

CHAPTER I

## JESUS, MARY, AND HUME

### On the Possibility of the Virgin Birth



Some wise men, a stable, sheep, and a young virgin giving birth to the mortal son of a perfect God. Ask anyone, and they will tell you Jesus' virgin birth is an essential part of the Christmas story. We talk about it so often there is even a shorthand way of referring to it – the Christmas miracle. Given how important this extraordinary claim is to people around the world, and how often we hear it made (almost every day for no less than a month every year), it is surprising how little attention and reflection is paid to establishing the truth of the

claim. In this essay we set aside our yuletide spirit in order to evaluate the truth of the Christmas miracle.

#### Miracle on Definition Street

Before we get too far, we need to be clear on what we mean by a miracle and how exactly the virgin birth of Jesus is supposed to be a miracle. When we use the term “miracle” we are using the definition given by the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–76). Hume defines a miracle as “a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent.”<sup>1</sup> This definition seems to capture the commonsense meaning of the word. To put it in

terms of an often used example, if God interceded and cured Grandma's terminal cancer, that would be a miracle. If, on the other hand, Grandma gets better without God's intervention, no miracle occurred – she was just lucky.

Essential to Hume's account of miracles is his understanding of laws of nature. A law of nature, as Hume understands it, is formed by consistently observing a regularity in a series of experienced events. It is the goal of the sciences to discover and explain these laws of nature. Hume's paradigm example of a law of nature is that "all men must die."<sup>2</sup> As evidenced throughout humanity, we experience with uniform regularity that if you are mortal, then you will die at some point. Although it may be very surprising to see a young person of good health suddenly die, it is by no means a miracle, as Hume notes, because it has been observed to happen in the past. Such an event would not constitute a violation of a law of nature because it conforms to past regularities. However, Hume agrees that it would be a miracle if a mortal person were to die and then come back to life. There is uniform regularity in our experience that points to the fact that death is irreversible. So, if a person were to come back to life after being dead, this event would violate a law of nature that has been firmly established from past, uniform experience. Notice this is perfectly in keeping with how the term is normally used. Christians say that it is a miracle that Jesus rose from the dead because such events are outside regularly established natural laws.

## What the Bible Says

If you ask believers why they think Jesus was born to a virgin mother, they will tell you, "It's in the Bible." So it seems like the Bible is a reasonable place to start our search for truth about the virgin birth. While most readers no doubt know the basics regarding the structure and organization of the Bible, let's do a quick review. The Bible is divided into two parts: the Old and New Testaments. The dividing line is the life of Jesus. Everything about Jesus is in the New Testament. The New Testament itself is divided into four gospels, each written by a different person. The names traditionally ascribed to the gospel writers are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, although authorship was not assigned until considerably after the texts themselves were written.<sup>3</sup> All four of the gospel writers offer what they see as the important highlights of Jesus' life. Just like with

a biography, the gospels are not complete histories, but all significant events are supposed to be covered. For example, all four gospels discuss Jesus' death by crucifixion and his resurrection. Since all the gospels covered the miraculous rebirth of Jesus, you would think they would all also cover his birth, if it was equally miraculous. This is not the case, however. Mark and John say nothing about Jesus' birth at all. This leaves us with only Matthew and Luke. Both of whom, we will see, say very little about the virgin birth.

Matthew's story starts with a lineage tracing Jesus' ancestry back to Abraham. The narrative proper begins with Mary learning from an angel that she is going to have a baby through the Holy Spirit. From there, the account moves to Joseph, a part of the story often ignored in retellings found in books and films. When Joseph finds out about Mary's pregnancy he tells her that he is going to set aside their marriage contract. But then Joseph also gets visited by an angel. Joseph's angelic visitor tells him that he should marry Mary because she conceived through the Holy Spirit and, like most people who are told to do something by a supernatural being, he does so. Most importantly, Joseph is told that the baby's birth will fulfill the Old Testament prophecy that "a virgin will conceive and bear a son, and his name will be Emmanuel," a name which means "God is with us."<sup>4</sup> This quote is a reference to a passage in Isaiah (from the Old Testament).<sup>5</sup> Never again in the rest of the gospel is the virgin birth mentioned.

Luke also offers an account of an angel visiting Mary. This time, the angel is given the name Gabriel, but the content of his message is the same, although more detailed. Mary asks Gabriel how it is she is going to have a baby, since she is a virgin. The angel explains that the Holy Spirit will be the cause of her pregnancy. Luke does not give Joseph's side of things like Matthew does, but he does note that Joseph and Mary were *not* married (they were betrothed) when she gave birth.<sup>6</sup> Just like with Matthew, after this brief account of Mary's conversation with the angel, the miracle of Jesus' virgin birth was not mentioned in the rest of the gospel.

