

J. Gresham Machen's *The Virgin Birth of Christ*: Then and Now

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Abstract

This article considers the context of J. Gresham Machen's *The Virgin Birth of Christ* and how it developed as the result of years of labor; it outlines the argument of the book and documents its reception. For Machen, positive evidence for the virgin birth and the failure of alternate explanations point to the supernatural fact of the virgin birth. His scholarship and interactions with a broad array of scholars set him apart from fundamentalists. Machen's *Virgin Birth* remains an essential treatment of the topic and an important work in apologetics and New Testament studies.

Introduction

New Testament scholar William Baird writes of J. Gresham Machen's *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, "How Machen accomplished the immense amount of research displayed in this work while he was center of the storm that raged in church and seminary is testimony to his enduring fortitude."¹ This

¹ William Baird, *History of New Testament Research* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 2:356. On Machen's New Testament scholarship, see also Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Theology and Historical-Critical Method from Spinoza to Käsemann* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 180–202.

article attempts to explain Machen's accomplishment by exploring the origin of his work and uncovering how it relates to the challenges he was going through.² Exploring his New Testament scholarship through *Virgin Birth* will allow us to situate him more precisely within the ecclesiastical and academic scene of his day.³ A paradox will emerge: his thorough and up-to-date research makes his work both outdated and relevant for today.

I. *Virgin Birth Discussions in Historical Context*

1. *The Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy*

The fundamentalist-modernist controversy is not mentioned in Machen's *Virgin Birth*, but the book was relevant to it and he engaged with it.⁴ Two popular contributions would have served in the debate and offer summaries of his views. The first is a popular presentation in two parts.⁵ In the second, he introduces the virgin birth as "a universal belief of the historic Christian Church."⁶

At the beginning of the twentieth century, conservative Protestants defined the five essential doctrines or fundamentals of the faith: "the inerrancy of Scripture and the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, bodily resurrection, and miracle-working power of Christ." The General Assemblies of the Presbyterian Church adopted these as "essential and necessary" in 1910 and 1916.⁷ In response, after the 1923 General Assembly, modernists drafted the

² We will use the revised edition of the book. J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (1930; repr., New York: Harper & Brothers, 1932).

³ His relationship to fundamentalism and his identity have long been a subject of discussion. See J. I. Packer, "Fundamentalism" and the Word of God: *Some Evangelical Principles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 34–36. D. G. Hart concludes that he was both an orthodox Presbyterian and allied to elements of modern culture. See D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 160–70. For arguments that his scholarship and educational philosophy are distinct from fundamentalism, see Annette G. Aubert, "J. Gresham Machen and the Theology of Crisis," *Westminster Theological Journal [WTJ]* 64 (2002): 337–38 and Dariusz M. Bryćko, "Steering a Course between Fundamentalism and Transformationalism: J. Gresham Machen's View of Christian Scholarship," in Thomas M. Crisp, Stever L. Porter, and Gregg A. Ten Elshof, eds., *Christian Scholarship in the Twenty-First Century: Prospects and Perils* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 83–84.

⁴ Hart states, "He wrote with exceptional detachment for one who would become the principle scholarly spokesman for fundamentalism." Hart, *Defending the Faith*, 41.

⁵ J. Gresham Machen, "The Virgin Birth," *The Bible To-day* 19 (December 1924): 75–79; 19 (January 1925): 111–15. Cf. "Machen – The Virgin Birth," PCA Historical Center, <http://www.pcahistory.org/documents/auburn/machen-1924-virginbirth.html>.

⁶ J. Gresham Machen, "The Virgin Birth of Our Lord," *Revelation* 1.12 (1931): 399–400, 426–28.

⁷ Cf. Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and*

Auburn Affirmation (1924).⁸ Its fourth point distinguishes between the “facts and doctrines of our religion” and “particular theories,” thus implying that one could hold to the incarnation without the virgin birth. In a public letter, Machen defended the virgin birth as essential and as a test for ordination: “The Affirmation declares the virgin birth to be a theory; Holy Scripture declares it to be a fact.”⁹ Accordingly, he had not merely an academic concern, but a vision of scholarship in service to the church.

2. *The History of Religion School*

Both Machen's *Virgin Birth* and his *The Origin of Paul's Religion* interact with and critique the history of religion school, which he encountered during his studies in Germany and which, in reaction to “literary criticism,” proposed a new comparative approach (including ancient myths).¹⁰ Adolf Harnack was one of its “spiritual forebears.”¹¹ It tore “down the barriers of the canon” and pioneered the study of “the pseudepigrapha and apocrypha.”¹² It dealt with essential “issues around baptism and the Lord's Supper, the virgin birth, the resurrection, mysticism, and Christology.”¹³ For example, Hermann Usener considered the biblical infancy narratives “to be legend,” originating “on Greek soil.”¹⁴ Its teaching was not without resistance, and “scholars in the history of religion [were] prevented from occupying chairs of theology in Prussia.”¹⁵ David Strauss, though earlier than this school, pioneered historical study of the New Testament.¹⁶ His epochal 1835–36 *Das Leben Jesu* (The Life of Jesus) challenged both rationalist and orthodox

Moderates (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 25. For the five points at the 1910 Assembly, see “Historic Documents of American Presbyterianism: The Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910 [Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.],” PCA Historical Center, <http://www.pcahistory.org/documents/deliverance.html>.

⁸ Cf. “The Auburn Affirmation,” PCA Historical Center, <http://www.pcahistory.org/documents/auburntext.html>. See Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy*, 78–79.

⁹ J. Gresham Machen, “The Virgin Birth, the Auburn Affirmation, and the Presbyterian Advance,” *The Presbyterian* 98 (February 9, 1928): 12. See also J. Gresham Machen, “Why We Believe in the Virgin Birth,” *Sunday School Times* 75 (1933): 775–76.

¹⁰ See Hugo Gressmann, “The History of Religion School,” in Albert Eichhorn, *The Lord's Supper in the New Testament*, trans. Jeffrey F. Cayzer, HBS 1 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 40.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹² *Ibid.*, 47.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁴ Werner G. Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems*, trans. S. MacLean Gilmour and Howard C. Kee (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 246. Cf. Machen's *Virgin Birth*, 324–26, 329.

¹⁵ Gressmann, “The History of Religion School,” 36.

