

THE HOLY NATIVITY OF A HUMAN JESUS

DE-MYSTIFYING THE DEIFICATION OF A HUMAN BIRTH,
AND RESTORING THE FULL HUMANITY OF A REMARKABLE LIFE

BY JOHN BENNISON

Right: One of thousands of depictions of the Nativity of Jesus. The full cast of characters, some winged, some with haloes. But does it portray an event any more miraculous than one every parent of every newborn has experienced?



PREFACE

On the First Sunday of the Advent season this year – for those Christian faith communities that observe a liturgical calendar -- the traditional four weeks of waiting on the tiptoe of expectation only lasted until 1:37 PM that afternoon for our family; when my own daughter gave birth to her first-born child.

To my knowledge and best guess, it was neither a virgin birth, nor did a halo appear around the head of the child, who was given the name Aurelia, the “golden one.” But it was just as miraculous and sacred a moment as any could have been; including, I would contend, the birth a Jewish male child once born to peasant parents, and given what was the most common of names, Jesus.

This brief commentary poses the question why the birth of a human Jesus -- with the teachings he gave us, and the life he exemplified for us -- wasn't sufficiently holy, and something sacred enough to be joyfully welcomed? And how elevating Jesus to godlike status not only denies him his full humanity, but convolutes our greater capacity to embrace the fuller meaning of the man, as well.

Why historic Christianity had to make this remarkable human being out to be something more – like all the other competing dying-and-rising gods vying for allegiance and subservience to secure some compensatory notion of salvation – is a weightier topic for another time.

THE HOLY BIRTH OF A HUMAN JESUS

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. Isaiah 11:6

The holiday shopping season had barely begun last month when a giant warehouse retailer that sells everything from tires to tortellini, caskets to fine cabernets, scrambled to do damage control at their Simi Valley location; when some of the Bibles they were selling to holiday shoppers in their book section were mistakenly labeled as “fiction.” Costco immediately repented of their venial sin, but blamed the distributor for the unintentional *faux pas*, as well.

“Of course it's fiction!” was my spontaneous retort to the onscreen newscaster delivering the retail disaster on the morning news. “Well, at least part of it is pure fiction,” I muttered to myself, since the reporter didn't seem to be listening.

The compilation of hundreds of numerous and variant texts deemed sacred to various folks and bound together as the Holy Bible is part fiction, part poetry, part prophecy, part myth and legend, part history or historical narrative, with a little mail correspondence thrown in. And all with plenty of redactive and editorial license taken by those entrusted over the centuries such writings were collected, in order to pass along

some vestige of what might have been anything close to “original.” And, nowhere is there more pure fiction than the multiple and varied imaginative accounts of Jesus’ birth.

If we remember that gospels are neither intended to be biographies of an historical figure, nor even a dependable historical record, we can readily label the multiple accounts of the “first” Christmas as fanciful fiction. Then we can instead proceed to ask what the gospel writers may have had in mind when conjuring up such wonderful tales.

Mark, the earliest known of the canonical gospels, either had no source material, or interest, in creating and “retrojecting” a nativity story. By the time Matthew and Luke composed their birth narratives, curiosity and speculation over the lost years of Jesus childhood and youth provided the perfect opportunity to reestablish Jesus’ Davidic lineage for Matthew; as well as the upside-down gospel of Luke, where the babe in the feedbox comes to the powerless and marginalized, and the high and mighty are brought low.

And in his “Christmas” story, of course, John’s late gospel introductory text has the divine Word becoming flesh. But then curiously enough, the vast majority of the actual words uttered by the Jesus of John’s gospel are generally considered to be the least likely of all sayings attributed to the historical figure who once was born, lived and died the same way as any other human being.

It is not difficult to understand the multiple reasons why early second and third generation followers of “the Way” – those who, like us, only knew of the historical Jesus by the redacted stories that had been passed along – would have wanted to make the human Jesus out to be something more. Those resurrection and post-resurrection stories are most often pointed to as that “something more.” But it begins retrospectively with the nativity narratives, where it’s helpful to remember the contention of a virgin birth arranged between the gods and one of their human vassals was a common plotline.

