Chapter 2

The Birth Narrative an Original Part of the Third Gospel

It has been shown in the preceding chapter that the doctrine of the virgin birth, so far as the extant sources permit us to judge, was as firmly established at the beginning of the second century as it was at the close. Such is the most natural conclusion to be drawn in particular from the testimony of Ignatius, and there is nothing in the other extant information to invalidate it.

Obviously a doctrine which appears as so much a matter of course in the Ignatian Epistles could not have been an innovation, but must have had its roots in the previous period. Ignatius was no neophyte, but the bishop of a great church, the mother church of Gentile Christianity. At Antioch he was in a position by no means remote from the ultimate sources of information about the life of Jesus. Obviously, what he presents, without argument, as an essential part of Christian belief must already have been commonly believed in the Church for many years.

Even, therefore, if there were not a word about the subject in the New Testament, the second-century testimony would show that the belief in the virgin birth must have arisen, to say the least, well before the first century was over. As a matter of fact, however, the New Testament does contain an account of the virgin birth, and that account must now be examined.

The New Testament account of the birth of Jesus is contained in two of the New Testament books, the Gospel according to Matthew and the Gospel according to Luke. Since the narrative in Luke is more extended than that in Matthew and begins at an earlier point in the course of events, it may conveniently be considered first.

Of course our estimate of the Lucan account of the birth of Jesus will depend to a considerable extent upon what we think of the Third Gospel as a whole. Obviously that larger question cannot be considered here; consideration of it would require a separate treatise. It can merely be remarked in passing that there is just now an increasing tendency among scholars of widely diverse opinions to accept the traditional view that the Third Gospel and the Book of

Acts were actually written by Luke the physician, a companion of the Apostle Paul.

If this view is correct, very important consequences at once become evident. If the author of Luke-Acts was, as he is held to be by those who defend the traditional view of the authorship, identical with that companion of Paul who includes himself with Paul by the use of the first person plural in the so-called "we sections" of the Book of Acts, then at every point where the "we" occurs the author must have been present. The movements and relationships of the author can thus be traced. It can be shown by this method, for example, that the author came into contact, on the second missionary journey, not only with. Paul, but also with Silas, who came originally from the Jerusalem Church. And, what is even more important, the significant "we" in the narrative extends into the very presence of James, the brother of the Lord, and of the Jerusalem Church itself.[1] The author was thus in Palestine at the beginning of the two years which Paul spent in prison at Caesarea; and since at the end of that period he appears again in Palestine (where he took ship with Paul for Rome), it is natural to suppose that he spent all or part of the interval in that country. At that time, then, he could have had abundant opportunity to obtain information about the earthly life of Jesus from those who were best qualified to speak. If Luke was really the author of Luke-Acts, then there is a strong presumption in favor of the trustworthiness of the double work, not only where it deals with the missionary journeys of Paul, but also with regard to the life of Jesus and the early history of the Palestinian Church; and in particular it must be treated with respect where it deals with the events concerning the birth and infancy of the Lord.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the great majority of those who deny the historicity of the infancy narrative in the Third Gospel deny also the Lucan authorship of the book. The primary reason why they must do so is perfectly plain; it is simply that the Third Gospel and the Book of Acts, not only in the infancy narrative, but elsewhere as well, present a thoroughly supernaturalistic account of the life of Jesus and of the beginnings of the Christian Church. If a man rejects the supernatural, it is very difficult for him to suppose that an author who stood so close to the events as did Luke the physician, a companion of Paul, could have given so clearly supernatural and hence mistaken an account of what occurred. But just because of this consideration, it is the more significant that scholars like A. von Harnack of Berlin,[2] and the

1. Acts xxi.18.
2. See the well-known series of monographs beginning with *Lukas der Arzt,* 1906 (English translation, *Luke the Physician,* 1907).

distinguished historian, Eduard Meyer,[3] who themselves altogether reject the historicity of the miracles narrated in Luke-Acts, should have felt compelled to accept the traditional view of the authorship. Only very strong evidence in the sphere of literary criticism could so overcome the strong presumption against Lucan authorship which must exist in the minds of such opponents of the supernatural content of the books. And as a matter of fact that evidence is found upon independent examination to be very strong indeed. The more one examines the literary phenomena in connection with Luke-Acts, the more one is impressed by the evidence for the traditional view that the double work was written by Luke the physician, a companion of Paul.

It is, therefore, very significant that the account of the birth and infancy of Jesus in Lk. i-ii is a part of the Third Gospel. But this account of the birth and infancy constitutes not only a part of the Third Gospel, but a very peculiar part, a part which well deserves separate consideration.

The prologue of the Gospel, embracing the first four verses, is one of the most carefully constructed sentences in the whole New Testament. It is a typical "complex" sentence, in which the sense is held in abeyance until the end; and in the last clause, "in order that thou mayest know, concerning the things wherein thou has been instructed, *the certainty,*" the emphatic word of the whole sentence, "the certainty," is reserved to the last in an effective way which cannot be reproduced in any smooth English translation. It would be difficult to imagine a more skilfully formed, and more typically Greek, sentence than this.

