

The Divine Sonship of Christ

PART EIGHT

"Ever learning, and never able to come to a knowledge of the Truth"—2 Tim. 3:7

THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE FIRST TWO CHAPTERS OF MATTHEW AND LUKE

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THAT Jesus is the Son of God is the foundation of the faith of Christ, and that this sonship is an actual sonship, by procreation of the Spirit of God, and not a mere legal or moral relation, or a sonship in any secondary sense, is necessitated by the nature of the plan of redemption by Christ; by the nature of the character of Christ; by the testimony of the prophets, and by typical foreshadowings of the Mosaic Law that went before.

The fact thus rests on a very broad and deep foundation, that cannot be undermined. These massive foundations have often been exhibited in these pages. It is not our purpose to enter upon them on the present occasion. We refer to them as indicating that the divine paternity of Jesus would stand an unassailable truth, even if the records of Matthew and Luke had no existence.

These records are, however, invaluable. They are the circumstantial illustrations of a truth which—though the nature of the case and the prophetic testimony necessitate it—we could not have so clearly and satisfactorily comprehended without them.

They explain to us the appearance and character of Christ, and make us privy to the divine method of procedure, from its incipency onwards, in the most wondrous work of God among men.

There is a class—a very small class—who do not receive these records, and who, more lamentably still, reject the truth which they so plainly exhibit. They accept the bulk of both Matthew and Luke, but reject the first two chapters in each, which contain the only record we have of the birth and early days of Jesus.

The fact of their rejection of these chapters has caused distress to some who, without looking at their reasons, have supposed there must be some ground for their attitude.

It is a question of the reasons. When this is investigated, it will be found that the reasons are altogether flimsy and insufficient: nay, that they are bad; and that the evidence in proof of the genuineness of the (by them) rejected chapters is more than decisive: it cannot be answered, it is irresistible. It leaves no room for doubt or gainsaying.

That, notwithstanding this, some would be found on the doubting or the unbelieving side, need not concern the believer of the Truth. There are such diversities and peculiarities of mental and moral incapacities and perversities that one must always expect an opposition party on every subject.

There always has been such a party in everything; and if a man is to wait till the opposition is converted before he accepts the Truth, he never will accept the Truth, but be found by Christ at his coming among those always weighing—always dubitating—

"Ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the Truth."

First, then, the evidence of the old manuscripts. Of these, not less than 800* have been discovered in various countries since the revival of learning. Every one of these contains the two first chapters of Matthew's gospel with the exception of the single Codex Ebnerianus. But even this manuscript contains ch. 2. As it stands, it begins at 1:18.

*Written 100 years ago. This is even truer now with further manuscripts discovered.

All the ancient versions contain Matthew 1 & 2, including the old Syriac, which is supposed to be nearly, if not quite, coeval with the apostolic age. So with Luke 1 & 2. All the old manuscripts and versions contain them.

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THIS evidence is confirmed by the quotations made by what are known as "the fathers" of the primitive church. Barnabas, Clement, Ignatius and Polycarp have no direct quotations from the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke, but when their subject leads them to refer to these gospels, their words recognize the chapters as we have them.

Ignatius, for example, in his epistle to Trallians, speaks of Jesus as "of the race of David, of the virgin Mary."

In his epistle to the Ephesians, he says, Christ was "conceived in the womb of Mary, of the seed of David, by the Holy Spirit." He refers also to the star mentioned in the disputed chapter.

Justin Martyr adverts to the account given of the miraculous conception by the evangelists. In his apology to the Emperor, Senate and people of Rome, within forty years of the death of the apostle John (Polycarp being still alive), Justin publicly declares as a circumstance well known, how those who had written a history of Christ had expressed themselves on the subject of the virginity of Mary and of the miraculous conception of Christ by the Holy Spirit, his object being to contrast this account with the licentious amours of the heathen deities as given by their poets.

This evidence of "the fathers" is conclusive as to the books of the New Testament containing the account of the miraculous conception in their time. And it is beyond dispute. The "fathers" may not be trust-worthy as to the **meaning** of a scripture, but as to the fact of the **existence** of a scripture, no witnesses could be more qualified to give evidence.