¹⁶ Kümmel, *The New Testament*, 172.

perspectives and offered a “mythical” alternative, analyzing miracles, including the virgin birth, as myth.¹⁷

3. *The Apostles’ Creed*

Discussion about the Apostles’ Creed and evidence from the second century serves as the entryway gate to Machen’s volume.¹⁸ He is familiar with the wealth of current studies on the creed, including the two volumes by Ferdinand Kattenbusch. He also makes use of Theodore Zahn and English-speaking scholarship. This evidences that the Apostles’ Creed (and the virgin birth) received intense scrutiny at the turn of the century.¹⁹

II. *Influences on Machen*

1. *Classical Education*

Machen received a classical education. His father collected early “editions of the Greek and Latin classics.”²⁰ At Johns Hopkins University he studied with the famous classical scholar Basil Gildersleeve;²¹ there he learned philology and encountered the German-based seminar system.²² The classical approach emphasized the authorial intent of texts in contrast to the new historical methods used by historians of antiquity and students of Christian origins.²³

2. *Old Princeton*

Machen asserts that his training in New Testament at Princeton compared favorably to the classes he took in Germany.²⁴ The dedication of *The Origin of Paul’s Religion* reads, “To William Park Armstrong, my guide in the study of the New Testament and in all good things.” Armstrong was his teacher and then colleague in the New Testament department at Princeton Seminary, and Armstrong’s interest in the historical study of the Gospels surely

¹⁷ Ibid., 120–21. Cf. David F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. George Eliot (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 130–33 (orthodox view), 137–40 (natural explanation), and 140–43 (mythical view).

¹⁸ Machen, *Virgin Birth*, 3–8.

¹⁹ Machen, however, does not want to “make the Apostles’ Creed ... the be all and the end-all of ... Christian profession” (ibid., 391).

²⁰ J. Gresham Machen, “Christianity in Conflict,” in *Contemporary American Theology*, ed. Vergilius Ferm (New York: Round Table, 1932), 1:247.

²¹ Machen, “Christianity in Conflict,” 250–51.

²² Hart, *Defending the Faith*, 15–16.

²³ Ibid., 53.

²⁴ Machen, “Christianity in Conflict,” 258.

influenced him.²⁵ In *Virgin Birth*, he made use of two writings by Armstrong, one on the text of Matthew 1:16 and the other on chronology in relation to the census of Quirinius.²⁶ The emphases of George Purves—Presbyterian pastor-scholar and New Testament professor at Princeton shortly before Machen's time—on history, early Christianity in the second century, and apologetics anticipate Machen's own concerns.²⁷ Benjamin Warfield, another of Machen's mentors, was a New Testament scholar in his own right. However, Warfield's more proximate impact on Machen was in the realm of systematic theology and apologetics. In his conclusion he explicitly refers to two articles by Warfield to reinforce the importance of the doctrine of the virgin birth and to support the distinction between classic Christianity and modern antisupernatural Christianity or "Christless Christianity."²⁸

Machen in *Virgin Birth* also interacted with the works of his colleagues in biblical theology and Old Testament. His conception of the Jewishness of the infancy narratives has affinities with Geerhardus Vos's understanding of the redemptive epoch prior to the Christian era.²⁹ When dealing with the Jewish background, he refers to Joseph Alexander's *Commentary* on Isaiah 7:14 for details about the fulfillment of the prophecy and to Robert Wilson for philological support on the meaning of 'alma as "virgin."³⁰

3. Education in Germany

The impact of Machen's studies in Germany on his scholarship and on *Virgin Birth* should not be overlooked.³¹ In 1905, Machen spent one year in

²⁵ His views on background, historical evidences, and supernatural Christianity are akin to those of Machen. See William P. Armstrong, "Gospel History and Criticism," *The Princeton Theological Review* [PTR] 12 (1914): 427–53 and "The Place of the Resurrection Appearances of Jesus," in *Biblical and Theological Studies* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1912), 307–92. Hart argues that despite theological differences, Princeton seminary shared its methodological approach with other schools. See Hart, *Defending the Faith*, 182, n. 45, and Ernest DeWitt Burton, "The Place of the New Testament in a Theological Curriculum," *American Journal of Theology* 16.2 (1912): 181–95.

²⁶ See Machen, *Virgin Birth*, 179, n. 25, and 239, n. 2.

²⁷ See Benjamin B. Warfield, "Introductory Note," in George T. Purves, *Faith and Life: Sermons* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1902), ix–xxx.

²⁸ See Machen, *Virgin Birth*, 382, n. 1, and 384, n. 3. On Warfield, see Annette G. Aubert, "Nineteenth-Century Princeton Theology in European Context," in *The Oxford Handbook of Calvin and Calvinism*, ed. Bruce Gordon and Carl R. Trueman (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2017).

²⁹ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (1948; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 305–29.

³⁰ Machen, *Virgin Birth*, 292, n. 15, and 289, n. 8.

³¹ See William D. Dennison, "Comparing J. Gresham Machen and Rudolf Bultmann: Reflections upon the Marburg Experience, 1905–06," *Journal for the History of Modern Theology/Zeitschrift für neuere Theologie-geschichte* 16 (2009): 217–75, and Machen, "Christianity in Conflict," 255–64.

Germany. He writes that “in Germany I obtained practically no contact with conservative scholarship, but listened almost exclusively to those who represent the dominant naturalistic point of view.”³²

At Marburg, he attended classes by Johannes Weiss, whom he came to appreciate more than at first and whose commentaries he used.³³ There he also heard Walter Bauer.³⁴ In *Virgin Birth*, Machen uses Bauer’s *Das Leben Jesu im Zeitalter der neutestamentlichen Apokryphen* (The Life of Jesus in the Age of the New Testament Apocrypha, 1909). Although Bauer’s controversial *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* only appeared in 1934, Machen’s work can be seen as a partial challenge to the thesis that orthodoxy and heresy were equally present in early Christianity.³⁵ According to William Dennison, he attended classes with Rudolf Bultmann at Marburg.³⁶ Both dealt with the Synoptics, but Bultmann kept the approach of the history of religion school alive while Machen defended the historicity of the Gospels.

At Göttingen, Machen heard the church historian Kattenbusch, who later reviewed *Virgin Birth*. Machen also attended lectures by Wilhelm Bousset. Later Machen wrote, “My admiration for Bousset’s learning and brilliancy were later increased by his book, *Kyrios Christos*, which appeared in 1913.”³⁷

The scholars Machen met in Germany were crucial for his work, and he kept up to date with their research. He had thus a first-hand knowledge of biblical and historical scholarship in Germany, which perhaps accounts for the broader appeal of his works.

III. *The Birth and Growth of Machen’s Magnus Opus*

1. *Machen’s Reviews on the Virgin Birth*

Early on, Machen started to write reviews on the virgin birth that shed light on his approach.³⁸ He reviewed two classic works, one by James Orr

³² Ibid., 255.

³³ Ibid., 258.

³⁴ Ibid., 259.

³⁵ Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, trans. a team of the Philadelphia Seminar on Christian Origins, ed. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel (1971; repr., Mifflintown, PA: Sigler, 1996).

³⁶ Dennison, “Machen and Bultmann,” 234–35.

³⁷ Machen, “Christianity in Conflict,” 260. Bousset argues that the witnesses to the virgin birth are late and limited to Matthew and Luke, and it is of pagan origin. Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 342–47, esp. 342–43. In *The Origin of Paul’s Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), Machen will both refute Bousset and find help in his creative views.