Yet this typically Greek sentence is followed by what is probably the most markedly Semitic section in the whole New Testament, the section containing the account of the birth and infancy in Lk. i.5-ii.52. There could scarcely be a greater contrast in style. In passing from the complex Greek sentence of the prologue to the simple narrative style of the following section, which is like the style of the Old Testament historical books, one seems to be suddenly transplanted into a different world.

This contrast between the language of the birth narrative and the author's own style as it is found in the prologue might be expected, in a day of acuteness in the field of literary criticism, to lead to the hypothesis that Lk. i.5-ii.52 is a later addition, not found in the original form of the book. And indeed this hypothesis has not been altogether without its advocates. But the significant thing is that the advocates of it were perhaps more prominent one hundred and twenty-five years ago than they are today.

3. *Ursprung und Anfänge des Christentums,* iii, 1923, pp. 23-36.

During the closing years of the eighteenth century the question was rather seriously raised whether the first two chapters, not merely of Matthew, but also of Luke, were later additions to the books. This hypothesis with regard to the Gospel of Luke (if we may confine our attention for the moment to that Gospel) has been favored in more recent times by Hilgenfeld,[4] Usener,[5] P. Corssen,[6] and F.C. Conybeare;[7] but it has failed signally to establish itself, and at present can claim comparatively little support.

The truth is that, despite the obvious differences of language and style that exist between Lk. i.5-ii.52 and other parts of Luke-Acts, a closer examination reveals also similarities of a very impressive kind. As early in the history of modern criticism as 1816, the language of this infancy section of the Gospel was carefully examined verse by verse by Gersdorf, with the result that a great number of "Lucan" words or usages – that is, words or usages found only or chiefly in the Lucan writings as compared with the other New Testament books – were discovered in it. Apparently without reference to Gersdorf, a similar process has been carried out in recent years by Zimmermann and Harnack, with entirely convincing results. An examination by the present writer, which was undertaken in order to test what proved to be an exaggeration by Harnack of the Lucan character of the section, yet resulted, so far as the present point is concerned, in a complete confirmation. It is perfectly clear that the hand of the author of the whole book has been at work in Lk. i.5-ii.52.[8]

Against this conclusion Hilgenfeld urged the hypothesis that the similarities between our section and the rest of the book were due to a redactor.[9] But surely the explanation is quite inadequate. The facts may be explained only if the author of the whole book, supposing he did use sources in Lk. i.5-ii.52, used them with freedom, preserving their peculiar quality and yet imparting to them something of his own style. Gradually the criticism of the Lucan writings is enabling us to construct something like a clear account of the literary methods of the author. And it is a very pleasing account indeed. We have here an author who had an admirable feeling for the beauty of the Old Testament narratives and of the Semitic narratives that came to him from Palestine, but

4. "Das Vorwort des dritten Evangeliums (Luc. I, 1-4)," in *Zeitschrift für wissenschaftliche Theologie,* Xliv, 1901, pp. 1 – 10; "Die Geburts- und Kindheitsgeschichte Jesu Luc. I, 5-II, 52," *ibid.,* pp. 177-235; "Zu Lucas III, 2," *ibid.,* pp. 466-468.
5. *Das Weihnachtsfest,* 2te Aufl., 1911, pp. 52, 83-95; art. "Nativity," in *Encyclopedia Biblica,* iii, 1902, cols. 3347 f.
6. In *Göttingische gelehrte Anzeigen, clxi,* 1899, pp. 325 f.
7. "Ein Zeugnis Ephräms über das Fehlen von c. 1 und 2 im Texte des Lucas," in *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft, iii*, 1902, pp. 192-197.
8. For further information about the studies referred to in this paragraph, see below, pp. 102 ff.
9. Hilgenfeld, "Die Geburts und Kindheitsgeschichte Jesu Luc. I, 5 – II, 52," in *Zeitschrift für wissenchaftlithe Theologie,* xliv, 1901, p. 185.

who at the same time knew how to impart to his book a certain unity amid the diversity, which prevents it from being a mere compilation and makes it a genuine literary whole.

Thus the linguistic facts are strongly against the view that Lk. i.5-ii.52 constitutes an addition to the original Gospel. And a little examination will show that other arguments that have been adduced in favor of that view all break down.

In the first place, there is not the slightest external evidence in favor of the hypothesis. It is true that in the second century Marcion, the ultra-Pauline heretical teacher, used a form of the Gospel of Luke that did not contain the first two chapters. That fact was still used by Usener in 1889 to support his removal of Lk. i.5-ii.52 from the original form of the Gospel. Usener supposed that Marcion's Luke was derived from an earlier form of the Gospel from which our canonical Luke also comes, and that at this point the Marcionic form was more original.[10] But it would probably be difficult to find advocates of such a view today; it is now generally admitted that Marcion's form of the Gospel was due to a revision of our canonical form, a revision undertaken to support Marcion's peculiar views.[11] Thus it was impossible for Marcion to include in his. Gospel any account of a birth of Jesus, to say nothing of a virgin birth, for the simple reason that he did not believe Jesus to have been born at all, but thought that He appeared full-grown upon the earth. As a witness to any form of the Third Gospel that did not include the first two chapters, Marcion is therefore altogether without significance.

