

Sent to us courtesy of David Thibert

## Jesus' Birth

The two stories of the Nativity in Matthew and Luke are both political and deeply personal. However, today's Christians have lost the political meaning of Christmas and concentrate on the personal. The whole Bible, Old and New, is concerned with the deepest yearnings of God's People, God's promises and passion. These stories are about light in our darkness, the fulfillment of our deepest yearnings, and the birth of Christ within us. And they are about a different kind of world. God's dream for us is not simply peace of mind, but peace on earth.

The issue of factuality of the birth stories is recent, the product of the last few hundred years. Earlier, the historicity of these stories was not a concern of Christians. Rather the truth of these stories (including their factual truth) was taken for granted. The same is true for the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve, Noah and the flood, the tower of Babel. These were stories of the way things happened for them. It didn't take faith to believe in them, just as it didn't take faith to believe in the factuality of the nativity stories.

These stories are neither fact nor fable. They are parable. Parables are narratives or stories. Nobody worries whether the events in parables are factual. Parables as a form of language are about meaning, not factuality. The meaning of a parable—its parabolic truth—does not depend upon its factuality.

Parables are thus a form of metaphorical language. The metaphorical meaning of language is its "more-than-literal" meaning. A parable is a narrative metaphor, a metaphorical narrative, whose truth lies in its meaning.

"Believe whatever you want about whether these stories are factual—now let's see if we can talk about what they mean.

However, we do need to combine a historical approach. This means: "ancient text in ancient context." What did these stories mean for the Christian communities that told them near the end of the first century? (These stories are not present in Mark, John, and Paul (who wrote in the 50's) or in the Didache (a manual of instruction for Gentiles becoming Christians before Paul even wrote (40's); they were written around the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century.

The Birth stories are "subversive parables". They subvert the "world" in which Jesus and early Christianity lived. They are a testimony, or witness, to the significance that Jesus had come to mean for them.

1. Who is the "King of the Jews"? That was Herod the Great's title, but Matthew's story tells us Herod was more like Pharaoh, the lord of Egypt, the lord of bondage and oppression, violence and brutality. And his son was no better. Rather, Jesus is the true King of the Jews. And the rulers of this world sought to destroy him.

2. Who is the Son of God, Lord, savior of the world, and the one who brings peace on earth? Within Roman imperial theology, the emperor, Caesar, was all of these. No, Luke's story says, that status and those titles belong to Jesus. He –not the emperor- is the embodiment of God's will for the earth.
3. Who is the light of the world? The emperor, son of Apollo, the god of light and reason and imperial order"? Or is Jesus, who was executed by empire, the light in the darkness, the true light to whom the wise of this world are drawn?
4. Where do we find the fulfillment of God's dream for Israel and humanity? In the way things are now? Or only beyond death? Or in a very different world this side of death?

The Nativity stories are the entire Christian gospel in miniature. Get it, and you get everything; miss it, and you miss it all. Jesus is prophecy fulfilled not the fulfillment of specific predictions. Rather, he is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets in a much more comprehensive sense. He is not their replacement, as has too often been thought by Christians, as if he superseded, and thus made irrelevant, the Law and the Prophets (and thus Judaism)

Instead, he is, according to Matthew and Luke (and the rest of the New Testament) the completion of the Law and the Prophets. He decisively reveals and incarnates the passion of God as disclosed in the Law and the Prophets—the promise and hope for a very different kind of world from the world of Pharaoh and Caesar, the word of domination and empire.

To call Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, Lord, and Savior, as the Christmas stories do, is a confession of commitment, allegiance, and loyalty. He is the decisive disclosure of God—of what can be seen of God in a human life, the fulfillment of Israel's deepest yearnings, the one who reveals God's dream for this world. This is what it means to call him Emmanuel (God with us) and to affirm that Emmanuel has come.

The Christmas stories and the Bible as a whole—combine what we often separate, namely, religion and politics, spirituality and a passion for this world. Together these stories are about a transformed world. Together, they announce that the Great Divine Cleanup of the World has begun in Jesus.

Joy to the world, the lord is come.  
Let earth receive her King!  
Let every heart prepare him room,  
And heaven and nature sing,  
And heaven and nature sing,  
And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.

Joy to the world—for God so loves the world.

Taken from "The First Christmas", by Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan