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A Response to R. J. Berry on ‘The Virgin Birth of Christ’

I call this comment on Professor Berry’s article, ‘The Virgin Birth of Christ’ (*Science and Christian Belief* 8, 101–110, 1996), a response because in general I simply wish to pursue questions which arise naturally out of assertions in the article. The area of faith must by its very nature leave ultimate judgments to commitment rather than knowledge or pure reason, but as Professor Berry says, ‘It is right to examine faith . . . with all our faculties; baseless credulity is a sin—a disservice to the God of truth’ (p. 110).

1. It is asserted that the biblical account of the Hebrews’ escape from Egypt includes a rare example of an explicit description of the method used by God to work a miracle: a wind blew and thereby created a path through water which would otherwise have been impassable (Exodus 14:21).

Is this explanation in itself sufficient? Does it not raise further questions which demand an answer before we can suppose that we have gained some clearer understanding of what was actually happening at the time?

(a) Let us think of pools of water, such as those which collect on roads after heavy rain. When a gale force wind blows on them it creates ripples. In order to create a path through such a pool the wind would have to be of even greater force and concentrated at one point. If we try to imagine the force and concentration of wind needed to make a path through a sea or lake, a path sufficient for a very large number of men, women, children and cattle to use, the wind itself becomes an obstacle at least as formidable as the sea or lake, and another miracle is necessary. The wind blew from east to west, while the Hebrews had to move from west to east; but the Hebrews would never have been able to withstand such a force, let alone move forward in the face of it. As far as this point is concerned it makes no difference whether we are thinking of an arm of the Red Sea or lakes in the vicinity; but it is worth bearing in mind that the word ‘sea’ is used in Exodus 14:21, and while it may be useful for modern critics to substitute a smaller expanse and depth of water in the interests of rationalising the incident we are not at liberty to alter the text to suit liberal criticism.

(b) What was the purpose of the miracle? We naturally assume that it was to enable the Hebrews to escape, but this is not what is stated in the text. The purpose of this specific miracle was to destroy pharaoh and his army. There could never be any doubt about the actual escape of the Hebrews from Egypt since this had already been determined by Jehovah; but the Exodus was a demonstration of Jehovah’s absolute power over the

gods of Egypt, including pharaoh, and the Hebrews were therefore deliberately led by God into a situation from which they could not possibly evade the pursuing Egyptians (Exodus 14:1–4). The Hebrews did not just happen to get ‘entangled in the land’, and pharaoh did not then simply decide to recapture them; the whole situation, including pharaoh’s powerful inclination was the creation of Jehovah.

How does this then affect our understanding of the wind? It would be convenient for modern exegesis to think of the wind blowing all night and helping relatively shallow waters to recede so that the Hebrews could then get across in the morning, and it may be that this is what actually happened—a point to which we must return. It is not, however, what the text says. According to the text the Hebrews crossed during the night and then Pharaoh and his army followed after them on to the land left by the parted waters. This first crippled the Egyptian force because their chariot wheels got stuck in the soft earth, and then turned into a disaster for them because they were helpless as Moses caused the waters to return early in the morning. It is not stated, but it has to be inferred, that the divinely appointed wind stopped. If the wind had continued it would have been working against the divine intent, which is absurd.

(c) Surely a modern reader is entitled to make allowance for the storyteller’s art, motivated by perfectly acceptable religious belief, and sort out the sober facts from rather obvious exaggerations which colour the narrative which has come down to us? When we do this we are left with an easily understood situation in which the desperate and hasty Hebrews, burdened with the aged and infirm and little children and herds of cattle, and perhaps not very well acquainted with the geography of the region, got themselves into an apparently hopeless situation and faced certain capture and no doubt some pretty rough treatment by the pursuing Egyptians. Not only to escape from this situation but also to witness the catastrophic collapse and even annihilation of their powerful enemy, would be naturally attributed to the overruling providence of their God. On reflection, the part played by an unusual wind would be noted, and seen as a particularly clear and striking example of divine intervention.

And why not?

2. Whether or not the latter kind of selective exegesis can be sustained is a matter for investigation and informed judgment in each individual case, and it cannot receive proper discussion here. The significant question which has to be answered here is this: Was the wind a miracle or not? If we take the text as it stands, then the wind was a miracle, it was produced by the direct intervention of God in the processes of nature. The wind would not have blown if nature had been left to itself, and we are not actually any wiser as to *how* God operated.