Equally without significance for our purpose is a certain note to which F.C. Conybeare called attention, attached to a manuscript, dating from the year 1195, of the Armenian translation of Ephraem's Commentary on the Diatessaron. The manuscript in question is very late, and both text and interpretation of the note are very uncertain. It is not surprising that Conybeare's estimate of this piece of evidence has not received support from other scholars.[12]

10. Usener, *Das Weihnachtsfest,* 1889, pp. 51 f., 80-91. These passages appear also in the second edition, which was published in 1911 under the care of Hans Lietzmann (pp. 51 f., 83-95).
11. See, for example, Harnack, "Marcion," *in Texte und Untersuchungen,* 3. Reihe 15. Band, 2te Aufl., 1924, pp. 65 f.: "Therefore it is also an error to hold that when he [Marcion] omitted the infancy narrative he was influenced by the earlier tradition (supposed not to contain that narrative). It must be remembered that he also omitted the narrative of the baptism, which belongs to the oldest part of the Gospel material and in all probability was already present in the source 'Q'."
12. Conybeare, "Ein Zeugnis Ephräms über *das* Fehlen von c. 1 und 2 im Texte des Lucas," in *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft,* iii, 1902, pp. 192-197. See "The New Testament Account of the Birth of Jesus," first article, in *Princeton Theological Review,* iii, 1905, pp. 643 f.

Thus there is complete unanimity among all the witnesses to the text in favor of including Lk. i.5-ii.52 in the original Third Gospel. The section was included in the earliest Gospel harmony, Tatian's Diatessaron, which was made in the second century; its presence in the Gospel is definitely attested by the Muratori Canon; and it is found in all the Greek manuscripts of the Gospel and in all the versions. Such unanimity among widely divergent lines of attestation makes it very adventurous, to say the least, to exclude the section from the original form of the Gospel according to Luke.

But if the attempts to find external evidence for excluding Lk. i.5-ii.52 from the Third Gospel have resulted in failure, equally, unconvincing are the arguments which have been adduced from the Lucan writings themselves.

Thus when it is argued from Acts i.I – "The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, concerning all things which Jesus began both to do and to teach, until the day when he was taken up" – that the Gospel (which is here called "the former treatise") could not have contained an account of anything that happened prior to the time when Jesus began to teach and to act, in other words, prior to the beginning of the public ministry,[13] surely that is a very pedantic way of understanding what is in reality just a reference to the main contents of the Gospel. Taken broadly, as over against the author's second book, the Book of Acts, the Gospel may surely be designated, even if it included the first two chapters, as an account of the things that Jesus began to do and to teach prior to the ascension. In a modern biography, it is considered perfectly proper for the author sometimes to go back even a number of generations in order that the reader may understand the better the life that is to be narrated in detail. So it was perfectly natural for a book concerned with what Jesus did and taught during His public ministry to include, at least by way of introduction, an account of events connected with His entrance into the world. And even though there were any objection to such a designation of the Gospel if the designation stood alone, the objection disappears when one observes the contrast that is implied with the contents of the author's second book. As over against the Book of Acts, with its account of the words and deeds of the apostles, it is not unnatural for the Gospel, even including the narrative of the birth and infancy, to be designated as an account of the words and deeds of Jesus. It should be observed, moreover, that in Acts i.1 no starting-point for the narrative of the former treatise is definitely mentioned. The author is thinking not of the starting-point of the Gospel, but of the end of it, where with the ascension of Jesus the transition was made to the subse-

13. Hilgenfeld, *op. cit.,* p. 178.

quent progress of the gospel under the instrumentality of the apostles, which provides the subject-matter of the second book.

It is perhaps worthy of remark that even if the first two chapters of the Gospel were not present, the book would still begin, strictly speaking, with something other than the words and deeds of Jesus; for the first twenty verses of the third chapter are concerned with John the Baptist, whose preaching is reported at much greater length than in the other Synoptic Gospels. Just how much introductory material may be allowed in an account of what Jesus did and taught? Even if Lk. i.5-ii.52 be removed, there is a certain amount of such material. Who can say that the addition of that section would require a different designation of the book as a whole? Thus the argument from the prologue of Acts may be said to prove too much.

Equally unconvincing is Hilgenfeld's use of the prologue of the Gospel. When he argues that Christianity began with the baptism of Jesus, so that what happened before that could not be included among the things "fulfilled *among us*" (that is, in Christendom),[14] that is again a quite unwarranted pressing of the author's words. For refutation of it, one does not need to enter at length upon the vexed question of the interpretation of the prologue. Surely an account of the birth and infancy of Jesus could not be excluded from the things that have been fulfilled *among us* (that is, among Christians) even if Hilgenfeld is right in supposing that in the author's view Christianity began definitely with the baptism. Far more natural is it to say that the author desires to treat the whole complex of Christian facts, to which the birth of the Saviour and of His forerunner belonged. And it may even perhaps be argued that when this author speaks about his having followed all things *from the beginning* he is alluding to an earlier point of departure for his narrative than that which appeared in the works of some, at least, of his predecessors.

But is Hilgenfeld correct in designating the baptism of Jesus as being for this author the beginning of "Christianity"? That brings us to a consideration of the use to which some of the advocates of the theory which Hilgenfeld is defending have put the Lucan account of the baptism in Lk. iii.21-23 and the references to it in Acts 1.22; x.37 f.; xiii.23 f. These passages, it is said, establish the baptism of Jesus by John, with the bestowal of the Spirit that accompanied it, as the true decisive "beginning" in the life of Jesus and thus as the beginning of the Christian facts with which the author of Luke and Acts was undertaking to deal.

14. Hilgenfeld, "Das Vorwort des dritten Evangeliums (Luc. I, 1-4)", *in Zeitschrift für wissenschafdiche Theologie,* xliv, 1901, pp. 1-3; "Die Geburts- and Kindheitsgeschichte Jesu Luc. I, 5 – II, 52," *ibid.,* pp. 177-179.

The argument is thought to be more powerful if, as has been done by a number of scholars, the reading of the "Western" text is adopted at Lk. iii.22. In that verse, the great mass of witnesses to the text, including the Codex Vaticanus and the Codex Sinaiticus, have the reading with which we are familiar: "Thou art my beloved son, in thee I am well pleased." But the Codex Bezæ, supported by certain manuscripts of the Old Latin Version and by certain patristic citations, including apparently a reference in Justin Martyr at the middle of the second century, reads: "Thou art my son, this day have I begotten thee," thus making the divine utterance a quotation of the words in Ps. ii.7. This reading, it is said, if it is original (and a number of scholars think that it is), places the beginning of the divine sonship of Jesus at the baptism, and so indicates that the same Gospel could not have placed it at the birth, as is plainly done in Lk. i.35.

In regard to this argument, it may be said in the first place that the Western text is in all probability incorrect at Lk. iii.22, as it is in so many other cases; and in the second place that even if it were correct it would not be nearly so significant as has sometimes been supposed. The passage in the Second Psalm, of which the Western text in Lk. iii.22 is a quotation, evidently designates, not the birth, but the induction into office, of the Messianic king. Accordingly it is applied by this same writer (in his report of a speech of Paul) to the resurrection.[15] If it were applied by the same writer both to the resurrection of Jesus and to the baptism, there would not really be the slightest incongruity; for in one sense the baptism and in another sense the resurrection constituted the induction of Jesus into his kingly function as "Son of God." Still less difficulty could be found in comparison with Lk. i.35, where the divine sonship of Jesus is brought apparently into connection with the virgin birth. The mere fact that after the virgin birth had been narrated the same writer should go on to apply a passage from the Psalms, in full accord with its obvious Old Testament sense, to the induction into office of the Messianic king at the beginning of the public ministry, surely need not be regarded as surprising at all.

Thus even if the Western reading were correct at Lk. iii.22 (as in all probability it is not), there would be clothing in this verse out of harmony with the birth narrative, and so nothing to show that that narrative could not have been included by the same author in the same book.

But even though the Western reading in this verse would not be sufficient, when taken alone, to show that the birth narratives were originally absent, may it not do so when taken in connection with certain other considerations?

15. Acts xiii.33. Compare Rom. i.4.

Or even if the Western reading is not correct, is there not still enough evidence to show that for the author of Luke-Acts the baptism of Jesus, and not the birth, was the great "beginning," the beginning *par excellence,* to which he must be referring in the prologues of both his books? These questions deserve some consideration.

But here again the evidence will not at all bear the weight that is put upon it. It is indeed perfectly clear that to the author of Luke-Acts, on the basis of the information that came to him, the baptism of Jesus was an important event that did mark the beginning of something. But, of what did it mark the beginning?

In the first place, it marked the beginning of that period in the life of Jesus to which the apostles could testify as eye-witnesses. That fact explains the reference in Acts i.22; for there it is represented as an important qualification for the man who was to take the place of Judas among the Twelve that he should have been with the disciples during all the time when Jesus went out and in among them beginning with the baptism of John. No other *terminus a quo* could have been designated, for the simple reason that none of the apostles, not even Peter himself, was with Jesus at an earlier time. The baptism clearly marks the beginning of the direct testimony of the apostles.

That fact really explains also the mention of the baptism in Acts x.37-39; for in that passage again Peter says: "And *we are witnesses* of all things which Jesus did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem." It was at the baptism that Peter began to be an eye-witness of the life of Christ upon earth. A similar consideration, if we may anticipate what will have to be said in another connection, serves to explain admirably the omission of the birth and infancy in the Gospel of Mark. That Gospel, according to a thoroughly credible tradition, embodies the teaching of Peter; and it seems to contain the things which would make a first impression rather than instruction of a more detailed and intimate kind. It is very natural that such a book should deal almost exclusively with things that Peter had himself seen and heard.

In Acts xiii.24, although there also the same consideration may be urged, the case is a little different; for in this passage, in the speech of Paul at Pisidian Antioch, the baptism of Jesus by John is not mentioned, and John appears rather as the last of the pre-Christian witnesses to Christ. But in the other two passages the prime consideration is that the baptism of Jesus by John marks the beginning of the period in the life of Christ to which the apostles could testify as eye-witnesses.

We are, indeed, far from wishing to assert that in the mind of the author of Luke-Acts, the baptism of Jesus was important only because it happened

to be the point at which the apostles began to be eye-witnesses. On the contrary, this author, like the author of the other Gospels, represents the baptism as marking an important new beginning, not only for the disciples, but also for Jesus Himself.