³⁸ Before him, Armstrong had written one review on Allan Hoben’s book on the virgin birth *PTR* 2.2 (1904): 347–49. Terry Chrisope, in part through an analysis of Machen’s book

(1907)³⁹ and the other by G. H. Box (1916).⁴⁰ Though Orr's views are akin to his, he finds Orr's work too popular (p. 508).⁴¹ He appreciates Orr's parallel between Romans 1:3–4 and Luke 1:35 and the doctrinal part on the importance of the virgin birth (pp. 506–7). Box shows the Jewish character of Luke's infancy narrative and challenges theories about the influence of Greek myths, but the infancy narratives are for him "throughout a poetic and idealizing expansion of actual fact" (p. 152), and he omits Bauer's work on the New Testament apocrypha (p. 153).

Two Catholic authors, Leonard Prestige⁴² and A. Durand,⁴³ defend the historicity and supernatural nature of the Gospels. Prestige does not adequately deal with "modern negative criticism" (p. 679) and follows a faulty reading in Justin Martyr, but Durand got Justin right. Machen disagrees, however, with the latter's defense of the "perpetual virginity of Mary."

The next two works are not up to Machen's standards. Louis Sweet (1906) through research became more convinced of the "historicity of the narratives,"⁴⁴ yet he overlooks "the interpolation theory" and confines himself to English and American sources. D. A. Hayes (1919) raises the question of the personalities of biblical authors, but his approach is undisciplined.⁴⁵ His treatment leaves unresolved the relation between Matthew's genealogy and the virgin birth.

Machen's reviews of other authors uncover less-than-adequate views on historicity or doctrine. In a 1925 work Orville Crain⁴⁶ "defends the historicity of the virgin birth, but is inclined to deny its doctrinal importance." Further, as Machen noted, he is not very familiar "with the modern critical debate" (pp. 134–35). Machen's review of James Mackinnon's 1931 study begins with an extensive survey of studies on the historical Jesus.⁴⁷ Mackinnon's

reviews, documents how his views matured up to 1915. See Terry A. Chrisope, *Toward a Sure Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Dilemma of Biblical Criticism, 1881–1915* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2000), esp. 99–114.

³⁹ PTR 6.3 (1908): 505–8. Orr also contributed to *Fundamentals* on the topic; James Orr, "The Virgin Birth of Christ," *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Testimony Publishing Company, 1910), 7–20.

⁴⁰ PTR 17.1 (1919): 152–53. Box also wrote G. H. Box, "Virgin Birth," *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908), 2:804–9.

⁴¹ Both use positive evidence and counteract alternative views.

⁴² PTR 17 (1919): 678–79

⁴³ PTR 9.4 (1911): 672–73.

⁴⁴ PTR 5.2 (1907): 315–16.

⁴⁵ PTR 17 (1919): 675–77. The book prompts Machen to assert that "the doctrine of plenary inspiration does not involve suppression of the personal characteristics of the Biblical writers" (p. 676).

⁴⁶ PTR 24.1 (1926): 134–36.

⁴⁷ *Evangelical Quarterly* 3 (1931): 312–21.

classical liberal view discounts the supernatural, but wants to keep historical elements. Machen, however, counters that “if the supernatural [is] removed they too must go” (p. 314).

These reviews show Machen’s grasp of the literature and concern about scholarly informed contributions, doctrinally sound treatments, and defenses of the historicity of the Gospels. These concerns shaped his works on the virgin birth that culminated in the publication of *Virgin Birth*.

2. *Roots of the Work*

Machen’s *Virgin Birth* was almost thirty years in the making and has antecedents in earlier writings published at key times in his professional career.⁴⁸ He wrote on the virgin birth, the assigned topic, for a fellowship competition in his last year at Princeton Seminary.⁴⁹ The essay he submitted was then published in the seminary’s periodical.⁵⁰ The twofold article includes many German sources and contains the seed of his later contributions: in particular the presentation of positive evidence and the refutation of alternate theories. Machen argues that either “the narrative may be regarded as really based upon facts ... [or it] may be regarded as false; in which case the genesis of the false ideas must be explained.”⁵¹ Thanks to this contribution to biblical studies and apologetics, he received job offers both at Biblical Seminary in New York and at Princeton Seminary.⁵² In addition, scholars such as Orr and Herman Bavinck used these early articles.⁵³

In 1912, Machen published three key articles.⁵⁴ The first two, reprinted as a booklet, were reviewed by Harnack.⁵⁵ This recognition encouraged

⁴⁸ Besides published material considered here, the Machen Archives (MA) of the Montgomery Library of Westminster Theological Seminary contain abundant notes taken by Machen in preparation for his book.

⁴⁹ Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir*, 2nd ed. (1955; repr., Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1977), 84–85.

⁵⁰ J. Gresham Machen, “The New Testament Account of the Birth of Jesus,” *PTR* 3.4 (1905): 641–70 and *PTR* 4.1 (1906): 37–81.

⁵¹ Machen, “Account of the Birth of Jesus,” 641.

⁵² Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*, 118.

⁵³ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2006), 3:287, n. 148.

⁵⁴ J. Gresham Machen, “The Hymns of the First Chapter of Luke,” *PTR* 10.1 (1912): 1–38; “The Origin of the First Two Chapters of Luke,” *PTR* 10.2 (1912): 212–77; and “The Virgin Birth in the Second Century,” *PTR* 10.4 (1912): 529–80. Cf. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*, 178–80.

⁵⁵ Adolf Harnack, *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 1 (1913): 7–8. While having some reservations, Harnack stated that Machen’s studies “deserve all our attention.” They debated about sources and the Semitic character of Luke. See Machen, *Virgin Birth*, 76. René Laurentin affirms against Harnack that Machen’s position “imposes itself as the only explanation for the

Machen, and shortly after he finally took the steps to be ordained and was installed as Assistant Professor of New Testament at Princeton Seminary in May 1915.⁵⁶ The third article, on the second century, became the first chapter of Machen's book, thus seeming to move the evidence of church history ahead of the biblical data.⁵⁷ The other two exegetical articles were more thoroughly changed and became chapters 4 and 5. These three articles served as building blocks of the book.

The Thomas Smyth Lectures delivered by Machen in the spring of 1927 at Columbia Theological Seminary, "The Integrity of the Lucan Narrative,"⁵⁸ would become the heart of the book.⁵⁹ The content of the lectures was published in the *Princeton Review*,⁶⁰ and chapter 6 reproduces this article with a few additional footnotes.⁶¹ The lectures perhaps explain this chapter's less compact style. About half the chapter on Matthew reproduces his popular article on the text of Matthew 1:16.⁶²

None of the remainder of the book (a little more than half) is derived from his writings, though he does refer to them here and there.⁶³ Thus, the sections on the early church, Luke, and Matthew are largely based on previous publications, while the sections on history and background are mostly new.

IV. *Outline of the Argument*

Chapters 1 to 11 present the positive evidence for his thesis that the virgin birth accounts are based on a miraculous fact; chapters 12 to 14 refute

entirety of the data"; René Laurentin, *Structure et théologie de Luc I-II*, EBib (Paris: Gabalda, 1957), 14, n. 2.

⁵⁶ Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*, 190.

⁵⁷ In comparison to the article, in the book a few details were omitted and some updates were made. See Machen, *Virgin Birth*, 18–20, 33, 39–41.

⁵⁸ Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*, 424. Starting in 1907–1908, Machen offered every year an elective on the "Birth Narratives." Ibid., 175.

⁵⁹ Machen confesses, "If the book presents any distinctive feature, it is to be found, perhaps, in the argument for the integrity of the Lucan narrative." Machen, *Virgin Birth*, vii.

⁶⁰ J. Gresham Machen, "The Integrity of the Lucan Narrative of the Annunciation," *PTR* 25 (1927): 529–86. A. Faux describes Machen's article as "remarkable." A. Faux, *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 24 (1928): 759–60. Cf. *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 17 (1928): 350; *Congregational Quarterly* 6 (1928): 272.

⁶¹ Additions on pages 164 to 168 are partly based on "The Origin of the First Two Chapters of Luke," 272–77.

⁶² Cf. J. Gresham Machen, "Matthew 1:16 and the Virgin Birth," *The Presbyterian* 85 (1915): 8–11. On pages 170–71 of *Virgin Birth*, discussion on the interpolation theory are based on his "Account of the Birth of Jesus," 61–62.

⁶³ See Machen, *Virgin Birth*, 189, n. 2, 211, n. 3, 257, n. 10, 265, n. 16, and 273, n. 5. On p. 320, n. 7, he alludes to his debate with Arthur McGiffert and refers to his *What Is Faith* (1925) and a book review in *PTR* 22.4 (1924). He also cites his *Origin of Paul's Religion* (1921) when speaking about the Jewish expectation of a Davidic Messiah (p. 296, n. 14).

alternative theories. Chapter 1 aims to show that belief in the virgin birth is already evident at the beginning of the second century. Some heretical groups denied the virgin birth but were motivated by “philosophical or dogmatic” presuppositions (p. 43). Thus, Machen aligns himself with the greater Christian tradition and argues that it has roots in the apostolic age.⁶⁴

Most of the exegetical section is dedicated to the infancy narrative in Luke (Luke 1–2; cf. chs. 2 to 6). Chapter 2 shows that Luke is “a genuine unity,” of which Luke 1–2 is part (pp. 60–61). Biblical writers may have employed sources, but they were authors who shaped their works (p. 60).⁶⁵ Consequently, “the true interpreter must rather seek to enter ... into the very spirit of the writer” (p. 56). The next chapter describes how the infancy narrative in Luke fits well into the whole. The style (“parataxis,” parallelism, and phraseology) indicates its Semitic character (pp. 62–63). The religious atmosphere is pre-Christian and predates the “revolutionary in the Pauline mission,” that is, the way Gentiles were received into the church.⁶⁶ The proper interpretation of Luke 2:22 confirms the author’s knowledge of the Jewish law (pp. 70–74).⁶⁷

In chapter 4, Machen focuses on the Magnificat and the Benedictus. He argues, building partly upon Hermann Gunkel’s analysis, against Harnack’s view that those hymns “are artificial compositions of a Gentile Christian” (p. 101). In his typical fashion, he concludes that “the element of truth in both these two views can be conserved, we think, and the element of error avoided, only if we suppose that the hymns actually originated in the situations where they are now placed in the infancy narrative” (p. 101, cf. p. 95). Writing on “the origin and transmission of the Lucan narrative” (ch. 5),⁶⁸ he wants to account for its Palestinian character (p. 102). He admits that there is some uncertainty with respect to sources (p. 118) and remains open to various way of handling the Synoptic question (pp. 108–9). However, it emerges that “the author of Luke-Acts certainly had a part in the production of the present form of the infancy narrative” and used sources (pp. 111,

⁶⁴ Belief in the virgin birth was “the conviction of Christendom throughout all the ages,” and “a true historical exegesis must recognize [it] as being in the mind of Luke” (p. 56). Daniel Treier places a similar weight on the early Christian tradition; see “Virgin Territory?,” *Pro Ecclesia* 23.4 (2014): 379.

⁶⁵ This emphasis was picked up by Ned Stonehouse in his work on the Synoptic Gospels and anticipates redaction criticism.

⁶⁶ See pp. 64 and 66. Cf. Vos and Machen, *Origin of Paul’s Religion*, 17–20.

⁶⁷ For an updated discussion, see “The ‘Presentation’ of the Infant Jesus in Luke 2:22–24” by Michael C. Mulder in this issue.

⁶⁸ His treatment was perhaps influential on Ned B. Stonehouse’s *Origins of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963).

113). He concludes that “the birth narrative formed part of the Third Gospel” and “is genuinely primitive and Palestinian” (p. 118).

Chapter 6, on the integrity of the Lukan narrative, contends against various interpolation theories that assert that the verses on the virgin birth were added to an earlier original text. These theories allow scholars to maintain the Jewish character of the narrative and the pagan origin of the doctrine (p. 119, cf. ch. 14).⁶⁹ Yet one cannot easily excise the verses presenting the virgin birth, and at many places in the infancy narrative the fact is presupposed (e.g., Luke 1:26–27; 2:5; 3:23). Up to page 148, Machen considers arguments in favor of the interpolation theories (arguments based either on style or thought, p. 136), and afterwards arguments against them. The Davidic descent of Jesus is shown to be compatible with the virgin birth—both in Luke’s mind and in the thought of the early church (pp. 126–35). He thinks that Protestants have often overlooked Mary (p. 134). On Luke 1:34 and its interpretive challenges (pp. 141–48), he rejects the Catholic doctrine of perpetual virginity (p. 143), but advocates a more human view of Mary against the cold modern scientific conception projected on her (pp. 146–48), thus showing sensitivity to the characters in the narrative. One of his strongest narrative arguments involves a tight comparison between the announcement of John’s birth (Luke 1:11–20) and that of Jesus’s birth (Luke 1:28–38; pp. 152–64), the outcome of which is not only that Luke 1:34–35 belongs integrally to the narrative structure, but also that Jesus’s birth is greater than John’s, and the greater virgin birth contrasts with a birth from parents in old age.⁷⁰ Machen concludes that “all the attacks upon the integrity of Lk. i–ii which would represent the mention of the virgin birth as a secondary element in the narrative have signally failed” (p. 168).

In chapter 7, he makes a similar argument about Matthew, which seems addressed “particularly to the Jews.” He cautiously states that “exaggerations ... should be avoided at this point” and that Matthew’s Jewishness does not conflict “with the principles of the Gentile mission” (pp. 169–70).⁷¹ Manuscript evidence and style militate against the minority view that Matthew 1–2 were not part of the original Gospel (pp. 170–73). Though “less markedly Semitic”

⁶⁹ Either Luke 1:34–35 or “seeing I know not a man” (v. 34) or vv. 34–37 have been added (p. 120).

⁷⁰ Machen applies “the terminology of textual criticism” to the question of sources and interpolation (pp. 155–56). This shows the familiarity with textual criticism that resulted from his training as a classical philologist and New Testament scholar. On textual criticism and other aspects of the study of the New Testament, see J. Gresham Machen, “Forty Years of New Testament Research,” *Union Seminary Review* 40.1 (1928): 1–12.

⁷¹ A similar balance can be observed in Stonehouse’s works; see, e.g., Ned B. Stonehouse, *The Witness of Luke to Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 5–6, 177.

than Luke, Matthew 1–2 are “essentially Jewish and Palestinian [in] character” (pp. 173–74),⁷² and “Mt. ii presupposes the virgin birth as it is narrated in Mt. i.18–25” (p. 176). In the rest of the chapter he rejects the textual reading of Matthew 1:16 that implies that Joseph is the physical father of Jesus.

In the next four chapters, Machen leaves “the sphere of literary criticism” and enters the “sphere of historical criticism.”⁷³ In chapter 8, he addresses the question of the relationship between the infancy narrative in Luke and that in Matthew, concluding that the differences (not contradictions) show the “independence of the two narratives” and offers his own harmonized outline of the events (p. 197; cf. p. 210). Matthew might have received his information through Joseph and Luke through Mary, but even if both got their information from Mary, Matthew represents Joseph’s viewpoint and Luke Mary’s (pp. 200–201). Then he argues “that the differences [in the genealogies] ... are not irreconcilable” (p. 209).⁷⁴ The historical reliability of the Gospels is defended at every point, even if his formulations are at times tentative.

Machen then handles the issue of miracles and the supernatural. He challenges the rationalist view that keeps some historical elements while rejecting the supernatural (p. 211). He perceives in Harnack’s approach some resurgence of rationalization (pp. 214–16)⁷⁵ and reiterates Strauss’s alternative: “Either accept the narratives as they stand ... or ... regard them as myths” (pp. 216–17). Machen opts for the former and explains the miracles as representing “a new era in the course of the universe” where God’s “creative power” is at play. He asserts that the recognition of miracles must presuppose a theistic worldview and rejects the distinction between faith and history (pp. 217–18, cf. p. 228).⁷⁶ In comparison with the apocryphal gospels, the canonical Gospels are fairly sober (pp. 219–20).⁷⁷ He then

⁷² Here he cites Box for support while rejecting his view that details of the narrative are unhistorical.

⁷³ Chapters 9 to 11 deal with the “inherent credibility of the narratives,” their relations to secular history and to the rest of the New Testament (pp. 210, 238).

⁷⁴ Howard Marshall still considers Machen’s discussion significant. Cf. I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 158, 161, 163.

⁷⁵ Machen considers Box’s approach of partial historicity to be very different from the rationalizing approach (p. 216).

⁷⁶ Cf. J. Gresham Machen, “History and Faith,” *PTR* 13.3 (1915): 337–51; and George M. Marsden, “J. Gresham Machen, History, and Truth,” *WTJ* 42.1 (1979): 157–75.

⁷⁷ N. T. Wright makes a similar argument about another parallel: “But in comparison with other legends about other figures, Matthew and Luke look after all quite restrained”; N. T. Wright, “Born of a Virgin?,” in Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989), 175.

responds to objections about angels (pp. 221–23), the star (pp. 223–28),⁷⁸ and Matthew's genealogy (with its inclusion of "Thamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah" [p. 230]). In chapter 10, Machen answers difficulties arising from comparisons with secular history: "the massacre of the innocents" (pp. 238–39) and "the census of Quirinius" (pp. 239–43).⁷⁹

The subsequent chapter deals with the silence of the rest of the New Testament on the virgin birth. He admits that it was not known in Palestine and among Jesus's contemporaries (pp. 244–52) and explains Mark's silence as a manifestation of Mark's intention to report what he heard from witnesses (pp. 252–54). The explanation of the silence in John's Gospel is similar (p. 255). On John 1:13, he is rather inclined to reject any allusion to the virgin birth.⁸⁰ Regarding Paul, Galatians 4:4–5 and Romans 1:3–4 are neutral on the subject of the virgin birth (pp. 259–62). Further, in Paul the life of Jesus is in the background, topics (e.g., the Lord's Supper) come up as the occasion arises, and the virgin birth is "congruous with Paul's teaching about Christ" (p. 262).⁸¹ Machen concedes that the teaching about the virgin birth was not as prevalent in the early church as teaching about the resurrection and thinks that it is fitting with the character of Mary that she would have shared this "secret" only later on (pp. 263–66).⁸² Further, the virgin birth makes sense in view of the New Testament teaching about Christ (p. 267). His nuanced analysis does not downplay the silence of "the rest of the New Testament" and offers plausible explanations for its relative absence early on.⁸³

Chapters 12 to 14 raise the question of alternative theories about the rise of the belief in the virgin birth (ch. 12). In contrast to Vincent Taylor, Machen does not consider it an irrelevant question (p. 270), but he is more cautious than H. R. Mackintosh about the strength of the argument concerning the difficulty of alternate options (p. 271, n. 2). Machen remarks that this

⁷⁸ The narrative of the star does not need to be an account of a supernatural phenomenon. "The poetical, oriental way of describing" has to be taken into account (p. 225), and at times modernists rather than conservatives are the literalists (p. 226).

⁷⁹ Cf. Wright, "Born of a Virgin?" 174–75, and C. E. B. Cranfield, "Some Reflections on the Subject of the Virgin Birth," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 41.2 (1988): 182–85.

⁸⁰ This goes against the conclusion of his former colleague Vos. Cf. Machen, *Virgin Birth*, 258, n. 12.

⁸¹ Cf. Machen, *Origin of Paul's Religion*, 117–69 and "Jesus and Paul," in *Biblical and Theological Studies* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1912), 546–78.

⁸² This secret was more naturally revealed after the resurrection (p. 276). Cf. Cranfield, "Some Reflections," 180.

⁸³ Though Cranfield is more reserved than Machen about proving the virgin birth, he is more open to finding allusions to it in Mark, John, and Paul. Cranfield, "Some Reflections," 177, 178–80.

question has occupied “the best efforts of modern scholarship” (p. 271). Also, if Jesus was born illegitimately or simply of Joseph and Mary, modern scholars need to explain how the theory of the virgin birth came into being (p. 278). Two options have been suggested: Jewish and pagan derivation.

Machen discusses several obstacles in Jewish thought to a virgin birth: the presence of extraordinary births but no virgin births in the Old Testament (pp. 280–81), God’s transcendence (p. 282), and the expectation of a Messiah descending from David (p. 285). However, key to this discussion is the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 and its quotation in Matthew 1:22–23 (p. 287). Machen considers it a prophecy, but since Jews did not interpret it to refer to the virgin birth of the Messiah, it cannot account for the rise of the virgin birth notion on Jewish soil (p. 293).⁸⁴ Alleged parallels in Philo to the infancy narrative in the Gospels are too divergent to be taken into consideration (pp. 297–311).⁸⁵ He concludes against the theory of Jewish derivation.