## Now Testify

Now that we know what the Bible says, we can evaluate how we should understand it. As rational agents, we don't just believe everything we are told. Instead, we look for reasons to think certain things are true before

we take them as fact. When we only have some reason, or our reasons aren't great, we reserve judgment or we hold weaker claims, like something probably is true, or might be true. Consider the following example: if your little sister tells you she saw mommy kissing Santa Claus underneath the mistletoe last night, that isn't going to be enough reason to take it to be true. But, given what you know about your mom, you might think, "That sure sounds like mom, it probably happened."

This intuitive way of understanding the way rational people come to beliefs was put a little more concretely by David Hume when he claimed that a wise person will form and hold beliefs in proportion to the supporting evidence of the claim. It helps to think of how evidence influences belief in terms of a sliding scale, with all the available hypotheses piled on it. Every time there is a new piece of evidence to consider we will move certain theories up on the scale and others down, based on which theories the evidence supports. Sometimes, like in the case of mommy kissing Santa Claus, there are only two hypotheses – either she kissed or she didn't. With others, like an account of quantum mechanics, there can be hundreds of hypotheses. Whichever theory is at the top is the one that we ought to believe, but we should only believe it to the extent to which it beats out the other theories.<sup>7</sup>

But how do we weigh evidence? With scientific data this is easy, since for the most part things are easily quantifiable, and experiments are designed specifically to test individual hypotheses. With testimony, however, whether it is from your sister or the authors of the Bible, things are a little more complicated. In these cases, the evidence needs to be evaluated on two standards: how credible is the person giving the testimony and how plausible is the purported event. So, say that you hear from your cousin in Florida that it snowed in Orlando on Christmas morning. In this case, the credibility of your cousin's testimony is important, given that the likelihood of it actually snowing in Orlando is pretty low. If your cousin is honest, finds practical joking distasteful, has keen senses, and isn't prone to hallucinations, then he is fairly credible, and you would have strong, but not absolute, reason to trust him. If your cousin has a deficiency in any of these areas, then you will have less of a reason to trust him. Now, consider a similar case where your cousin calls and tells you that not only is it snowing in Orlando, but that talking snowmen are falling from the sky. At this point, the credibility of your cousin's testimony doesn't play much of a role, no matter how trustworthy he is. This is because what he is telling you (at least the snowmen are falling from the sky part) is, though not logically impossible, so highly improbable

given everything you know about the world that you can't give it credence. In some cases, "the incredibility of a fact" is enough to invalidate even the most accredited testimony.<sup>8</sup>

It is also important to note that you can have multiple people giving testimony about something. When this happens you have to evaluate the testimony of all parties in the way we have just laid out. It will often be the case that some witnesses will be more credible than others. The addition of testimony of a more credible witness will bolster the claims of a less credible individual when they agree, but several meritless witnesses will not make the testimony much more believable. So, if your cousin who tells you about the snow in Orlando is a liar, but his story is confirmed by his honest mother, then it is more likely to be true. If that whole side of the family tends to be loose with the truth, then you still shouldn't believe them, even if everyone in the house tells you about the snow. Given this, you can always look for more credible witnesses to confirm or deny what you have been told through testimony. You can also search for first hand or scientific evidence. So, if you're skeptical about your cousin's testimony that it's snowing in Orlando, you could try to confirm it by watching a meteorologist's weather report of Orlando, as well as seeking out visual confirmation of the snowfall. Comparatively, if you sought verification in the case where your cousin tells you talking snowmen are falling from the sky, you would most likely end up disconfirming the testimony in light of the scientific evidence. In cases where testimony by itself is not convincing, attempting to verify the testimony by scientific authority can be very helpful.

## Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About the Gospels But Were Afraid to Ask

So, are Matthew and Luke credible sources of testimony regarding the virgin birth? To answer this question, we need to know a little more about these gospel writers, and unfortunately, we don't have a lot to go on. Tradition has it that Luke the gospel writer is the Luke mentioned in two of Paul's letters as his physician traveling companion. Historians and biblical scholars have reason to doubt the accuracy of this tradition, however. First, there is no extra-textual evidence of this claim – no other document of historical record says that this is true. In fact, Luke himself does not make this claim, either in his gospel or in the Book of Acts,

which is believed to be a continuation of the narrative by the same author. The second reason is that Luke's writings do not demonstrate much knowledge about Paul, which is strange if they were companions. Although Paul's letters were written much earlier than Luke or Acts, the author does not seem to have access to the information contained in them. That is strange if you consider how much you know about people in your life that you don't even like, let alone your friends. Those problems aside, Paul didn't know Jesus, so the absolute best case is that Luke is getting his information third hand (from the disciples and others who knew Jesus, to Paul, to Luke). Luke also claims to have conducted interviews and that he used these interviews to write his gospel. While Luke sees these interviews as making his account more scholarly, he doesn't tell us who he interviewed. We can assume, however, that none of the interviews gave him anything closer than third hand information, or he probably would have told us about it. Another reason to think Luke's information could not have been better than third hand is that his gospel wasn't written until about 90 CE. By this time Jesus had been dead for about sixty years. Most of his contemporaries would have been dead, or extremely old.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to interviews, scholars believe Luke relied on three sources when writing his gospel. The first is the Gospel of Mark, the earliest of the gospels. The second source is lost to us now, but is referred to as "Q." This source is believed to predate the gospels, taking the form not of a narrative, but of a collection of sayings or quotations from Jesus. Matthew and Luke contain many of the same quotations (not included in Mark), and the only way this could have happened is if these two gospel writers had access to a shared source unavailable to Mark. The likelihood that there was a common source is what leads to the belief that there was a text (of which no copies are extant) that Matthew and Luke were both drawing from. There is also additional material, unique to Luke (dubbed "L"), which is believed to stem from either a written or an oral source available only to Luke, probably coming from the church community where he lived. Again, none of these sources are very close to the events discussed in the gospel. Mark, being written earlier, is a more reliable source, but Luke apparently found Mark's gospel to be lacking, as he chose to rewrite it. We can't say very much about the credibility of Q or L, since we don't know anything about them (nor can we be certain that they existed).<sup>10</sup>

We know even less about Matthew than we do about Luke. Since he tells us nothing about himself or his sources, we are left reconstructing

things as best we can. Just as in Luke, it is clear that Matthew relied on Mark and Q, and he also had a third source, "M," which was not available to the other gospel writers. We can be pretty sure about these things, given the similarities between the synoptic gospels (i.e., those written by Matthew, Mark, and Luke). Given the lack of information about Matthew, however, we can't treat him as a very credible source of testimony.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the problems with the credibility of Matthew and Luke, there is also a language issue. If you have ever paused and reflected on how old the Bible is, you probably realized that it was not written in English. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. As you might expect, different languages do not translate word for word, and this is especially true for ancient languages. The variable ways to translate words and phrases result in the astonishing number of translations of the Bible, and as you might expect, different translations will end with the same passage meaning different things. Given these translation difficulties, it makes sense to go to the original Greek and Hebrew when you want to know what the authors of the Bible were literally saying. The passage from Isaiah which Matthew quotes is one of these cases where there seems to be a translation problem. Recall the passage is, "a virgin will conceive and bear a son, and his name will be Emmanuel."<sup>12</sup> Well, Hebrew has two words that can mean "virgin." One, *bethulah*, only means virgin, while the other, *almah*, is much more ambiguous. It can mean virgin, maiden, young woman of marriageable age, or newly married woman. Which do you think is used in the quote? If you guessed the second, you're correct. So, there is some ambiguity regarding what was meant by the prophecy in Isaiah. When Matthew translated this passage into Greek he eliminated the ambiguity by translating it into the Greek word *parthenos*, which means a literal virgin. However, there is good reason to think that this was a serious mistake (or deliberate alteration) since the writer of Isaiah chose to use the word with ambiguous meanings, rather than the word with a single clear meaning.<sup>13</sup>

One additional reason to call into question the credibility of both Matthew and Luke is that they contradict each other on a pretty major point – the marital status of Mary and Joseph at the time of Jesus' birth. Matthew says they're married; Luke says they're yet to be married. If one of them can get such an important fact wrong, it seems likely that they could have gotten other facts wrong, especially when the other two gospel authors did not find anything of importance to tell us about Jesus until much later in his life.

## Oh Come On, All Ye Faithful

Setting aside problems with the specific testimony about the virgin birth, David Hume identifies four general problems with all testimony concerning miracles. First, Hume points out that most (if not all) of the miracles that are used to justify religious belief (including the virgin birth) have only been testified to by a handful of individuals, and then passed on through several secondary sources. If you heard about the virgin birth from a relative or a preacher, you got the story *at best* fourth hand. The further along the chain of retelling a story, the more likely it is that the story gets twisted or elaborated (like the children's game of telephone).<sup>14</sup> As such, a wise person would be cautious in lending full credibility to the testimony of so few people, especially when they are of unproven character.