The fact is no doubt indicated by the striking use of the absolute participle "beginning" at Lk. iii.23. That verse, literally translated, reads as follows: "And Jesus Himself was, when He began [in Greek, "beginning"], about thirty years old, being the son, as was supposed, of Joseph who was the son of Eli. …"[16] The words, "when He began," naturally give rise to question. The reader may be tempted to ask, "When He began *what?*"

Extreme answers have sometimes been given to this question. Thus it has been suggested, especially when the Western reading, "Thou art my son, this day have I begotten thee," is adopted in the preceding verse, that the "beginning" which is referred to in our verse is the beginning of the divine sonship of Jesus. Jesus has just been designated as having been begotten "this day" by God; hence His divine sonship, it is said, begins at that point. On this interpretation, the words, "as was supposed," in the phrase, "being the son, as was supposed, of Joseph," instead of being taken, in accordance with what is certainly the prevailing opinion, as a reference to the virgin birth of Jesus, have somewhere actually been taken as contrasting the physical sonship of Jesus as a child of Joseph and Mary – His sonship according to the outward appearance – with His real, or spiritual sonship, which began through the divine begetting at the time of the baptism. That divine begetting, on this interpretation, did not take place until Jesus, as a son of Joseph and Mary, had grown to full manhood. His apparent, or physical, or external, sonship had lasted for thirty years before His true, divine sonship began.

This interpretation of the words, "as was supposed," it may be remarked in passing, is rather unnatural. If the beginning of the divine, as distinguished from the human, sonship of Jesus is not regarded as having taken place before the baptism, then Jesus up to that time was not only apparently but really the son of Joseph. Therefore, to justify the interpretation of which we have been speaking, the sentence ought perhaps rather to have read: "And Jesus was, when He began, about thirty years of age, being, as was supposed, *still* (or *only)* the son of Joseph," or "being *according to the flesh* the son of Joseph." The words as they stand will hardly bear the meaning that is attributed to them. It would not be natural to set the divine begetting in a relation of contrast with the current opinion about the paternity of Joseph, as is done by the words, "as was supposed," except on the assumption that Joseph was not in a

16. *καὶ αὐτὸς ἦν Ἰησοῦς ἀρχόμενος ὡσεὶ ἐτῶν τριάκοντα, ὢν υἱός, ὡς ἐνομίζετο, Ἰωσὴφ τοῦ Ἡλεί….*

physical sense – that is, not in the sense that prevailed generally among the people – the father of Jesus.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the great majority (to say the least) of those who hold that the passage Lk. iii.22, 23 is incompatible with the birth of Jesus as it is narrated in the first two chapters, and that those chapters arc therefore a later addition to the Gospel, admit that the words, "as was supposed," in verse 23 do constitute a reference to the virgin birth as it appears in Lk. i.34, 35, and hence admit that these words were interpolated by the same person who added the first two chapters to the Gospel. On that view, the words, "as was supposed," can no longer do duty as indicating that the baptism, and not the birth, of Jesus was the beginning of His divine sonship.

But even with this ordinary interpretation of these words, as they stand, as referring to the virgin birth (the interpretation which is no doubt held by nearly all scholars of all shades of opinion), and even with the ordinary, as distinguished from the Western, text in Lk. iii.22, does it not still remain true that the word "beginning" ("when He began") in verse 23 designates the event at the baptism as the decisive beginning, the beginning *par excellence,* which the author has in mind in the entire plan of his work, so that there could not originally have been prefixed to the account of this event an extended narrative of prior events such as that which we now have in the first two chapters?

In answer to this question it must freely be admitted, as indeed has already been done, that the baptism by John, or the event that immediately followed, is regarded by the author of Luke-Acts as an event of very great importance indeed. It is not at all surprising, therefore, that the time, or at least the general setting, of this event – or rather of the public appearance of John which was preliminary to it – should be fixed by the elaborate reference to contemporary political conditions in Lk. iii.1.

But surely the importance of the baptism of Jesus, in the mind of the Evangelist, does not carry with it any lack of importance for the birth and infancy. And as for the elaborate reference to contemporary conditions, it may be said, (1) that possibly the author did not possess equally detailed information regarding conditions at the time of the birth, (2) that such a chronological or political note would have been out of accord with the style chosen (for whatever reason) for the birth narrative, when a simple phrase, "in the days of Herod the King," alone suited the spirit of that narrative, (3) that in a reference to a time when Herod the Great ruled over all Palestine there was no need for the separate designation of the districts into which the country was later divided, so that for that earlier time an elaborate note like that in Lk. iii.1, 2 would have been impossible, (4) that the phrase, "in the days of

Herod the King," in Lk. i.5, coupled with the reference to the census and to Quirinius in Lk. ii.1 f., does show a desire on the part of the author to synchronize the birth of Jesus with surrounding political conditions which is somewhat similar, after all, to the treatment of the appearance of the Baptist in Lk. iii.1 f.