The theory of pagan derivation appears to be the majority view (ch. 14), especially of the history of religion school. Kattenbusch’s theory of an indirect pagan influence through stages did not take hold (pp. 317–19). At the outset two objections arise: the Christian church and the Greco-Roman world are very distinct (pp. 319–21, cf. pp. 338–39), and the infancy narratives have a distinctly Palestinian character (pp. 321–22). The interpolation theory, or the idea that the virgin birth “was already naturalized in pre-Christian Judaism,” does not answer the latter objection (p. 322). Christ’s birth has been compared with heroes “begotten by the gods” or the stories of great men containing narratives of extraordinary births (p. 324). Confirmation is seen in the use of such stories by church fathers like Justin Martyr or Origen (pp. 327, 329). However, these fathers argued more by analogy, and their apologetic methods differed from that of the New Testament (p. 331).⁸⁶ Crucial differences emerge between pagan stories and the accounts of Jesus’s birth: these stories do not relate a “*virgin birth*” (p. 335), the pagan gods are represented anthropomorphically (p. 336), and these narratives betray a polytheistic worldview (p. 338). Parallels have also been sought elsewhere, such as in the “religions of the East” (p. 339).⁸⁷ Hugo Gressmann (pp. 349–58)

⁸⁴ The reception of Isaiah 53 in Jewish circles is similar (p. 294). On biblical prophecies, see pp. 314–15.

⁸⁵ The discussion on Philo anticipates the next chapter (p. 310).

⁸⁶ In this context, Machen writes revealing words: “though the content of revelation cannot be deduced by human reasoning, the credentials of the revelation become clear to a human reason that has been freed from the blinding effect of sin.”

⁸⁷ For example, later Buddhist (pp. 339–42) and Babylonian sources (pp. 344–45). Bousset suggests a comparison with the Arabian god Dusares (pp. 345–48). For Machen such an appeal indicates “the weakness of the more usual hypotheses” (p. 348).

and Eduard Norden (pp. 358–63) have compared Jesus's birth with stories from Egypt. However, "the supposed 'adaptation'" of the myth into the New Testament implies "the removal of the very heart and core of the pagan myth" (p. 362) and fails to appreciate "the inner spirit of the New Testament" (p. 363). Machen then refutes the work of Hans Leisegang, who redefines the work of the Holy Spirit in Luke in light of comparative studies (pp. 363–79).⁸⁸ The result is "that if the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ did not originate in fact, modern critical investigation has at any rate not yet succeeded in showing how it did originate" (p. 379).

Finally, positive evidence and the failure of alternate theories plead in favor of the virgin birth (p. 380),⁸⁹ and this miraculous birth is in harmony with the biblical presentation of the person of Christ. The discussion implies that first, since the Bible teaches the virgin birth, to reject it is to reject the authority of the Bible (pp. 382–87); second, belief in the virgin birth is a better test that someone holds to a supernatural Jesus than faith in the resurrection (pp. 387–92); and third, the virgin birth is essential to Christianity (pp. 392–97), as it sheds light on "redemption" and the "incarnation" and so is an integral part of the gospel (pp. 393–94, 396). He concludes that "even if the belief in the virgin birth is not necessary to every Christian, it is certainly necessary to Christianity." Thus, to profess the virgin birth is to uphold a fuller understanding of the Christian faith.

V. Reception of Machen's Virgin Birth

Machen's work received international acclaim. Ned Stonehouse states, "Some ninety reviews in magazines and newspapers of several countries have been preserved, many written by the most distinguished theologians of the day."⁹⁰ Reviews on the *Virgin Birth* can be classified as mostly positive, sympathetic but critical, and mostly negative.⁹¹ There is also evidence of

⁸⁸ Bultmann's critique reinforces Machen's challenge (p. 378).

⁸⁹ His overall argument is similar to Wright's case ("Born of a Virgin?" 176) and Cranfield's argument (Cranfield, "Some Reflections," 186). Machen makes a similar argument about Paul; after having pitched the liberal disjunction between Paul and Jesus against Bousset's reconstruction of the Lordship of Christ in Paul in light of Hellenism, Machen presents Paul's real encounter with the resurrected Lord as key for understanding Paul's theology (Machen, *Origin of Paul's Religion*, 30, 58–68).

⁹⁰ Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*, 515. His numbers can be confirmed by the reviews collected by Machen's mother, Minnie G. Machen, "Scrapbook on the Virgin Birth of Christ" [MA Scrapbook]. See also Laurentin, *Structure et théologie de Luc I–II*, 208, and Hart, *Defending the Faith*, 191. Cf. Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America*, 2nd ed. (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 1998), 55.

⁹¹ MOSTLY POSITIVE: H. John Chapman, *Dublin Review* 95 (1931): 150–53; Samuel Craig,

dialogue between Machen and some of the reviewers.⁹²

1. *Comprehensiveness and Importance*

All reviewers agree that Machen's research was comprehensive, especially with his inclusion of German scholarship and specifically the works of Norden, Leisegang, and Gressmann (Chapman, p. 152; Cadbury; Charue, p. 88; Lowe, p. 266; Kolffhaus). Morton Enslin marvels, "It is amazing that a man can find so much to say about this subject" (p. 518). Kattenbusch writes, however, "He names many (foreign, American, English) writings which I do not know. That he does not know all (some German) ... is natural" (p. 454).

The Virgin Birth is seen as an essential work of apologetics and scholarship. According to Kattenbusch, "it is clearly the most comprehensive work on the subject that has appeared" (p. 454; cf. Bartlet, pp. 224–25).⁹³ Mackintosh acknowledges, "his book must rank as *the* book on the strictly conservative side." William McGarry considers it "one of the finest pieces of apologetic for the virginal conception in the English language" (p. 491).⁹⁴ Machen's *Virgin Birth* was taken into account, not only by Reformed theologians,⁹⁵ but also by exegetes like Oscar Cullmann and Bultmann.⁹⁶ In recent scholarship,

Christianity Today 1.1 (1930): 13–14; Marie-Joseph Lagrange, *Revue Biblique* 39 (1930): 514–15; John Mackay, *Evangelical Quarterly* 2.2 (1930): 203–6. SYMPATHETIC BUT CRITICAL: G. H. Box, *Laudate* 9 (1931): 77–88, 147–55; Henry Cadbury, *Christian Century* (1931): 307; A. Charue, *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 27 (1931): 86–88; August Deneffe, *Scholastik* 6.1 (1931); MA Scrapbook, 61; Morton Enslin, *Crozer Quarterly* 7 (1930): 518–20; F. J. H., *Living Church* (May 3, 1930): 14; MA Patton Material; Ferdinand Kattenbusch, *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 102 (1931): 454–74; Wilhelm Kolffhaus, *Reformierte kirchenzeitung* 80 (1930); MA Scrapbook, 60–61; John Lowe, *Canadian Journal of Religious Thought* (1930): 266–67; MA Patton Material; H. R. Mackintosh, *British Weekly* 88 (July 17, 1930): 313; William McGarry, *Biblica* 12.4 (1931): 490–93; *Times Literary Supplement* 29 (April 10, 1930); MA Scrapbook, p. 9. MOSTLY CRITICAL: Vernon Bartlet, *Congregational Quarterly* 9 (1931): 224–27; A. D. Beittel, *Journal of Religion* 10 (1930): 600–602; James S. Bezzant, *Modern Churchman* 21 (1931): 94–96; Martin Dibelius, *Deutsche Literaturzeitung* 4 (1932): 147–50; Burton Easton, *Anglican Theological Review* 12.5 (1930): 454–55; Maurice Goguel, *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 10 (1930): 585–90.