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WHAT are the grounds of rejection?

Unitarian writers assert that the chapters in dispute had their rise among the Gentiles, among whom it was nothing new to suppose immediate intercourse between the Deity and human females, of which heathen mythology furnished several instances (as to which, it may be separately remarked that the men who can discover any affinity between the fabulous heathen accounts of the licentious amours of their gods with women, and the evangelical accounts of the miraculous conception, is ill-qualified to appreciate the difference between the most libidinous and the purest and most sacred of writings).

Unitarian writers produce no proof in support of their assertion. Their only ground of objection lies in the fact testified by Epiphanius and Jerome, that the chapters in question were wanting in the copies used by the Nazarenes and Ebionites; and also in the New Testament used by Marcion.

Let us consider whether this absence of the disputed chapters from the documents in question constitute any ground for objecting to them. This investigation we best conduct by asking what are the facts touching the Ebionites and Marcion.

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WHO were the Ebionites?

The first to mention the Ebionites is Irenaeus (about 175 AD), who speaks of them as a sect not only separated from the general body of Christians, but who opposed the doctrines preached by the Apostles, and rejected, not only the disputed chapters, but the greater part of the books of the New Testament, rejecting all the epistles of Paul, whom they called an apostate from the Law. They only made use of a Hebrew gospel, which they called Matthew's, but which differs from Matthew in many particulars besides the two chapters.

Here is a sect which rejected whole books of authentic Scripture, because they were contrary to their notions. How can a reasonable man accept such a sect as affording guidance on the question of the authenticity of two particular chapters absent from their version, but present in almost all other manuscripts throughout the world?

Their "Matthew" was impugned at the time. It was proclaimed a corruption of the genuine gospel, while the "canonical" Matthew, as we have it, was never called in question. Epiphanius (abt. 350 AD) says:

"In that gospel which they (the Ebionites) have called the gospel according to Matthew, which is not entire and perfect, but corrupted and curtailed, and which they call the Hebrew gospel, it is written . . . (and he quotes).

"Thus" (he says) "they change the true account into a falsehood . . . They have taken away the genealogy from Matthew, and accordingly begin their gospel with these words, 'It came to pass in the days of Herod.'"

Origen (about 225 AD) alludes to it thus —

"It is written in a certain gospel, which is called 'According to the Hebrews'—if indeed anyone is pleased to receive it, NOT AS OF AUTHORITY, but for illustration of the present question . . ." (then he quotes).

Passages quoted by Origen from it prove that the text of the Hebrew Gospel, read by Origen, was not the same as our gospel of Matthew, with which its friends suppose it to be identical. It differed on many points besides the first two chapters.

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THE absence of the first two chapters of Matthew from the Ebionite and Nazarene gospels is of no weight in view of their rejection of Paul's epistles, which even the Unitarians accept. The omission is accounted for in the way the rejection of Paul's epistles is accounted for; the two first chapters did not coincide with their notions, and therefore they struck them out.

The Nazarene and Ebionite copies of Matthew's gospel not only omit the first two chapters, but in several instances they contradict the other three gospels of Mark, Luke, and John, whereas the corresponding passages in the accepted gospel of Matthew agree with them, which shows which way the tampering has occurred.

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AS to Marcion, is his authority of any weight against any part of the Scripture? He omitted the two disputed chapters; but he also rejected the whole of the Old Testament, both the law and the prophets, as proceeding from the God of the Jews, whom he regarded as the creator of this world, in contrast to a higher Creator.

As to the New Testament, he made one for himself, consisting of only one gospel, supposed to be compiled chiefly from Luke, and only ten of Paul's epistles, which are altered from the received version in numerous instances, in order to make the text more pliable to his gnostic notions.

People who quote him against the miraculous conceptions are bound consistently to follow him in these variations as well. He did not admit Christ to have been born at all. Consequently, he begins his gospel thus:

"In the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius, God descended into Capernaum."

