

THE

Miraculous Conception:

OR,

THE DIVINITY OF JESUS CHRIST

CONSIDERED AS

The Foundation

OF

THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION.

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THE
Miraculous Conception,

&c.

THERE are two accounts of the miraculous conception, one in the gospel according to St. Matthew, the other in the gospel according to St. Luke. In both these accounts there are several collateral circumstances which are here printed from the approved version, but the examination is intended to be confined as closely as possible to those parts only which relate to the miraculous conception, and, consequently, to the supposed divinity of Jesus Christ. That the Christian reader may see nakedly, and without disguise, the grounds of his faith.

The story in St. Matthew is as follows:—

CHAP. I.

“ 18. Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: *when as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.*

“ 19. *Then Joseph her husband being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily.*

“ 20. *But while he thought on these things, behold the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, ‘ Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.*

“ 21. *‘ And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus.: for he shall save his people from their sins.’*

“ 22. Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying,

“ 23. Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted, is God with us.

“ 24. *Then Joseph being raised from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife.*

“ 25. And knew her not till she had brought forth her first-born son. And he called his name Jesus.”

This is all St. Matthew says on the subject.

St. Luke's account is more circumstantial, it is as follows:—

CHAP. I.

“ 5. There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

“ 6. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

“ 7. And they had no child, because that Elizabeth was barren, and they both were now well-stricken in years.

“ 8. And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course,

“ 9. According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.

“ 10. And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense.

“ 11. And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

“ 12. And when Zacharias saw him he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.

“ 13. But the angel said unto him, ‘ Fear not, Zacharias; for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Eliza-

beth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.

“ 14. ‘ And thou shalt have joy and gladness ; and many shall rejoice at his birth.

“ 15. ‘ For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink ; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb.

“ 16. ‘ And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God.

“ 17. ‘ And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just ; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.’

“ 18. And Zacharias said unto the angel, ‘ Whereby shall I know this ? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years.’

“ 19. And the angel answering said unto him, ‘ I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God ; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings.

“ 20. ‘ And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season.’

“ 21. And the people waited for Zacharias, and marvelled that he tarried so long in the temple.

“ 22. And when he came out, he could not speak unto them ; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple : for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless.

“ 23. And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house.

“ 24. And after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying,

“ 25. ‘ Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men.’

“ 26. *And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth,*

“ 27. *To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.*

“ 28. *And the angel came in unto her, and said, ‘Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.’*

“ 29. *And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.*

“ 30. *And the angel said unto her, ‘Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God.*

“ 31. *‘And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus.*

“ 32. *‘He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David:*

“ 33. *‘And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.’*

“ 34. *Then said Mary unto the angel, ‘How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?’*

“ 35. *And the angel answered and said unto her, ‘The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.*

“ 36. *‘And, behold, thy cousin Elizabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren.*

“ 37. *‘For with God nothing shall be impossible.’*

“ 38. *And Mary said, ‘Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.’ And the angel departed from her.*

“ 39. *And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill-country with haste, into a city of Juda;*

“ 40. *And entered into the house of Zacharias, and saluted Elizabeth.*

“ 41. *And it came to pass, that, when Elizabeth*

heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost.

“ 42. And she spake out with a loud voice, and said, ‘ Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.

“ 43. ‘ And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

“ 44. ‘ For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy.

“ 45. ‘ And blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord,’

“ 46. And Mary said, ‘ My soul doth magnify the Lord,

“ 47. ‘ And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

“ 48. ‘ For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

“ 49. ‘ For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name.

“ 50. ‘ And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.

“ 51. ‘ He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

“ 52. ‘ He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree.

“ 53. ‘ He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.

“ 54. ‘ He hath holpen his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy.

“ 55. ‘ As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.’

“ 56. And Mary abode with her about three months, and returned to her own house.