⁹² Machen sent the second edition his book to Box and they had a friendly letter exchange. G. H. Box, to J. G. Machen, 16 June 1932. MA, Box 21, *The Virgin Birth of Christ: Responses*. Chapman sent Machen a long appreciative handwritten note with his review. H. John Chapman, Letter to J. Gresham Machen, Stratton-on-the-Fosse, 14 February 1931. MA, Box 21.

⁹³ Walter Bauer, perhaps thanks to Kattenbusch, refers to Machen's book alongside Kattenbusch's review. *Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch*, 5th ed. (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1958), 1243 ("παρθένος"; BAGD 627).

⁹⁴ The great Catholic exegete Lagrange offers a very positive review; see also Deneffe.

⁹⁵ E.g., Packer, "Fundamentalism" and *the Word of God*, 35, n. 1, and Henri Blocher, *Christologie* (Vaux-sur-Seine: Faculté Libre de Théologie Évangélique, 1986), 2:235.

⁹⁶ Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., trans. Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. M. Hall (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 295–96. Rudolf Bultmann, *History*

Andrew Lincoln, in his book on the virgin birth, though mostly reaching opposite conclusions from Machen, still considers his work unavoidable.⁹⁷

2. *The Most Interesting Part*

For many reviewers, the argument for the integrity of Luke's narrative is the strongest and most interesting part (e.g., Mackay, p. 204; Kolfhaus). John Chapman wrote to Machen, "The vindication of Luke i-ii is an extraordinarily brilliant piece of argumentation, because it is at once so explicit and complete and moderate in tone" (Chapman, letter to Machen). Others consider the treatment of Luke the center (Bezzant, p. 95; Goguel, p. 587). For Martin Dibelius, however, his section on "the religious-historical derivation of the virgin birth" is the "most interesting part" (p. 149), and McGarry finds both parts "most cogent and instructive" (p. 492).

3. *Between Fundamentalism and Catholicism*

The reviewer of the *Times Literary Supplement* comments that "the writer's presuppositions are not merely conservative, but ultra-conservative." Conservatives welcomed Machen's scholarly defense: Chapman rejoices that it is not only "conservative" but also "a book one must admire and praise" (p. 150; cf. Craig, p. 14). Less conservative voices acknowledged his scholarship: his "fundamentalist ... attitude to Holy Scripture" is accompanied by wide reading (Bezzant, p. 94).⁹⁸ Machen's rejection of Box's mediating position is held as a sign of his conservatism (Easton, p. 454). Box himself acknowledges Machen's "conservative conclusions," but considers him "eminently fair to the scholars with whom he disagrees" (Box, p. 78).

Likewise, reviewers criticized Machen's attempt to prove the historicity of every detail in the biblical narrative (*Times Literary Supplement*; Easton, p. 454). Bezzant ironically states, "In an argument which consists of a whole series of hypotheses ... the cumulative uncertainty remains" (p. 96), and Mackintosh argues that "his argument would probably have gained in persuasive force" if he had not followed the "all or nothing" motto. Yet Chapman appreciates the "cumulative effect" of the argument against assumed results of criticism (p. 151).

of the Synoptic Tradition, rev. ed., trans. John Marsh (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1963), 292, n. 1; 295, n. 3; and 296, n. 3.

⁹⁷ Lincoln writes, "[*Virgin Birth*] remains an erudite classic defence of this doctrine ... [and] continues to exercise significant influence among evangelical Christians"; Andrew T. Lincoln, *Born of a Virgin? Reconceiving Jesus in the Bible, Tradition, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 245.

⁹⁸ F. J. H. states that "his fundamentalism," which comes out only once, "does not ... disqualify him as a patient and careful scholar." Cf. Goguel, p. 585.

There were other perceptions of Machen. One Catholic reviewer wrongly identified him as an “Anglican theologian.”⁹⁹ Machen’s broad knowledge of the literature (*Belesenheit*) and his “prolixity” remind Dibelius of Catholic authors (p. 147). For Vernon Bartlet, Machen’s understanding of Scripture is “Catholic” not “Reformed” (p. 227). One Catholic reviewer affirms that although Machen is not Catholic, if he would “reconsider his own principle,” he would acknowledge the authority of the church (Deneffe). Catholics were among the most enthusiastic readers, taking exception, however, to his denial of the perpetual virginity of Mary and his views on the brothers of the Lord.¹⁰⁰

4. History and Background

For James Bezzant, “the historical rather than ... the doctrinal standpoint” is presented (p. 94), but Burton Easton questions Machen’s “historical sincerity” (p. 455). Maurice Goguel feels that Machen has not established the virgin birth historically (p. 586; cf. Bartlet, 225) and further questions whether “traditional dogma” can be based upon “an historical inquiry” (p. 590). Other reviewers more in line with Machen’s presuppositions differed.

For Machen, background information does not account for the virgin birth, but the real event itself does. But A. Beittel accuses him of lacking “appreciation of the good qualities in many of the religions of the Graeco-Roman world” and considers his view that “Christianity developed ... without being influenced to any extent by its environment” obsolete (p. 601). For Dibelius, one cannot easily separate Jewish from pagan elements (p. 149).¹⁰¹ Bezzant writes about Isaiah 7:14, “The question is not, What interpretation was possible to the first century Jews? but, What interpretation became possible to Christians?” (p. 96). Though Machen’s argument could be nuanced, he has adequately shown the gulf between the biblical texts and their background.

5. Repetitious or Clear?

Evaluations of Machen’s style vary. Chapman finds the first chapter “hard reading” and the book as a whole plagued by “many avoidable repetitions” (pp. 150–51; cf. Enslin, p. 518); this can be partially explained by the genesis

⁹⁹ *The Ecclesiastical Review* (May 1930); MA Scrapbook, 27.

¹⁰⁰ Despite reservations, McGarry states that in contrast to rationalism in biblical studies, “the book comes as a refreshing surprise” (p. 491). Cf. Chapman, p. 152; Lagrange, p. 615; Charue, p. 88; F. J. H.

¹⁰¹ More recent studies on Hellenism in Palestine perhaps confirm Dibelius’s point. See Bernard Aubert, *The Shepherd-Flock Motif in the Miletus Discourse (Acts 20:17–38) Against Its Historical Background*, SBL 124 (New York: Lang, 2009), 49–50.

of the book.¹⁰² Yet for John Mackay, “the style is crisp and clear and the concatenation of paragraphs as logical as the Shorter Catechism” (p. 203; cf. Charue, p. 88; and Lowe, p. 267). As for the tone, in some parts there is “an apparent gravity, beneath which the author’s amusement does not fail at times to emerge” (Chapman, p. 152). Henry Cadbury remarks that he “avoids ungentlemanly tactics of controversy.”