What, then, was the importance of the event at the baptism of Jesus, which caused that event to be designated by the somewhat surprising absolute use of the participle "beginning" (that is, in English, "when He began") in Lk. iii.23? The answer is simply that that event marked the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus. Up to that time He had been hidden; now He came forward publicly in His Messianic work. The account of the temptation, which immediately follows the account of the baptism, supports this understanding of that previous event. Jesus had just been designated by the voice from heaven as Son of God – that is (whatever deeper meaning there may be in the term), at least as Messiah. Thus the Western text, with its quotation of Ps. ii.7, secondary though it no doubt is, yet involves perhaps an essentially correct interpretation of the divine word; Jesus was, when the Spirit descended upon Him, designated as the Messianic king. The kingship had indeed been His before; but now He was to enter into the active exercise of it. But what kind of king should He be; how should He use His kingly power? That question it was which was asked by the Tempter, with his repeated "If thou be the son of God," and which Jesus answered in such a decisive way.

But, it is said, if the event at the baptism be taken in this fashion, not as making Jesus something that He had not been, but merely as designating His entrance into a Work for which He had been qualified even before, what shall be thought of the descent upon Him of the Holy Spirit (Lk. iii.22)? Even if the words, "Thou art my son," could be understood not as the conferring of some new dignity or power that He had not possessed before, but merely as the announcement or confirmation of what was already His, how can the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Him be understood in this merely declarative way? Does not *that* event, at least, indicate that He now came to be something that He had not already been? And if so, how could it be supposed that not only had He possessed the Holy Spirit from His mother's womb, as was the case with John the Baptist,[17] but had owed to the Holy Spirit, in a supernatural conception, the very constitution of His being?[18] Finally, if that question is unanswerable, how could the same author have included two such incompatible representations in his book? And so must not the birth narratives, in which

17. Lk. i.15.
18. Lk. i.35.

the other representation is found, be a later addition not due to the original author of the book?

Such questions have sometimes been asked. And yet the objection that underlies them is not really by any means so serious as it may at first sight seem. It depends upon the assumption that the coming of the Holy Spirit in connection with the life of Jesus upon earth could take place, according to our Evangelist, only at one time and in one way. But surely that assumption is exceedingly uncertain, to say the least. The actions of the Spirit of God – we will not say, in reality, for that is not the question here – but according to the mind of the author of the Third Gospel, were very much more mysterious and very much more varied than they are thought to be by many modern scholars in their study-chambers. Who can say that because the Holy Spirit came upon the virgin mother of Jesus when He was conceived in the womb, therefore the same Spirit could not, according to the Evangelist, come upon Jesus again, and in other fashion, to fit Him for His public work as Messiah? Can the ineffable interactions between Jesus Christ and the Spirit of God be thus reduced to a set scheme? We think not; and in so thinking we are not merely voicing the conviction of Christendom throughout all the ages, but also are in full accord, no matter what the particular investigator's own convictions may be, with what a true historical exegesis must recognize as being in the mind of Luke. In order to understand a book like the Third Gospel, and like the other New Testament books, it is necessary to do something more than impose upon those books our own predilections; the true interpreter must rather seek to enter, as cannot be done by rule of thumb, into the very spirit of the writer. And when that is done, no contradiction will be found, but rather the deepest harmony, between the work of the Holy Spirit at the very beginning of Jesus' earthly life and the coming of the same Spirit upon Him when finally He went forth to begin His public ministry.

There is not the slightest reason, therefore, why we should not hold that the event at the baptism was important for Jesus, according to the author of the Third Gospel, not because it made Him something that He was not before, but because it designated His entrance upon His public work. What had been hidden before was now to become manifest to all the people. There had been a period of obscurity, but that period was preparatory to what was now at last to come.

That this interpretation is in accordance with the intention of the writer is not only probable in itself, but also is confirmed by one particular link between the birth narrative and what follows – a link which has generally escaped notice. In Lk. i.80 it is said that John the Baptist was in the deserts

until the day of his "showing" to Israel.[19] Does that verse not lead the reader to look for the great "day" that is there held in prospect, the day when John should emerge from his obscurity and appear publicly as the forerunner of the Messianic salvation? Whenever that day should come, surely it would be heralded by the writer who included Lk. i.80 in his book, with all the solemnity that he could command. And just exactly that is done in Lk. iii.1 f. The period of obscurity and waiting in which the reader was left in the former passage at last is over; the forerunner emerges from the deserts and the day of Messianic salvation has dawned. What wonder that the concomitant political conditions are marked with all the precision that the writer can command; what wonder that rulers and high priests are marshalled to do honor to the great event that signalized their reign?

Thus is explained the fact that the elaborate synchronism of rulers in Lk. iii.1 f. marks not the baptism of Jesus, but the appearance or "showing forth" of His forerunner, John. In the clearest possible way the author has taken up the thread that for the moment was broken off. The forerunner was in obscurity in the deserts; He for whose coming he was to prepare was in humble subjection to earthly parents – and then the great day came, the day of the formal appearance of the herald in his great function of preparing for the Messianic king.