If, on the other hand, we reconstruct the historical incident according to evidence selected from the whole narrative we can treat the wind as a natural event, and the substance of the account can easily be accepted as a piece of plain, straightforward history. As mentioned above, a perfectly

plausible description can be given, based on a detailed survey of the region, of what 'really' occurred. If, however, the wind was a natural event, a wind which any competent weather forecaster could have anticipated with a knowledge of antecedent circumstances, where is the miracle? Professor Berry accepts the familiar view that the miraculous character of the event lay in the coincidence of the wind with the need of the Hebrews, and this is reasonable enough; but it means that the intervention of God must then be transferred from the natural world (as we usually understand the phrase) to the mental realm of Moses and pharaoh. This is strikingly consistent with the whole Exodus story in which Jehovah speaks to Moses and exercises an iron control over pharaoh's will and feeling; although it contradicts 14:21 and what is the more obvious reading of the narrative. May it not be, however, that people in general have tended to read into external circumstances what is in fact the direct work of God in our hearts and minds?

If we accept this idea of the miraculous in the present case we must then ask if it can be applied to other miracles. Once again, this is a lengthy task which cannot be gone into here, but it might be held to reduce the idea of a 'miracle' to its purely subjective meaning of something wonderful, something startling in the experience of the witnesses; and which, therefore, would cease to be marvellous in the light of further knowledge. On this hypothesis the wind itself would cease to be a miracle since it would become part of the generally understood weather pattern, but it would be open to believers to see themselves as guided by God so as to benefit from it. A strikingly similar example might be seen in the case of Elijah when he saw the cloud as little as a man's hand and the promise of a torrential end to long drought. It was not that God had intervened to send the rain, but rather had guided the prophet so that he gathered Israel together at the crucial moment (I Kings 18).

3. The same fundamental question arises in the case of the plagues. If they were natural events, how could they be miracles in the sense of being the direct consequences of divine intervention in the natural order? Such direct intervention would surely be unnecessary in that case? Nor can we evade this question by saying that the plagues were natural events made unusually severe by God. They were either unusually severe because of unusual circumstances or they were unusually severe because of direct divine intervention. In neither case do we discover the method of God's working by inspecting 'natural' events.

The case of the Nile turning to blood is, of course, particularly interesting. By no stretch of imagination could such an event be regarded as natural. If it had happened then God made it happen and it would not, in the normal course of events, have occurred without such intervention. As a miracle in this obvious sense it is without possible explanation. On the other hand, if we wish to substitute for the total mystery an event which is open to rational explanation and plain description then we are not any longer dealing with a miracle in the obvious sense; we have unquestionably moved to the realm of the mental and emotional. The Nile flood was

stained and the inspired imaginations of the Hebrews saw in it a sign and token of a profound change which their lives were providentially destined to undergo.

It must be admitted that the latter, subjective interpretation of the miracles is not that expressed in the text. Moses is instructed by Jehovah to go and meet pharaoh at the river. This is highly dramatic since pharaoh presumably went to the river specifically as part of a religious ritual designed to ensure the proper rising of the Nile and the essential blessing of Egypt's divinities if Egypt was to continue as a nation at all. The river and all the pools which result from the inundation are turned to blood as a severe warning to pharaoh and his people. If instead something natural occurred, something not infrequent, how could it be a warning to anyone? (See Exodus 7:14–25).

4. Professor Berry says with reference to the healing of Naaman that it is not clear why the Jordan should be more effective in healing leprosy than the Syrian rivers familiar to Naaman; and he also refers to the different kinds of explanation we might be looking for in such a case (p. 102). This highlights the difference between a modern, scientifically informed approach to the miracle, and that of the narrator of the incident and the biblical characters involved. The former looks for some kind of material, physical difference in the waters, suggesting a natural explanation for the 'miracle'; and perhaps not surprisingly we can find no relevant difference between the Palestinian river and the two Syrian rivers. The latter thinks of Jehovah as Israel's God, ruling with undisputed supremacy over Israel's land, Palestine, and that is obviously why the Jordan is effective in a way which was impossible for the Syrian rivers in a land ruled by other gods (II Kings 5:1–19). The story conveys belief in Jehovah's supremacy over other gods, thereby reflecting Israel's special place among the nations, even though the king of Israel fears war with Syria, which is implicitly acknowledged to be a stronger power in military terms. There is also, however, the clearly implied assertion that Jehovah could control even Syrian affairs: which then brings us back to the question why Jehovah did not therefore use a Syrian river to heal Naaman. The only possible answer seems to be that compulsory bathing in the Jordan made it unambiguously clear that it was Jehovah, and not any Syrian deity, which had performed the miracle.

In other words, explanation does operate, as Professor Berry points out, at two very different levels. On one level no explanation is possible in this case. On the other level we can have an explanation although the miracle, at that level, remains a total mystery.

5. It would generally be agreed that the reference in Isaiah 7:14 is to a 'young woman' who, as far as vocabulary is concerned, might or might not be a virgin. Professor T. F. Torrance is referred to in a footnote as claiming that a virgin must be meant since there would be no point in the prophet talking about the perfectly commonplace occurrence of conception and birth in a married girl (ft 4, p. 102. See also pp. 109–110).