Second, Hume casts doubt over what motivates a person to testify in favor of a miracle. Specifically, he contends that there are certain "agreeable emotions," namely wonder and surprise, which come with believing that a miracle has occurred.<sup>15</sup> People take pleasure in hearing about, and believing in, the incredible and miraculous. Hume argues that even those who may not derive personal pleasure out of believing in miracles may testify to others in order to make them excited or happy. Couple this appetite for wonder and awe with a story that is meant to help spread the presumably noble teachings of a religion (remember the gospels were intended as a tool for religious conversion), and it may be the case that even a person who does not believe that the miracle actually occurred would testify in its favor, simply to spread what they believe is a good-natured message. Nonetheless, the idea that there may be an ulterior pleasure derived from testifying in favor of a miracle speaks to the credulity of people in general, and gives reason for pause when evaluating the credibility of testimony for a miracle, especially when we have very little evidence in favor of the individual being credible.<sup>16</sup>

The third point Hume discusses is closely related to the first. He points to the fact that most miraculous events have been observed primarily by nations and people who were underdeveloped and uneducated.<sup>17</sup> Essentially, Hume is concerned that the people who were witnesses to alleged miracles and spread the testimony of such events were not in a position to provide rational explanations of what they saw. If you don't understand the concept of a law of nature or the fundamentals about

how the natural world works, then you might think that something is a miracle that isn't. As evidence of this claim Hume directs our attention to the fact that, as nations develop and the common people become more enlightened, the reports and testimonies of miracles occurring begin to fade and are less frequent. The more you know, the less you find inexplicable. Seemingly miraculous events become understandable and the need to evoke a supernatural explanation fades away.<sup>18</sup>

The final point Hume discusses concerns the wide range of miracles that have been testified to by different religious groups. Essentially, Hume points out that rival religions use alleged miracles as support for their specific teachings. As such, the supposed miracle of one religion can be taken as an attempt not only to justify its teachings, but also to discredit the miracles and teachings of other, competing religions. With so many competitors, there is no justifiable reason to claim that one religion's miracles are any more believable than the other. Remember the sliding scale of hypotheses we talked about earlier. If every miracle story is supposed to push up a particular religion on the scale of truth, while pushing all others down, everything ends up a wash when you count every religion's stories.<sup>19</sup>

## One More Kink for the Christmas Miracle

At this point you might think that we have exhausted every argument against the possibility of Jesus' virgin birth, but you'd be wrong. Hume gives one more argument against the possibility of miracles, and it's a doozy. Remember Hume's definition of a miracle: it must be a violation of a natural law. Well, given this fact, it must be the case that there will "be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation."<sup>20</sup> But here is the kicker: if that is the case, there is a lot of evidence (all the rest of human experience) that the so-called miracle never happened. Given the very nature of a miracle, a rational person would need extraordinarily strong evidence to support the idea that a miracle has in fact occurred, since we are essentially being asked to believe in something that is contrary to all prior experiences. It seems impossible that any testimony could be of that strength, given all the problems with establishing the credibility of testimony regarding unlikely events. The way Hume puts it, "no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony

be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish.<sup>21</sup> This might sound like there is an out for the believer of miracles, allowing for them in exceptionally rare cases. Not so. If it turned out that the falsehood of the claim would be more miraculous than the fact it is being used to prove, you would not have a miracle; you would have evidence that you were wrong about what you thought was a natural law. Recall the talking snowmen case. If it turned out that the falsehood of your cousin's testimony would be more miraculous than the possibility of talking snowmen, it would mean that talking snowmen don't violate the laws of nature after all. It would mean that we were wrong in our belief about the law of nature which previously caused us to doubt the existence of the talking snowmen.

So let's bring it all back home and apply what we have learned to the virgin birth. Clearly, if Jesus was in fact born of a virgin mother, then the event should be deemed a miracle. There is an obvious violation of a law of nature, as past experience has taught us with uniform regularity that virgins do not give birth to children. The question is, what evidence do we have to believe that Mary gave birth to her son while she was still a virgin? Absent a time machine and directions to the nativity, the only evidence we can look to in support of Jesus' virgin birth are the written testimonials from the Bible. So, we must compare the likelihood of the allegation that a child was born of a virgin mother with the credibility of the source of testimony. As we have seen above, we have little to no evidence in support of Matthew and Luke's credibility and some pretty serious reason to call it into question. However, even if we assume that the testimony of Jesus' virgin birth came from the most reliable sources, Hume has still made the case that this is not enough to believe that the miracle has actually occurred, and the uniformity of our experience of the laws of nature (that do not allow for virgin births) gives us exceedingly good reason to believe those laws to be true rather than new ones that allow for virgin births.

