

'The Virgin Birth of Christ

SOME four years ago two able monographs on the miraculous conception, written by the German scholars, Professors Soltau and Lobstein, made available to English readers the arguments on which a large number of Continental students base their rejection of the historical character of the narratives of the infancy contained in the First and Third Gospels. These books were circulated

quite widely, and revealed to large numbers, greatly to their astonishment and sorrow, how strong a case could be made out against the opinion which has prevailed for centuries. It is a little remarkable that no adequate reply has been made to these treatises, despite the great and tender interest in the subject and the controversies it has occasioned in recent years. We have now, however, two very good essays on the topic, from the conservative point of view, written independently and about the same time. The book of Professor Orr is the result of lectures delivered in this city last winter under the auspices of the Bible Teachers' Training School. They attracted wide interest at the time, doubtless partly owing to the case of Dr. Crapsey, then fresh in the public mind. Dr. Orr is a strenuous conservative, a man of wide reading and information, and of unquestioned integrity and sincerity of conviction. He never quotes an opponent's position unfairly, nor intentionally presses his own argument beyond his honest conviction of its worth. His book is probably the clearest and strongest defense of the traditional view that can be made at the present time.

It is doubtful if such as have felt that in reading the early chapters of Matthew and Luke they were in the presence of legend rather than history will change their minds after reading Dr. Orr's earnest apology. The reason is that Dr. Orr is a dogmatic theologian, and the problem he handles is one of literary appreciation. With all his penetration and his honest endeavor to put himself in the place of those who doubt, it cannot be said that he realizes the obstacles in the way of literal acceptance of the infancy narratives. For example, a familiar argument against the miraculous birth is that the genealogies trace the descent thru Joseph, which would make it appear that their compilers had no knowledge of the claim of supernatural conception. But to Dr. Orr it is a sufficient answer that to Luke and Matthew the genealogies were not inconsistent with birth from a Virgin, and therefore they are *not* in reality incompatible. Dr. Orr

is thinking of the Evangelists as careful historians whose logic can be trusted; but those he labors to convince are thinking of earnest Christian teachers who desired to edify, and who gathered here and there stories of their Master which they believed would be spiritually useful, without considering always whether they would logically hold together.

It may further be doubted whether Dr. Orr has caught quite the spirit in which his problem should be approached for the large number of those who are seeking light upon it. He writes of "attacks" upon the doctrine, and of its "assailants," and the image of a Puritan pike and broadsword seems almost to start out from some of his pages. But those in the camp against him do not need to be charged with the truth; they require only to be shown clearly and unmistakably where are its lines. In this respect Mr. Sweet would seem to have the better of the Glasgow professor. His position is essentially the same, his examination of the subject is much more detailed, his reasoning is not always cogent, but his research has been patient, his consideration of the subject on all sides thorough, and he has preserved throughout the convincing spirit of inquiry. These volumes supplement one another, Mr. Sweet's being fuller in the examination of particular subjects, Dr. Orr's being superior in clear presentation, and together they carry the discussion as far as it can go until the larger question of the literary character and inter-relation of the Gospels is more nearly settled.

¹THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF CHRIST. By James Orr, M.A., D.D. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. \$1.50.

²THE BIRTH AND INFANCY OF JESUS CHRIST ACCORDING TO THE GOSPEL NARRATIVES. By the Rev. J. Louis Matthews Sweet, M.A., with an introduction by James Stevenson Riggs, D.D. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press. \$1.50.