The whole of the foregoing matter, as well that

taken from Matthew as that from Luke, is rejected by the Unitarians as spurious. This sect, which is every day increasing, contains, and has long contained, many very learned men; and these men have for the use of the sect made a new translation of the Testament, which is published under the title of "THE NEW TESTAMENT, IN AN IMPROVED VERSION," &c.

In a long note, appended to the 16th verse of the 1st chapter of St. Matthew, reasons are given for rejecting the story of the miraculous conception. Among other things it observes, "The account of the miraculous conception of Jesus was probably the fiction of some early Gentile convert, who hoped, by elevating the founder, to abate the popular prejudices against the sect. See upon this subject, Dr. Priestley's History of Early Opinions, Vol. IV. Book iii. c. 29; Pope on the Miraculous Conception; Dr. Williams's Free Enquiry; Dr. Bell's Arguments for the Authenticity of the Narratives of Matthew and Luke, and Dr. Williams's Remarks; Dr. Campbell's and Dr. Newcombe's Notes upon the Text; Mr. Evanson's Dissonance, chap. i. sect. 3. chap. iii. sect. 2.; Jones's Developement of Events, Vol. I. p. 365," &c.

In a note to the 1st chapter of Luke, the Improved Version has six articles, containing reasons for rejecting both that and the succeeding chapter. The six articles are summed up by the following observation: "And there are many other circumstances in the story which wear an improbable and fabulous aspect."

"It has," they continue, "been objected, that so large and gross an interpolation could not have escaped detection, and would never have been so early and so generally received. In reply to this objection it is observed, that the interpolation was not admitted into the Hebrew¹ copies of Matthew's Gospel, nor into Marcion's² copies of Luke. That it is notorious that

¹ The language in which Matthew is supposed to have written.

² Marcion was the leader of a sect in the second century.

forged writings, under the names of the apostles, were in circulation almost from the apostolic age. See 2 Thessalonians, chap. ii. ver. 2. That the orthodox charge the heretics with corrupting the text; and that the heretics recriminate upon the orthodox. Also, that it was much easier to introduce interpolation when copies were few and scarce, than since they have been multiplied by means of the press. And, finally, that the interpolation in question would, to the generality of Christians, be extremely gratifying, as it would lessen the odium attached to Christianity from its founder being a crucified Jew, and would elevate him to the dignity of the heroes and demi-gods of the heathen mythology."

The Unitarians, reject all that is related of the birth of Christ, as spurious and interpolated, and of course consider him as the son of Joseph and Mary, begotten in the ordinary way; and they give references to many scholars and inquisitive men, in whose works the curious reader will find a number of learned arguments against the stories of Matthew and Luke being received, and to these he is referred. What follows is a short examination of the two stories on the principles of what is usually called common sense, in the way in which an ordinary man would investigate a tale in which he was interested in knowing the truth.

We will begin with Matthew, because he is admitted to have been the oldest writer.

Ver. 18. "Before they came together." It was necessary to premise this, because their "coming together" was in no way disreputable according to the custom of the Jews of that time. It was usual, when both the parties were of mature age, for them to come together as soon as they were espoused; if the woman became great with child, they were then married, if otherwise, the espousement continued for a year, when the parties were usually married; but it sometimes hap-

pened that they separated by consent. Not having children being considered a curse.

Ver. 19. "Joseph was minded to put her away *privily*." In the former verse it is said, "she was found with child of the Holy Ghost;" here, it seems, it was not suspected to be "of the Holy Ghost," but by a man, and that too as a fraud upon Joseph, who was minded in consequence to put her away. It follows, also, that Mary was unconscious that it was "of the Holy Ghost" she was breeding, or we must suppose she would not have failed to have told Joseph of so very important a circumstance; it is, however, abundantly plain, she told him nothing about it. "She was found with child." How found? By her own confession. No such thing; had that been the case, it would certainly have been mentioned; and the angel which, in the next verse, came on purpose to announce it, would, instead of announcing it, have come only to have confirmed her account of her being with child, without having known man, and to say how it happened. But, no; the angel comes not for any such purpose, but to prevent her being put away when it had been discovered that she was breeding. By what was she found to be with child. By her appearance? No; in that case, "putting her away *privily*" would have been absurd? By her friends? No; "putting her away *privily*" would in that case have been equally absurd. It could then have been known to no one but her husband Joseph, who finding himself imposed upon, was willing to hide his shame by getting rid of her in the quietest way he could. But all this happened "before they came together;" this assertion was made for the open-mouthed, wide-throated, credulous, ignorant people, to whom this Gospel was addressed, and for their successors, "who strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel."