The interpretation of the Isaiah passage is fraught with difficulties, but should we not read verse 14 in its context, verses 10–17? When we do, is it not strange that there is no emphasis on the virginity of 'the young woman' and that this is not even clear in the vocabulary used? And how do we account for verses 15–17? They appear to be commentary on the words in verse 14, but whatever else they mean they make no reference to virginity.

6. Professor Berry quite rightly points out that texts in the New Testament which refer directly to the birth of Jesus, and which seem to contradict or at least ignore Mary's virginity, are not necessarily as straightforward to interpret as may at first appear. Is it not significant, however, that commitment to belief in the Virgin Birth is unknown in the New Testament as part of the general proclamation of the gospel? See, for example, Acts 2:14–40, and note incidentally verse 30; Acts 3:12–26; 4:8–12; 5:29–32; 10:34–43; 13:16–41; 17:22–31. St Paul's Epistle to the Romans is the most thoroughgoing exposition of his faith which has come down to us. With respect to the Virgin Birth is there not a sharp contrast between this declaration by the apostle and later quite explicit assertions of Mary's virginity by the Church Fathers? Are not Romans 1:3–4 and 9:5 remarkably phrased for someone who knew of Jesus's Virgin Birth, let alone regarded it as essential to faith? And what do we make of II Timothy 2:8?

7. For the scientific layman like myself it is valuable to have Professor Berry's informed but cautious statement concerning what is known about human sexuality and conception, and his point must be taken that sweeping and dogmatic assertions in this field of knowledge cannot be taken to settle the question whether or not Jesus was actually born of a virgin.

As Professor Berry says, it is precisely the case that the orthodox doctrine asserts Jesus's birth to have been very exceptional indeed, or even unique. In that case, however, how relevant can scientific considerations be? If evidence came to light that a man could be born of a virgin, even though the chances of such a birth were very remote, what would this tell us about Jesus's birth? Would it tell us that his birth was an example of a perfectly natural, even though exceptionally unusual birth? Or would it tell us something about the work of God? And if the latter is held to be the case, how could natural science give us insight into what would be essentially super-natural? Most important of all, how could we ever decide between the two kinds of explanation?

Would it not be altogether better to acknowledge that if Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary through the direct action of the Holy Spirit that this is a miracle; and a miracle not merely in the sense that the event was remarkable, very exceptional indeed and such as to evoke wonder which could, of course, evaporate in the light of greater knowledge, but in the sense that God was working in a way simply not open to human investigation? The Virgin Birth then becomes for us an event upon which science has nothing whatever to say, one way or the other, simply because it was a

miracle. This concept of the miraculous would entail the absolute irrelevance of the natural sciences to its understanding and acceptance. And is this not implied in the assertion that the real Christmas miracle is the Incarnation, not the Virgin Birth? (p. 110).

8. With respect, it must be pointed out that David Hume's notorious argument against miracles is not a tautology. It is not even by any means certain that it is a circular argument (pp. 109–110, and ft 31 on p. 109). Hume is the spokesman for those who are impressed by the uniformity of the natural order and who rightly demand evidence to support claims that this uniformity has been broken. This is not to say that Hume's argument is valid, but it does demand a reply; and Professor Berry's article could be held to be precisely the kind of reply which is needed.

9. The uniformity of nature, however, has biblical support. The opening chapter of the Bible declares the world to have been granted a life of its own requiring no further intervention by God to keep it going. Nature is characterised by unity and harmony, and once it has been created God retires from the work of creation to enjoy his eternal sabbath. A most important relationship with creation continues, and that is the communion of man and God; but it is mankind which is left in charge of the natural order, to rule it and use it in accordance with God's will.

The exegesis of an important passage such as the opening account of creation in Genesis obviously requires far more attention than can be given it here; but the existence of an independently working natural order, established once for all, does raise the question whether or not miracles would occur. A miracle, in the sense of a divine intervention to create something in nature which would not otherwise happen seems to contradict the biblical account's lesson that creation is once for all. It may be held that miracles are exceptions to the general state of things described in Genesis 1:1–2:4a, but this scarcely seems to do justice to the fundamental significance of the passage with its repeated emphasis on God's satisfaction with his completed work, culminating in 2:1–3.

Human sexuality and reproduction are part of the perfect order of creation. Why should the Son of God not enter the world in the divinely appointed way? The argument that in order to be fully human the Son of God must have been fully human from the very beginning of his life in this world is surely not to be dismissed as simply a point that can be more than adequately answered? (p. 103). If the work of salvation had to be accomplished through a real human death, why not through a real human birth? We are accustomed to comparing the Virgin Birth with the Resurrection, but might it not be wiser to compare it with the Crucifixion? In St Paul's Epistle to the Philippians birth and death are linked as illustrations of the self-emptying of Christ. The Resurrection/Ascension follows this sacrifice, the sacrifice beginning with the Incarnation and ending with the Cross (Philippians 2:7–9).