He not only omits the first two chapters of Luke; he omits also the account of John the Baptist, the baptism of Christ, and his visit to Nazareth. He also omits part of chapters 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23 and 24.

Those who quote Marcion as an authority in the case of the first two chapters, ought to accept him as such in all these cases. That they disregard him in these cases is a proof that even in their opinion, his authority is of no weight.

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WHEN we come to look at the internal evidence of the chapters in question, the case becomes irresistible.

1. *The narratives of Matthew and Luke would be incomplete without them.*

2. *The chapters themselves are in the inimitable style of the inspired writers, and such as a forger could not have written.*

There is found in the first two chapters of Luke's gospel in particular, no internal trace of forgery or fiction, but many of genuineness and truth. Here are no mistakes; here is nothing inconsistent with manners or with facts—nothing that accords not as well as truth could accord, with all we know of what went before and of what followed this narrative. Everything that is ascribed to every character, whether word or deed, is perfectly natural and proper.

The narratives of Matthew and Luke are both forged if either is: they agree perfectly together; and they reciprocally elucidate and support each other.

For example, Luke's story of the annunciation explains and supports Matthew's narrative in v. 18; and his story of the angel's address to Joseph in v. 20, and the subject of Mary's joy in Luke's v. 48 is explained and illustrated by what we find of Joseph's state of mind concerning his purpose, and his change of purpose in Matthew's vs. 19-20.

Some things in the narrative are of such a nature that they would be likely to bring the whole into controversy, and an ingenious forger would have avoided them as improbable; and there are such things as would hardly have presented themselves to his imagination; or, if they had, such as he would have rejected, lest they should discredit his fiction.

The story of Zacharias and Elizabeth for the confirmation of Mary's faith in the angel's prophecy, seems neither natural nor easy to imagine for the purpose; and had it been a fiction, the scene would not have been laid in a place so public and under the observation of so many people. The circumstances would not have been so numerous, so particular, and so extraordinary; nor would it have been remarked that the transaction was noised abroad and made deep impressions on the minds of the whole country.

Again, as in these things there are hazards of detection which a forger would not have incurred; so also, as in other instances, there is such wonderful propriety in numerous particulars as would not have occurred to an impostor.

For instance, the angels' message to the shepherds, considered as intended to engage their attention and belief is most admirably proper: it is conceived in terms all of them alluding to ancient prophecies of the Messiah, every one of which has singular pertinence and energy; and the whole shows deep scriptural knowledge, circumspection, comprehension, and attention of mind. This, again, seems more like the care of Providence than the invention of a deceiver.

Whether we consider—

1. The unaffected simplicity of the narrative,
2. The calmness with which Matthew records the murder of the infants at Bethlehem (a peculiarity characteristic of the sacred writers) without indulging in reflections on the cruelty of Herod, from which a common historian on such an occasion would scarcely have abstained,
3. The incidental coincidence in the casual description by the evangelist of the reigning powers that periods, with the accounts we read of them in profane history, or
4. The spirit of piety which pervades Luke's narrative—

—we may apply to these portions of the gospels what has been said of the gospels themselves—that the supposed fabrication of them is more wonderful, and more repugnant to our knowledge of the complexion of forgery, than the admission of them as authentic narratives.

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TO summarize—

On the one side (in **support** of the authenticity of the disputed chapters), we have the united evidence of ALL the accessible ancient manuscript and versions, supported by the recognition of the very earliest Christian writers, confirmed by the internal character of the chapters and the necessity for the event which they narrate, to explain the character and mission of Jesus of Nazareth.

On the other side (**against** the chapters) is the merely negative fact that the disputed chapters are absent from the Ebionite gospel, which at the time of its production was pronounced a corruption; and from the Evangelium of Marcion, a gospel which he wrote to suit his own heathenish notions, and from which he recklessly omitted, not only the disputed chapters, but everything that interfered with his peculiar ideas.

The subject is really beyond all controversy. Low indeed must the Biblical critic rank who can gravely attempt to impugn the united evidence of all the manuscripts and "fathers" by such worthless documents as the Ebionite Hebrew gospel and Marcion's Evangelium.