If they had "not come together," all Joseph would

have had to do would have been to send her home again to her parents; he would have had no occasion to cogitate on the means of getting rid of her; he would have told her relations, "My bargain was for sound ware, and I cannot take this 'cracked pitcher,'" and there the matter would have ended. But it was by their coming together that Joseph found out she was with child; how long they had cohabited does not appear, but it must have been some time, according to the easy, familiar style of the narrative: "When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together she was found with child." Their having been together, and her being with child, were indeed the only reasons why he could not send her home again, as barrenness was a curse, so fruitfulness was a blessing, and had Joseph sent her home he would have been reminded that he had possessed the person of his espoused, and was in a fair way to be blessed. According to the Jewish law and custom, he had no cause for complaint, and could have received no redress; therefore he "thought on these things, and was minded to put her away privily."

So far this story is told in a bungling manner, pompously introduced by a falsehood, that "she was found with child of the Holy Ghost."

Ver. 20. "But while he thought of these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.'" In verse 18, "she was found to be with child of the Holy Ghost," and then, and not till then, Joseph was going to put her away; plain enough it is, if the words have any meaning, that "she was found with child," but not "of the Holy Ghost;" if it had been so, it could not have been said, "Then Joseph was minded to put her away," neither would it have been necessary for "the angel of the Lord" to pester him in his sleep, as he is said to have done.

Cavillers may talk themselves blind, learned doctors may preach themselves hoarse, commentators may write "so many books, that the world would not contain them," they will never be able to make any thing more of this story than that a poor, ignorant, credulous man, dreamed in his sleep that an angel had been talking nonsense to him; this folly might have passed, as no doubt it did pass for reason, some centuries ago, when almost every body had faith in dreams; but it is an ill compliment to the intelligence of the present generation to expect it should be equally besotted.

Joseph dreamed that he saw an angel, that the angel told him his wife was with child by God himself, (the Holy Ghost being God), and ver. 24, "Then Joseph being raised from his sleep, did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him, and took unto him his wife." But did Joseph dream? Perhaps he did; but whether he did or did not, clear enough it is that he, and he alone, could relate that he had dreamed; whether or not he did make such a relation we are not told, but we are left to infer that he did, because somebody, nobody knows who, has written that he did say he had dreamed. But if he had dreamed, and had personally related his dream to every one of us, would that be any reason for our believing that God had got his wife with child, and that an angel had been sent to tell him so? Talk of blasphemy; in what can this relation be paralleled as blasphemous, except indeed by the grossest credulity? A poor, ignorant man relates a dream, and all the world are called upon not only to believe his relation of that dream, absurd, abominable, and ridiculous as it is, but to place their everlasting happiness upon the absurd relation, to inculcate a belief fo it into their children, to waste their substance in paying people to preach it, and to persecute to death those whose minds cannot receive the monstrous doctrine as undoubted truth. Moral evidence there is none, there can be none;—there is nothing in the

story which can be compared and contrasted ; there is nothing out of it which can elucidate it ; it is nothing more than a pretended relation of a credulous man—
That he, being a sleep, had dreamed a dream.

According to the account given by St. Luke, not one word of all this story is true.

ST. LUKE. Chap. I.—Here the story is altogether, from the beginning to the end, a different one from that told by Matthew. Here there is no account

1. Of Mary being found with child.
2. Of Joseph's intention to put her away.
3. Of Joseph's dreaming.
4. Of the angel appearing to him.
5. Of his changing his mind, and resolving to keep her.