Far, therefore, from being an argument against regarding the first two chapters as part of the original form of the Gospel, the elaborate political note in Lk. iii.1 f. is an argument to the contrary. And even the way in which the Baptist is introduced in these two verses provides an incidental indication of the fact that the birth narrative has gone before. In contrast with what is found in the other Gospels, John is here designated, at his first appearance in connection with Jesus' public ministry, not as "the Baptist" or the like but as "Zacharias' son." It is truly surprising that Hilgenfeld actually finds in this phrase an argument *against* the original inclusion of the first two chapters in the Gospel.[20] Zacharias, the father of John, he says, is here mentioned as though for the first time, and therefore this Gospel could not have contained the account of him that now stands in Lk. i. Could there be any more complete reversal of the natural inference? Is it not perfectly clear that the reason why Luke, as distinguished from the other Evangelists, designates the Baptist as Zacharias' son, is that, unlike the other Evangelists, he has already given an account of

19. The word for "showing," it may be remarked, is no ordinary word, but has a rather formal, solemn sound.

20. Hilgenfeld, "Zu Lucas III, 2," in *Zeitschrift für wissenschaftliche* Theologie, xliv, 1901, pp. 466–468.

Zacharias at the beginning of his Gospel? Lk. iii.2 rather plainly refers back to Lk. i.5-25, 57-80.

A number of indications in detail, therefore, have been shown to unite the main body of the Third Gospel with the first two chapters. Careful search might reveal many others. And of course the words, "as was supposed," in Lk. iii.23, which have already been discussed in a slightly different connection, provide, as they stand, an additional link with the birth narrative. If that narrative is to be regarded as absent from the Gospel as it originally appeared, then these words must be an interpolation due to the man who expanded the Gospel into its present form. But obviously the necessity of removing such supposed interpolations in the body of the Gospel, before it can be separated from the first two chapters, overloads the hypothesis, and raises anew the question why it is that the original, shorter and uninterpolated, form of the book has so completely failed to leave any trace among the extant witnesses to the text.

Usener,[21] apparently, has an answer to this latter question. The Gospel, he thinks, was at first subject to repeated additions; it was not a work completed at one time and given to the world in definitive form, but was, rather, an agglomeration that was only gradually formed and was added to from time to time as the real or supposed needs of the Church might require. Thus, at first, according to Usener,[22] it did not even contain an account of the baptism of Jesus by John: the account of the baptism was then added; and last of all there was added the account of the birth. Why then is there such unanimity in the transmission of the text; why have those successive earlier forms left no trace? The answer, apparently, that Usener gave, at least the only answer that he could give, to this question is that the extant text, in all its lines of transmission, goes back to a canonized form of the Gospel that was fixed at some time in the second century to put an end to the misuse of the Gospels by what was regarded as heresy. This act of canonization it must have been, therefore, according to Usener's hypothesis, that stopped the process of agglomeration of Gospel material that had been going on before, and caused only the Gospels as we now have them to be handed down to us today.

To this entire hypothesis, however, there are the most serious objections. Where and when did this definitive canonization take place? If there was going on so free a process of addition to the Gospels as Usener supposes, if the contents of the Gospels were so completely in a state of flux, where, in the second century, was there a central ecclesiastical authority strong enough to

21. *Das Weihnachtsfest,* 2te Aufl., 1911, especially pp. 95-101,130-139.
22. *Op. cit.,* 1911, pp. 51 f, 93.

put a stop to such a process all at once – strong enough to say to everyone who was freely adding to the agglomerations of material now called Gospels: "Thus far shalt thou go and no farther; this business of adding to the Gospels must stop; here and here only is the form of the Gospels which henceforth you must use"? And even if there was an authority strong enough to do that, would it have been efficient enough to destroy all the previous forms of the Gospels, widely used though they were in various parts of the Church, so completely that no trace of these forms should remain today in any of the many divergent lines of transmission of the text? It must be remembered that our text of the Gospels can be traced, through patristic citations and by the convergence of widely separated families of documents, to a time long prior to the production of the great uncial manuscripts. Could the supposed act of canonization have been so early and so complete as to dominate not one but all of the divergent lines of transmission?

If the thing had been attempted in the fourth or fifth century, conceivably it might have been possible. In the early fifth century, for example, the use of the Diatessaron was rooted out of the Syriac-speaking Church by ecclesiastical authority, and the use of the four separate Gospels was substituted for it. But, in the first place, that concerned only the Syriac-speaking Church, not the Church throughout the world; in the second place, it was not, as a matter of fact, completely successful, since, despite all ecclesiastical efforts, the Diatessaron, in translation at least, and through a commentary upon it, does remain to us today; and in the third place it was done in the fifth century, when ecclesiastical authority was far stronger than it was in the second century, which is the period with which Usener's hypothesis deals. Surely it would be difficult to find in that early period an ecclesiastical authority, not local but in the very fullest sense ecumenical, which could all at once put a stop to the transmission of the shorter forms of the Gospels which were being used in various churches and could suddenly impart to the Gospels a fixity of content which originally the Gospels did not at all possess. If the content of the Gospels was at first in such a complete state of flux, the process could never in the second century have been stopped so completely, and the earlier and shorter gospels so completely destroyed, as Usener's hypothesis really requires. No, there is only one way to explain the essential unanimity of our witnesses to the text, so far as the content of the Gospels is concerned. That way is to suppose that the Gospels were not mere agglomerations of material, as Usener apparently thinks they were, but in some sort literary units. No ecclesiastical authority in the second century could have produced the unanimity of transmission; only the authors themselves could have done it.