6. *Apologetic Character*

Craig notes the balance of Machen’s apologetic approach as he “steers midway between the position of Vincent Taylor ... and that of H. R. Mackintosh” (p. 13; see also McGarry, p. 492; and Box, p. 147).¹⁰³ Cadbury observes that “presuppositions are a determining factor” and that “he will play the liberal theories against one another, with their contradictions.”¹⁰⁴ For Goguel, the book cannot “convince anyone unless he was already persuaded before” (p. 589).

Wilhelm Kolffhaus, who is otherwise appreciative, asks, “Does he hope through proof to force unbelievers [to believe]? ... Should the truth of the Bible be proved?” John Lowe similarly asserts that he attempts to demonstrate “the obviously indemonstrable” (p. 267). Dibelius and Bultmann note the “apologetic tendency,” which was for them not a compliment (Dibelius, p. 147; Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 292, n. 1).

VI. *Machen’s Response*

1. *Second Edition*

Machen’s *Virgin Birth* was first published in 1930; two years later a revised edition appeared that took into account reviews of his work and recent publications. The pagination of the two editions is the same, so small cuts had to be made to make space for additions.¹⁰⁵ He also added a preface (pp. vii–x) where he interacts more in depth with evaluations of his book. This

¹⁰² That Machen worked on *The Virgin Birth* for years did not go unnoticed. Easton, p. 454; D. B. Botte, *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* (1930); MA Scrapbook, 47; and Laurentin, *Structure et théologie de Luc I–II*, 208.

¹⁰³ Not surprisingly, Mackintosh finds that the second part comes “with a force ... difficult to resist.”

¹⁰⁴ For Enslin, it “is not without its grotesque side” (p. 519).

¹⁰⁵ A comparison of the two editions reveals that Machen made changes on the following pages (not including the preface and index): 16, 29, 61, 63, 90, 120–21, 137, 157, 165, 209, 213, 275, 296, 307, 317, 323, 359, 374–76, 378, and 385. Among the changes, one could cite interactions with Bultmann and Kattenbusch, small corrections, and discussion about the proto-Luke hypothesis of B. H. Streeter and Taylor.

revised edition shows Machen's continued attention to detail and engagement with key scholars.¹⁰⁶

2. A Few Targeted Responses

In his response to the complaint of the British theologian Mackintosh that he defends the historicity of all the details,¹⁰⁷ Machen indicates that this was not a criticism of Box but of "rationalizing treatment."¹⁰⁸ Further, he wants a comprehensive defense (not just of a few central doctrines) to protect "the outer defence of Christianity" (i.e., "plenary inspiration of the Bible").¹⁰⁹ For him, inspiration is "the starting-point of systematic theology" but "the goal ... in apologetics," and, if one "believe in the true resurrection of Jesus ... and yet reject the particular miracle of the virgin birth," he or she still shares in God's grace.

Machen responds to Kolffhaus on apologetics in a letter.¹¹⁰ In line with "the position of B. B. Warfield and others of our Princeton School (now, alas, deprived of its centre in Princeton itself)," he feels that Kolffhaus places less weight on apologetics. Likewise, "there was a difference between Abraham Kuyper and Warfield ... but ... that difference was [not] so great in practice as it was in theory."¹¹¹ Machen attempts to hold together the impact of sin on the mind and reason: "A truly open mind" accepts the evidence of the New Testament, but "the mind of sinful man is not truly open," and the Holy Spirit through regeneration has to remove "the noetic effects of sin." The "truths" of the Bible are not found "by unaided human reason," but the Spirit does not work "in defiance of the scientific evidence or in independence of it."¹¹²

Conclusion

Machen's *Virgin Birth* grew out of years of research and various publications, and out of concern for the church. His achievement remains considerable,

¹⁰⁶ No such revised edition exists for Machen's *Origin of Paul's Religion*.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Machen, *Virgin Birth*, 216.

¹⁰⁸ Machen, "The Virgin Birth: Is the Doctrine Crucial?" *British Weekly* (August 21, 1930); MA Scrapbook, 50. He distinguishes views that accept "as historical the central miracle in the birth narratives and rejects details, from views of those who accept only details and reject the central miracle" (Machen, *Virgin Birth*, x).

¹⁰⁹ In his preface, Machen puts it like this: "A thoroughgoing apologetic is the strongest apologetic in the end" (ibid.).

¹¹⁰ Letter to Kolffhaus, January 31, 1931; MA, Box 21.

¹¹¹ Note that Cornelius Van Til also defines his approach in relation to Warfield and Kuyper yet probably places more emphasis on Kuyper than Machen does. See Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 229–54.

¹¹² Letter to Kolffhaus.

as more than half the book was new material. His interaction with critical scholarship and appreciation for Catholic scholarship set him apart from fundamentalism. His book was welcomed in America and Europe by conservative Protestants, critical scholars, and Catholics scholars.¹¹³ His scholarship, also well grounded in the Reformed tradition, makes him relevant for the international Reformed community.

Here are a few of Machen's contributions. First, his comprehensive defense of the doctrine remains a significant achievement. It is sensitive to others' views and often nuanced. In an era of renewed interest in theological interpretation, his book deserves a second look.¹¹⁴ Second, he continues Old Princeton and anticipates Cornelius Van Til.¹¹⁵ His views about reason and sin, presuppositions, and antithesis, and his attempts to show the bankruptcy of opposing explanations, point toward Van Til. Thus his New Testament apologetics has commonalities with Van Til's philosophical apologetics. Third, he offers valuable insights into New Testament studies and is a master at synthesis.¹¹⁶ He contrasts acceptance of supernatural facts with offers of alternate solutions, the virgin birth and putative Jewish/pagan backgrounds; the origin of Paul's religion in a personal encounter with the risen Christ and Paul's Hellenistic background. Machen remains a model of confessional biblical scholarship (e.g., philology and textual criticism, Synoptic studies, source criticism and historical analysis, and narrative analysis), especially as such issues in biblical studies did not vanish. Of course, new answers and interaction with the most recent scholarship is certainly what Machen would have expected. His following comments are still relevant as we commemorate Erasmus's anniversary:

The new Reformation ... will be accompanied by a new Renaissance; and the last thing in the world that we desire to do is to discourage originality or independence of mind.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ This reinforces the importance of a transatlantic approach advocated by Annette Aubert; see her "J. Gresham Machen and the Theology of Crisis," 337–62, and Dennison, "Machen and Bultmann."

¹¹⁴ Cf. Treier, "Virgin Territory?," 373.

¹¹⁵ For more on Machen and Van Til, see Greg L. Bahnsen, "Machen, Van Til, and the Apologetical Tradition of the OPC," in *Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1936–1986* (Philadelphia: Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986), 259–94, and John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995), 39–44.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Aubert, "J. Gresham Machen and the Theology of Crisis," 361–62.

¹¹⁷ J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Faith?* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 18–19.