It should be observed, that these five items include the whole account in Matthew. So, in Luke, not one of the circumstances related are told by Matthew. In Matthew, Joseph is made the important personage, while poor Mary seems to have been ignorant of all that was passing ; in Luke she is made the important personage, and poor Joseph is now as ignorant as Mary was according to the former relation.

Luke's account is indeed very circumstantial, he says it was the angel Gabriel who visited Mary, but although he relates the very words which passed between them, it does not appear that Mary knew she was conversing with an angel ; he did not announce himself as an angel, nor is there one word in the dialogue between them which can fairly be said to indicate any such understanding on the part of Mary : she does not appear to have been at all surprised at the visit, private and abrupt as it was. "*She was troubled at his saying,*" not at his presence, "*and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be ;*" at this salutation she might, to be sure, be somewhat confounded, although she immediately afterwards submitted herself so humbly to her guest. "*All these things she kept in her heart,*" for it does not appear

that she communicated any of them to her husband; to him she never opened her lips on the subject; no angel visited him, sleeping or waking, to tell him of it; nothing is said about his "*knowing her not till she had brought forth her first-born;*" they lived together in the ordinary way of poor people, as man and wife, until she was brought to bed in a stable, Joseph all the time considering the child as his.

Luke's story, stripped of its verbiage, is this:—The angel Gabriel was sent by God to Mary, who was espoused to Joseph. The angel addresses her very familiarly—she becomes alarmed, and the angel tells her she shall "conceive in her womb, and bring forth a son, and shall call his name Jesus." Mary, in her simplicity, asks how that can be, "seeing I know not a man." The angel replies,—“The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee.” And Mary says, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to thy word.” Mary then went to her cousin Elizabeth, who lived at a distance “in the hill-country, where she staid about three months,” and then she came home again. Afterwards Joseph and Mary go to Bethlehem to be taxed, (enrolled); here Mary is delivered in a stable, there being no room in the inn.

A Mr. Le Clerc, a very learned, that is, a very bookish man, made what he called a harmony of the Evangelists; he puts the relation of Luke first, and supposes all that he relates, happened to Mary, before Joseph and she got together: and that she concealed from him all that had passed between her and the angel Gabriel, and between her and Elizabeth; and that Joseph being left in utter ignorance of all that had passed, resolved to put her away. To prevent this, says the learned Doctor, an angel appeared to him in a dream (what does appearing in a dream mean, simply in his imagination) and told him the story as related by Matthew. The learned Doctor says: “Joseph being awaked from his dream, perceived it had been sent by

God, as well because Mary, upon his enquiry, related to him what had happened to her just after the same manner as the angel had told him in his sleep."

To what miserable shifts is folly driven to support superstition; what miserable pretexts does roguery have recourse to, to propagate and uphold imposition! Not one word is there to warrant this pretended conference with Mary, which the learned Doctor has so circumstantially related. That Joseph was ignorant of the intercourse Mary had had with the angel, could not be concealed from the reader, who believed Matthew's relation, according to which Mary had said nothing to Joseph of the communication and commerce she had had with the angel, neither is there the least reason from that account to suppose that Matthew knew any thing of the decently-told story of Elizabeth, or of Mary's going and remaining three months with her; but, according to Luke, she hurried off in her exultation of being with child, and there they communed together in a state of the highest enthusiasm. Elizabeth, being filled with the Holy Ghost, and the babe leaping for joy in her womb, spake out in a loud voice,—and Mary followed in the same manner, and in the same strain. But notwithstanding this, notwithstanding the exultation between the women, Joseph was not to be let into the secret; all the rapturous feelings of Mary were now subdued; she not only suppressed her joy which seemed unbounded, but she kept the whole matter a profound secret, even at a risk of being turned out of doors as a strumpet, and an angel is obliged to be sent from God to Joseph in a dream, to prevent the catastrophe; the deception is approved by God, who sends the "angel from heaven" to reconcile Joseph to his wife's perfidy.

