Virgin Birth in International Standard Bible Encyc., vol.V, p.3052.



## II. The Statement of the Virgin Birth is History

A contribution of great importance resulting out of the present study is that Christianity is rooted in history, as its oldest creed testifies and its early leaders insisted. As has been well said, "Christianity took its rise, not in an abstract conception of what ought to be, but in the recognition of what had been."<sup>1</sup> And, "It revealed itself from the beginning, not as a speculative theory, however brilliant, but as loyal response to fact."<sup>2</sup>

And so it is important to note that the statement of the Virgin Birth in the New Testament is not dogma but history, and that its first Creed was confessional in intent and not polemical. The basis of authority in Christianity from the first is seen in the testimony of one who associated with the historic Jesus and wrote about 100 A.D. St. John says, "That which was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we beheld, and our hands handled, concerning the Word. . . that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you also."<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, though the article of the Virgin Birth is not polemical in form, yet it had a great importance in the controversies which beset the Church during its first centuries. For as Dr. Mozley suggests, these largely were "concerned with the extent to which Jesus Christ did truly belong to history. If the Gnostics were right: if there had been no real birth, no real body, no real crucifixion, then clearly the links binding the Gospel to concrete historical fact were broken."<sup>4</sup>

. . . . .

1 D. W. Forrest, The Christ of History and of Experience, p.5

2 I. K. Mozley, Historic Christianity and the Apostles' Creed, p.3

3 First Epistle 1:1-3

4 Mozley, p.67

### III. The Testimony to the Virgin Birth an Unbroken Chain

It is significant of the period's witness to the Virgin Birth that interest in it is seen at every point of time and place. From the Apostles and their disciples to the Council of Nicea, there is an unbroken chain of testimony to it. And from Gaul to Syria, and North Africa to Germany, there has come contemporaneous testimony to interest in it. This unquestionable testimony is of great import.

### IV. Belief in the Virgin Birth from Apostolic Age

Studying the testimonies of Ignatius, Aristides, and Justin Martyr, one sees that the Virgin Birth could not have been newly promulgated in their time. They simply declared its reality as a fact which the Church as a whole had accepted. Their testimonies appear to be extracts from a familiar Creed such as had been taught to catechumens, as has been seen was the case. Such testimony, therefore, indicates that this belief existed before the time of the sub-apostolic writers, at least not later than the last quarter of the first century.

Similarly, the testimony of early Christian writers such as those who composed the apocryphal writings, who without any heresy necessarily in mind, conformed to some extent to Church traditions, oral or written. Many of their writings point clearly to their origin in the narratives of the First and Third Gospels. At least they point to a commonly accepted tradition in the Virgin Birth.

### V. The Undesigned Witness of the Heresies to the Virgin Birth

The witness of the heresies is significant in that it was undesigned. The Gnostic's disbelief in any real incarnation caused him to reject the New Testament narratives of Christ's birth. Also the undesigned witness of early Ebionism in caricaturing Mary

indicates a previously existing and familiar belief in the Virgin Birth among Jewish Christians. Such negative testimony of the nature of heresies has inferential value in witnessing to truth.

In this connection it is significant concerning the Gnostic heresies that their proponents did not reject the Virgin Birth in words. They subverted it by making the birth from Mary a more or less unreal and phantasmal affair. And so their testimony to it might be added, in that they did not deny but rather subvert it.

CONCLUSION

And so it is significant that the Apostolic Fathers, the Apostles' Creed, the apocryphal writings, and the heresies all combine to presuppose a long-established Christian tradition of the Virgin Birth which must be referred back to the first century. The witness of Justin is of special importance here, when he tells of "Memoirs which are called Gospels," composed by "apostles and their followers" and "read on Sunday," at congregational worship "in cities and in country."<sup>1</sup> He quotes from these, such as the angelic annunciation in Luke chapter one, and the injunction to Joseph in Matthew chapter one to call the son<sup>2</sup> of Mary Jesus; the occurrence of Christ's nativity under Cyrenius, the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and the circumcision as recorded in Luke chapter two;<sup>3</sup> the appearance of the star in the east, the visit of the wise men, the flight into Egypt, and the massacre of infants narrated in Matthew chapter two.<sup>4</sup> Such testimony to the Gospels is especially significant to the question of the Virgin Birth.

There is no more fitting conclusion than the following by Dr. Oussani. He says, "The testimony of the earliest fathers of the Church indicates that, even before the death of the last apostles, the doctrine of the Virgin Birth of Christ must have been among the rudiments of the faith in which every Christian

. . . . .

1 First Apology 66,67

2 First Apology 33

3 First Apology 46; Dial with Trypho 78,67

4 Dial with Trypho 106,78

was initiated, and this not only in one Church or another but in all the Christian churches and communities, such as the Church of Rome (Irenaeus), Greece (Aristides), Africa (Tertullian), Asia (Irenaeus, Justin, Ignatius), Syria and Palestine (documents of the First and Third Gospels, Ignatius, Justin), Alexandria (Clement and Origen), . . .

"Such a consensus, accordingly, in the third and second centuries, reaching back to the end of the first, among very independent churches, seems to us, apart from any question of the Gospels, to prove for the belief an apostolic origin. It could not have arrived at such an undisputed and universal acceptance unless it had really the countenance of the apostolic founders of these same churches--Peter, Paul, John, James, Mark, and the rest, and the argument of Tertullian and Irenaeus for the identity of distinct traditions to their apostolic origin is in the main of conclusive force."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paper on the Virgin Birth by Dr. Gabriel Oussani in W. W. White's possession.

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