

ST MARK'S WITNESS TO THE VIRGIN BIRTH.

ST MARK'S Gospel is so commonly felt to be a difficulty rather than a help to the doctrine of the Virgin Birth that it may be worth while studying its witness.

I. The first difficulty usually urged against the doctrine is that St Mark lacks the Matthean Birth-document. To urge this is to use the 'argument from silence'; which may or may not be valid.

But (a) The Gospel represents the mind of St Peter. Antecedent probabilities are strongly against supposing that the apostle who made the most public profession of faith in the Divine Sonship did not accept the Virgin Birth. It may be argued, however, that this profession of faith quoted in St Matthew's Gospel is not from St Matthew's pen.

Still (b) No great weight could be set upon the silence of the Petrine Gospel, were it indeed silent. For the Marcan Gospel is the preaching of Peter. It is essentially a *εὐαγγέλιον*, i. e. a message, a witness, an eye and ear witness. St Mark alone calls his work a *εὐαγγέλιον*. Neither St Luke nor St John ever uses the word. And the first Gospel which does use the word four times, is entitled 'The Book of the Generation of Jesus Christ'. St Mark's Gospel is essentially the 'witness' of St Peter. It is his formal evidence. It is what he saw, and heard, and preached. There is scarcely a word or an incident in the Gospel that St Peter had not personally heard or seen. He could therefore appeal to it as evidence. It was of apologetic value.

Hence he begins with the preaching of the Baptist whom he had heard and seen. But, he had been nowise a witness of the Virgin Birth. Nor was it of any apologetic value. To preach it was to increase rather than lessen the difficulties of faith. It was otherwise with the Resurrection. Of that great miracle he had been in a special way the witness. Moreover it was of supreme apologetic worth. Thus it formed the master-theme of the apostolic preaching. On antecedent grounds, then, no argument could be drawn from the supposed silence of St Mark. But

II. St Mark's witness to the Virgin Birth is by no means to be overlooked. If it is not the thesis of the Gospel, it is not denied by the thesis. The argument naturally falls into subdivisions.

(a) Not once does St Mark call Jesus the son of Joseph. In vi 3 He is called *ὁ υἱὸς τῆς Μαρίας* (Mt. xiii 55 *ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ λέγεται Μαρίας*) where St Luke has (iv 22) *οὐχὶ υἱὸς ἐστὶν Ἰωσήφ οὗτος*; and St John vi 42 *Ἰησοῦς ὁ υἱὸς Ἰωσήφ*.

This is somewhat more striking if we recall that St Mark has a fondness for giving the parentage of those who appear prominently in his Gospel. He alone gives (x 47) 'the son of Timaeus'.

(b) If St Mark nowhere calls Jesus Christ the son of Joseph he insists on the fact that Jesus Christ is the 'Son of God'. Indeed, it is doubtful whether this could not be looked upon as the thesis of his Gospel. And indeed it might well be, if St Peter's profession of faith is kept in mind. The references to the Son of God are very striking.

i 1 ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ υἱοῦ Θεοῦ. B and D support this reading; N omits it.

i 11 'Thou art My beloved Son'. [This is the first mention of the parentage of Jesus Christ. It should be compared with St Peter's profession of faith, especially with Mt. xvi 17 'Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona, for flesh and blood hath not revealed it to thee, but my Father'. Moreover, St Mark displaces the chronology in order to begin with this striking saying.]

iii 11 'And unclean spirits, when they saw Him, fell down before Him, and cried, saying, Thou art the Son of God'.

v 7 The unclean spirit 'cried out with a loud voice, What have I to do with thee, Jesus Son of the most high God?'

ix 7 'And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, THIS IS MY BELOVED SON, HEAR HIM'. [It should be compared with 2 Pet. i 17 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye Him'. 18 'And this voice we heard brought from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mount'.]

xiv 61 'Art thou the Christ, the υἱὸς τοῦ εὐλογητοῦ?'

xv 39 'The centurion . . . said . . . Truly this man was the Son of God'.

(c) Confirmatory evidence may be found in the parable of the master of the vineyard, which is found in the Synoptists. St Mark's account seems the earliest. Mk. xii 6 'Having yet therefore one son, His well-beloved' (ἔτι ἓνα εἶχεν, υἱὸν ἀγαπητόν). St Mark alone gives ἓνα.

All three Synoptists agree that it was this parable that goaded the chief priests and pharisees to seek to lay hands on Him.

Another confirmation is from Mk. xiii 32 'But of that day and that hour knoweth no man; no, not the angels which are in heaven; neither the Son, but the Father'.

(d) There are fourteen texts in which Jesus Christ is called the *Son of Man*.

(e) There are four texts in which He is called the *Son of David*.

III. St Peter, from whom the Gospel of St Mark draws its information, either believed that Jesus Christ was the son of Joseph or he did

not believe. If he believed, it is almost inconceivable that he should never call Him by His father's name, especially when it was the custom of the country to do so. It becomes still more inconceivable when we remark that he uses the phrase 'Son of God' seven times, 'Son of Man' fourteen times, and 'Son of David' four times.

But if he held that Jesus Christ was not the Son of Joseph, but the Son of God, although the Son of Mary, the whole of his witness becomes clear.

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I PETER v 9.

ὅ ἀντίστητε στερεοὶ τῇ πίστει, εἰδότες τὰ αὐτὰ τῶν παθημάτων τῆ ἐν κόσμῳ ἡμῶν ἀδελφότητι ἐπιτελεῖσθαι.—R.V. text.

Whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world.—A.V.

Whom withstand steadfast in your faith, knowing that the same sufferings are accomplished in your brethren who are in the world.—R.V.

If I venture to question the correctness of our English versions, I must shelter myself in the first instance behind the authority of Dr Bigg, who writes:—'Almost every word of this rendering is open to serious objection. εἰδὼς followed by an infinitive means "knowing how" to do a thing; cf. Luke xii 56, Phil. iv 12, Krüger's *Greek Grammar* lvi 7, 9; Blass, p. 227. "Knowing that" is εἰδὼς ὄτι.'

But besides the grammatical objection, there is an even more serious moral one. Surely it is far too low a note for St Peter to end his great Epistle on—'You are not alone in your sufferings; all Christians have the same burden to bear.' It was just the amount of consolation which Buddha gave to his disciples, according to the well-known story. To the young mother whose child had died he said, 'Get me a handful of mustard seed from a house where no son, husband, parent, or slave has died.' And so she learns that suffering is the common lot, and extracts from the knowledge such comfort as she can. But is this all that Christianity has to teach us?

'That loss is common would not make
My own less bitter, rather more:
Too common! Never morning wore
To evening, but some heart did break.'

And we too have felt how 'common is the commonplace' when we have tried to draw upon it for the consolation of ourselves or others. To suppose that St Peter would inflict it on us as the climax of his