According to Matthew, a certain man had a dream. According to Luke, an angel called privately on a young woman, who, in consequence of the visit, was with child. And this is all there is to establish the divinity of Jesus Christ.

It cannot be called evidence, for by whom it was given, whether by the man himself, or the woman herself, nobody knows; to whom it was given, if it was given, nobody knows; when it was given, nobody knows; where it was given, nobody knows; and the learned are even disputing to this very time about the language in which the stories were originally written, and by whom they were written. And yet not literally to believe either or both of these worse than "old wives' tales," is to subject a man to persecution; not to affect to believe that which, when stripped of the absurd reverence which has been cast round it, no man ever did or ever can believe, is to be imputed to him as a reproach of so horrible a nature, that thousands, who treat it as it deserves in their own minds, dare not avow their disbelief; not to commit the immoral act of self-delusion and debasement is imputed as a crime, and men are shunned because they are moral.

The sanctity thrown around this sad nonsense; the cry of blasphemy which has been raised against any one who ventured to examine it, the horror felt by fanatics, which vented itself in persecutions the most diversified, deterred people from trusting to reason, and made them even forget that it was by reason alone they are ever able to choose one religion in preference to another. Every religious sect allows, that you may use your reason to distinguish between what they hold out to you, and what you yourself believe; you may, and you ought, they tell you, to exercise your reason so far as to give their doctrines the preference; and having thus exercised your reason, and having by its aid abandoned your former notions, and adopted theirs; having become "a child of grace," and turned to the right way, there shall be "more joy in heaven at your conversion than over ninety and nine just persons, who" having always belonged to the sect, "needed no conversion." All sects proclaim this joy, at the same moment, as each makes converts from the others; with all of them reason to choose your faith is the great

good, but having exercised it so far, there you must stop, reason must be instantly extinguished; on no account must you trust to such a "*blind guide*;" reason, which but just before was all but omnipotent, is now "*fallible*"—" *poor fallible reason*," all is now "*faith*;" examine any one of their dogmas, you are a "*backslider*;" doubt any one of their absurd relations, you are a "*blasphemer*;" and thus it is that ignorance and persecution brutalizes and degrades mankind. Had the stories of Joseph and Mary been preached to us from the sacred books of the Persians, how would every good Christian have been scandalized! "What, he would have exclaimed, "what horrid blasphemy! first to pretend that God himself (the Holy Ghost being God) had commerce with a woman, by which she became with child, and who all the time she was breeding lived with a man, lived with him, too, by command of 'an angel sent from God,' lived with him as his wife in such a way that no one seems to have suspected the child was not his own, and after the birth of God, (God the Son being God) in the ordinary way of all mankind, and still living with him, and having other children by him.¹ First God has her, then Joseph has her. These are abominable stories, indeed. Call out blasphemy at yourselves, ye fanatical persecutors of other men's opinions. Shame, pity, contempt, are the passions those terrible tales excite for you, compassion for those who are so unfortunate as to become your victims."

Thanks, however, are due to the intelligence of the age which could endure this monstrous perversion of the human understanding no longer, which has abolished the LAW that made it criminal to deny "that

¹ Matt. chap. xiii. ver. 55, 56. "Is not this *the son of the carpenter*? is not his mother called *Mary*? and his brethren, *James*, and *Joses*, and *Simon*, and *Judas*, and are not all his sisters with us?"

Jesus Christ is God," and left us at liberty freely to express our opinions on this absurd dogma.¹

¹ By stat. 9 and 10 William III. c. 32. "Any person or persons, having been educated in or having at any time made profession of the Christian religion within this realm, shall by writing, printing, teaching, or advised speaking, deny any one of the persons in the Holy Trinity to be God, or shall assert or maintain there are more Gods than one," shall be liable to certain penalties.

By stat. 53 George III. c. 160. it is enacted, that the Act passed in the 9 and 10 William III. "so far as the same relates to persons denying as therein-mentioned, respecting the Holy Trinity, be, and the same are hereby repealed."

THE END.