The idea that the Virgin Birth would never have been invented by the early Christians if they had not known it to be an historical fact (ff 32,

p. 109) ignores the Old Testament tradition of miraculous births, continued, be it remembered, in the account of the Baptist's conception and birth as well as that of Jesus. It also ignores the massive if indirect influence of pagan religious belief which includes many tales of sexual relationships between deity and humanity. Early Jewish Christians would naturally look back to Isaac, to Samson, to Samuel, and perhaps Jacob and Esau and Joseph, as they struggled to give expression to the ineffable work of God and tried to convey the true significance of Jesus's coming into this world. Both St Matthew and St Luke have drawn heavily on the Old Testament in attempting to do literary justice to the birth of the Messiah, Son of God; and this means that we do not have to look for evidence of historical witness to an actual virgin birth at all. This is not inventing an idea, but drawing quite naturally on centuries of tradition.

10. John Robinson's statement that the only choice open to us 'is between a virgin and an illegitimate birth' is quoted, apparently with approval, and a number of biblical and extra-biblical texts are mentioned. Should we not include in the relevant biblical texts St Matthew's reference to four women early in the genealogy of Christ? (See Matthew 1:3–6). As is well known genealogical connections were normally traced through men, and that is true for the genealogies in Luke and Matthew apart from these four women, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and the wife of Uriah; and of course, Mary. The exceptional mention of the early four seems to demand some explanation, and all the more so because they were all four more or less disreputable. Tamar seduced her father-in-law (Genesis 38); Rahab was a prostitute (Joshua 2:1, 6:17, 22, 25); Ruth was a Moabitess who seduced Boaz at the instigation of her mother-in-law (Ruth 3:1–14); and Bathsheba committed adultery and could even be regarded as complicit in her husband's murder (II Samuel 11–12:25).

Is it not correct to say that nothing could be further removed from the circumstances under which these women conceived and gave birth than the Virgin Birth of Jesus? On the other hand, as a reply to charges of illegitimacy, the references are surely intelligible? Human judgments on human behaviour, however true and justified, do not set limits to the work of the Holy Spirit; and we should beware of defining the work of grace and salvation in terms of our own moral perception. Is this not consonant with the whole gospel?

If St Matthew knew that as a matter of fact Jesus was born of a virgin, would he have deliberately linked the name of Mary with Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and 'the wife of Uriah'? Or, indeed, with any one of them.

Conclusion

Would Professor Berry agree that there is a certain tension in his article? One aim is to make the actual occurrence of miracles, especially the Virgin Birth, more readily acceptable in a modern society which all too easily adopts or even assumes a sceptical attitude towards claims that they really

did happen. The other aim is to affirm profound religious truth regardless of historical circumstances and accident.

If this tension is accepted, it might nevertheless be regarded as something with which we simply have to live; and, indeed, even fruitful for religious thought. If so, however, we seem to be left with a fatal ambiguity regarding the miraculous. Miracles which can be explained in naturalistic terms, even when we are dealing with extremely remote possibility, cease to be miracles, except in the weak subjective sense of being events which cause amazement. We are left with an historical incident which modern scepticism is compelled to accept, but with no evidence that it was actually an instance of direct divine intervention in the world's working. If we then feel obliged to insist that the weak sense of 'miracle' will not do and we assert that in any given miracle God is 'acting' by analogy with human action in the natural world, only on a much more powerful scale, then our explanations are *ipso facto* surrendered. Human beings continually and in millions of ways alter the course which nature left to itself would follow, a garden or a meal being simple illustrations of the fact. We do this by understanding and manipulating the properties of things; but at this point the analogy breaks down. The specifically miraculous creates new properties and things behave in ways which defy human understanding. This is the evidence that something miraculous has occurred, something which only God could bring about. Are we not left with a choice between mutually exclusive alternatives? Either what is amazing, but in fact what fits in with all other known phenomena and can be coherently explained; or what is unique, at variance with other phenomena and utterly inexplicable.

The implications of our choice are far-reaching. Getting the concept of the miraculous right means getting our conception of God's work in the world right; and since each one of us is part of the world, getting a right understanding of God's work in 'my' life, the lives of 'my' family, friends, acquaintances, enemies, community, nation. This brings us back to the scepticism which concerns Professor Berry, as it concerns all religious believers, and which today is so widespread and deep-rooted. That arch-sceptic, David Hume, ended his Essay 'Of Miracles' with the following piece of savage sarcasm: 'So that, upon the whole, we may conclude that the *Christian Religion* not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: and whoever is moved by *faith* to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience'.

May it not be that Hume, following in the footsteps of Caiaphas and Pilate, spoke truer than he thought?

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