### Countin' on a Miracle (Objection) to Come Through

Before concluding, it will be helpful to discuss a common objection that has been raised against Hume's attack on miracles. First, it has been argued that Hume is too quick to dismiss as unbelievable testimony

against uniform regularities. Philosopher C. D. Broad points out that sometimes testimony against supposed laws of nature has turned out to be correct, and that if we follow Hume's lead and are unfairly skeptical towards such testimony in all cases, scientific progress will be severely limited.<sup>22</sup> What Broad has in mind here is that, according to Hume, we ought to reject the testimony which supports the idea that a purported law of nature has been violated, and continue to believe in the so-called law. However, over the course of history, science has found laws of nature to be amendable. Yet, it seems Hume's account would not allow for second guessing *any* law of nature. Broad writes:

So that it would seem on Hume's theory, that if, up to a certain time, I and everyone else have always observed A to be followed by B, then no amount of testimony from the most trustworthy persons that they have observed A not followed by B ought to have the least effect on my belief in the law. ... If scientists had actually proceeded in this way, some of the most important natural laws would never have been discovered.<sup>23</sup>

Essentially, Broad is arguing that Hume's position on the testimony of miracles does not allow for scientific inquiry to progress naturally. Anytime we might hear of a law of nature being violated, instead of questioning whether or not the law actually is a law, we should assume that the person's testimony is mistaken.

Unfortunately, Broad's critique depends on a misunderstanding of how scientific progress works. When a researcher claims to have made a new discovery, the scientific community does not just accept it – no matter how reputable the source of the information. Instead, the methods used in the study are repeated by many other researchers. It is only when there is independent confirmation by other researchers that the new discovery comes to be accepted as truth. This happens in accordance with how Hume argued rational men come to form beliefs – they accept the belief only in proportion to the supporting evidence for the claim. The more studies you have that say the same thing, the more the scientific community will come to hold the belief as true. It is also of note that the credibility of scientific testimony works just as Hume said it should. When improbable claims like the theory of relativity and cold fusion are proposed, scientists are dubious at first. As Einstein's calculations are repeated and not refuted, his claims gain credibility, as the repeated confirmation of the results make the claims more and more probable. Conversely, the lack of result confirmation makes the improbable claims

about cold fusion made by Fleischmann and Pons even more improbable, and their claims even less credible.

## Hume, Joyful and Triumphant

So where does this leave the possibility of the virgin birth? Not good at all. We have shown that a little investigation into Matthew and Luke reveals that there is little evidence of their credibility and plenty of reason to suppose that they are not credible. These reasons range from a lack of personal information about the men, to their conflicting testimony, to a dubious chain of testimony telephone, to questions about their translating practices, to simple facts about human nature. Even if these men were the most credible witnesses, however, the claims would seem extremely implausible given the uniformity of human experience concerning reproduction. We don't know many virgins, and the ones we know don't have kids. There doesn't seem to be any option for the rational person other than to deny the virgin birth and all other miracles. For anyone upset by this conclusion, feel free to call us Scrooges. You can even call us Grinches – just don't call us wrong or late for Christmas dinner.

## NOTES

- 1 David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 3rd edn., ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 115.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- 3 The order they were actually written in is Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John.
- 4 Matthew 1:22. All biblical quotations are from the Revised English translation.
- 5 Matthew 1:18–25.
- 6 Luke 1:26–2:7.
- 7 Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 111.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 113.
- 9 Information about the gospel writers is available in any introductory work on the Bible. A good source is Stephen L. Harris, *Understanding the Bible* (Mountain View: Mayfield Publishing, 2000).
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 355–61.
- 11 *Ibid.*

- 12 Isaiah 7:14.
- 13 Non-Hebrew and non-Greek speakers can engage in biblical word study through the use of a concordance, which offers a word-by-word index of the Bible, giving each instance of the word, in the original language, as it appears in the Bible. The best source is *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, which is keyed to several English translations. A concordance alone is not enough, however, as it does not offer detailed translations or information about possible ambiguities and debates. Pair up your concordance with a good lexicon for each language, and a detailed word study source, and you're all set. The best biblical Hebrew lexicon is the *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon*. The best biblical Greek lexicon is the *Liddell and Scott Greek-English Lexicon*. *Vine's Bible Dictionary* is a good detailed word study.
- 14 Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 117.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 119–20.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 115–16.
- 22 C. D. Broad, "Hume's Theory of the Credibility of Miracles," in Alexander Sesonske and Noel Fleming (eds.) *Human Understanding: Studies in the Philosophy of David Hume* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1965), p. 91.
- 23 *Ibid.*