It might indeed be admitted, without the slightest danger to this conclusion, that a process of gradual agglomeration of originally separate material does, to some extent at least, underlie our Gospels. It might be admitted further that our Gospels, including the Gospel of Luke, do make use of earlier written sources, and that some, at least, if not all, of these sources were shorter than the Gospels as we now have them. These admissions would not at all involve us in the difficulties into which Usener's hypothesis falls; they would not at all cause us to be puzzled at the disappearance of some or all of the written sources that our Gospels used. The point is that the unanimity in the transmission of the contents of our Gospels, and the disappearance of some, at least, of the sources that they used, can be explained only if – contrary to Usener's view – the men to whom we owe our Gospels were not mere compilers, but in some sort (despite their use of previous materials), *authors,* who imparted a certain unity to their completed works and gave them to the Church with the authority of the authors' names. The facts of the transmission, we think, are explained only if our Gospels are not merely arbitrary fixations of impersonal and gradually forming agglomerations of materials, but genuine *books,* given to the world at definite points of time and possessed of the fixity of content which literary productions ordinarily have.

But if this conclusion alone, and not the hypothesis of Usener, does justice both to the state of ecclesiastical authority in the second century and to the unanimity in the transmission of the text, even more signally is it in accord with the characteristics of the Gospels themselves.

Are our Synoptic Gospels, as a matter of fact, merely loose conglomerations of material which could naturally be added to (or subtracted from) as need might require? The question must be answered with an emphatic negative, and most clearly of all as concerns the Gospel according to Luke. Whatever may be said of the other two, it is quite evident that the Third Gospel, at least, possesses, amid all the variety of its parts, a genuine literary unity. The whole recent history of literary criticism since Usener's book first appeared in 1889 has tended mightily against Usener's hypothesis. Through the researches of Harnack and others, and through a more sympathetic attention to the literary form of the New Testament books, which has been only one manifestation of a more sympathetic attitude in general toward the productions of the Hellenistic period in the history of the Greek language, it has been becoming increasingly evident that the writer of Luke-Acts was far more than a compiler, that he was, in fact, a genuine *author* who had his own plan for his work and who knew how, despite all his use of previously existing materials, to carry out that plan

in detail.[23] There has not been for the most part, indeed, any return to the Tubingen over-emphasis upon the plan or "tendency" of the author; recent scholars have been less and less prone to find in the author of Luke-Acts a man who carried out his purpose for his book with ruthless disregard of the information that came to him. But that fact does not at all affect the point that we are now making. It does remain true that the whole tendency of recent criticism has been in favor of the literary unity of the Lucan writings.

This conviction as to the literary unity of Luke-Acts extends in the fullest measure, as we have observed, to the first two chapters. The more carefully those chapters are examined, the clearer become the indications in them of the hand of the author of the whole book. Those indications can never be explained by Hilgenfeld's elaborate hypothesis of a Pauline redactor who revised the birth narrative and also undertook a work of interpolation in the rest of the Gospel. This hypothesis seems rather obsolete today, not only because it displays a Tubingen assurance of discrimination between what is Pauline and what is not, which has come to be out of date – especially in view of the fact that many of Hilgenfeld's "Pauline" redactorial touches in Lk. i.5-ii.52 are paralleled in the Old Testament prophets – but also because the stylistic congruity between the birth narrative and the rest of Luke-Acts is too deep and too subtle to have been produced by a redactor. It could only have been due to a genuine author. If literary criticism has established anything at all, it has established the fact that the narrative of the birth and infancy is an integral part of the Third Gospel.[24]

23. See especially Eduard Meyer, *Ursprung und Anfänge des Christentums,* i, 1921, pp. 1–3.

24. Kattenbusch ("Die Geburtsgeschichte Jesu als Haggada der Urchristologie [Zu J. Gr. Machen, The virgin birth of Christ]", in *Theologische Studien und Kritiken,* cii, 1930, p. 456) criticizes the argument in this chapter on the ground that it does not take account of the hypothesis of B.H. Streeter *(The Four Gospels,* fourth impression, 1930, pp. 201–222) regarding a "Proto-Luke" which did not contain Lk. i.5–ii.52; and J.S. Bezzant (in his review in *The Journal of Theological Studies,* xxxiii, 1931, p. 74) mentions Vincent Taylor in the same connection, as another prominent advocate of the Proto-Luke hypothesis *(Behind the Third Gospel,* 1926). But in excluding Lk. i.5–ii.52 from Proto-Luke, Streeter and Vincent Taylor are holding merely that this section did not stand in one of the sources – a very important source, it is true – of the Third Gospel, rather than that it did not from the beginning stand in the Third Gospel itself. These scholars do, indeed, hold that the author of Proto-Luke was Luke himself, who was also the author of Luke-Acts; and they do, indeed, think that the elaborate way in which the appearance of John the Baptist is introduced in Lk. iii.1 f. is due to the fact that Proto-Luke began at this point (Streeter, *op. cit.,* p. 209; Vincent Taylor, *op. cit.,* pp. 193 f.). Nevertheless, a sharp distinction is to be drawn between their hypothesis and those of Hilgenfeld and Usener. Streeter *(op. cit.,* p. 216) regards the Third Gospel, as we now have it, not as a formless agglomeration of material, nor as a mere slightly enlarged second edition of an earlier work, but as a real book, whose parts are welded together by an author of considerable skill. And that book contained the birth narrative. Vincent Taylor *(The First Draft of St. Luke's Gospel,* [1927], p. 8) speaks of Proto-Luke as "no more than the first draft of a great work."