A Virgin Birth and a Persecuted Child

Its editor J.A. Fitzmyer noted that “with reference to the infancy narratives it is surprising how little the first part of *Genesis Apocryphon* has been exploited for the type of literature found there.” The reason of course, as he himself notes, is that “this Qumran parallel does not solve the problem about the origin of the notion of the virginal conception of Jesus or its religionsgeschichtliche background.” The recognition of the story’s role in shaping Mt. 1:18–25 shows, however, that the expectation of Brown and others that the virgin-birth belonged to the pre-Matthaean source-material at this point was misplaced. That is unlikely to mean, on the other hand, that the evangelist himself introduced the virgin birth theme, e.g. as a theological reflection, nor that he has arrived at it by weaving disparate materials and ideas together from the Old Testament. In fact, as we have previously mentioned, there is widespread acceptance that the citations (such as the celebrated Is. 7:14 in 1:22–23) are to be understood as secondary commentary on the traditions the evangelist has used, rather than their original determinants. One would still expect therefore that the origins of the idea should be found in the sources which underlie the infancy narratives. In fact, the inclusion of the 1QApGen story only becomes relevant to explaining the infancy narrative if it was already joined with material which corresponds to Brown’s a “main narrative” story. Otherwise, after all, the doubts and reassurance in the Qumran text are not specific enough to be certainly those behind Mt.

If Mt.’s source was more or less closely similar to the story-cycle in ApocAd, we have seen reason to think that virgin birth, as a special case of mythological themes concerning an unnatural or paradoxical

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birth, was one of the basic ideas which had drawn the legendary tales together in the first place (i.e. the legend of the virgin-born Saošyants, already appropriated to point to the Messiah). Though it does not appear in connection with the Second Kingdom, it features several times in the material which immediately follows, notably the stories of the Third and Fourth Kingdoms. I have argued that these were already joined together as they are in ApocAd, and formed a unit, by the time they reached the evangelist. The “unnatural” birth motif of the Second Kingdom was already understood as pointing to the virginal motif belonging to core theme of the cycle, made explicit in the two joined stories that follow. It is to the first of these that we must now turn.

We have already noted that the “Third Kingdom” story bears strikingly upon certain narrative features in the Gospel story:

The third kingdom says
of him that he came
from a virgin womb.
He was cast out of his city,
he and his mother; he was brought
to a desert place. He nourished himself
there. He came and received
Glory and power. (CG V.78,18–25)

In our preliminary observations we noted the general similarity of the story to materials from what Brown terms Mt.’s “main” infancy narrative (which I designate therefore “A”), materials commonly supposed from literary analysis to have once existed independently.²

ApocAd now attests a very similar if not identical story’s presence in a Jewish-syncretistic setting close to the time of Christian origins, and very probably the version in ApocAd could be early enough to antedate the Gospel.

Points of comparison may be treated briefly as follows.

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² Thus Brown, op. cit. p. 109: based on Mt. 1.20–21; 2.1a; 2.2–3; 2.13–14; 2.16b; 2.19–21. C.T. Davis, “Tradition and Redaction in Matthew 1:18 – 2:23”, in JBL 90(1971), 404–421 offers a somewhat less convincing analysis whereby the “massacre of the children” episode does not belong to this particular block, but the “visit of the Magi” does. I shall suggest below there may be an element of truth here, in that a suggestion of the plot relating to the Magi was already contained in the tale behind the Third Kingdom story. However, the case for the Magi-episode being influenced by a separate story is actually strong (cf. next chapter), and since the massacre does not show obvious signs of other affinities, it seems most natural to group it with the contents of the “Herod” story as does Brown. Needless to say, it would be a mistake to distance the massacre-story from this block because historical evidence for the incident is not forthcoming.