Various biblical scholars have pointed to the Hebrew text in the Jewish scriptures that prophesied the coming of the messiah (I Isaiah 7:10-16); how the word for “a young woman of marriageable age” got conveniently translated in Greek Septuagint (and subsequently used by Matthew and Luke when writing their Christmas stories) into the word for a “virgin.” [See Harry Cook’s succinct exegetical [commentary](#).]

But anyone who has ever struggled to translate a foreign language knows what can happen. And anyone who’s ever taken Biology 101 can quibble over the credibility of Mary’s virginity, and miss the larger point that there was something afoot with the advent of someone who was to come and change the course of our human story with what a Jewish peasant sage, born of Mary, would one day say and do.

But when you start to make a human being out to be more than a human being, there’s little room for anything other than something that claims to be divine, eternal, superhuman. And human beings aren’t perfect, spotless, and immortal. Otherwise, an entire apologetic then needs to be constructed, and the construction project never ends.

If the mother of Jesus was required to be a virgin impregnated by a divine spirit so Jesus could be more than a human being, then proof of Mary’s own immaculate conception must be assured and held intact from the moment of her own birth. So, within 120 years or so of Jesus execution, an apocryphal “nativity” gospel, the *Protoevangelium of James*, appears out of nowhere to concoct the tale of Mary’s birth, as well.

In this tale, Mary’s aged mother Anna is barren, and subsequently regards herself as accursed. She resents the birds of the air who nest in the laurel tree and bear their young so easily. But then,

Suddenly, an angel of the Lord stood in front of her, saying, “Anna, Anna, the Lord God has heard your prayer. You will conceive and give birth and your child will be spoken of everywhere people live.” (4:1) Next, two angels came, saying to her, “Look your husband Joachim is coming with his flocks.” For an angel of the Lord

had gone down to Joachim, saying, "Joachim, Joachim, the Lord God has heard your prayer. Go down from here. Look, your wife Anna has conceived in her womb." (4:3-4)

And his wife's pregnancy came to term. After nine months, Anna gave birth and she said to the midwife, "What is it?" The midwife said, "A girl." Anna said, "My soul exalts this day." And she put her baby to bed. After her days were completed, Anna cleansed her menstrual flow (10) and gave her breast to the child and gave her the name Mary. (5:5-9-10)

Day by day, the child grew stronger. When she was six months old, her mother set her on the ground to test whether she could stand. And after walking seven steps, she came to her mother's breast. And her mother picked her up, saying, "As the Lord my God lives, you will not walk on this earth again until I take you to the temple of the Lord." And she made a sanctuary in her bedroom and would not permit anything common or impure to pass through it. And she called the pure daughters of the Hebrews and they played with her. (6:1-7)

A virgin untainted by the original sin at conception and cloistered from six months of age? That's quite a story! It's even considered required dogmatic belief in some Christian traditions. It is as if the gift of a child born to a couple thought to be barren wasn't enough.

But if instead one can fathom demoting Jesus from the Godhead of all that ever was, is now, and ever will be -- in order to invest him with nothing more, nor less, than his full humanity -- what then can we say about his nativity?

Since there's general agreement such a human being once existed, there was a birth. From other historical events, we can guess the date within a few years. Guessing the month and the day, our odds are 1 in 365.

He was born somewhere, but where is anyone's guess. It could have been cowshed or a cave in Bethlehem, who knows? Since we have good reason to believe Jesus was from Nazareth, he was likely born in a peasant's home. That's it. Hardly the makings of world-wide festive holidays, children's pageants, caroling, gift-giving, and the increasingly popular self-gifting!

But over the years, religious movements have a wonderful way of doing something called "creative historiography." It's part fiction, part non-fiction, and the truth it's meant to convey is left up to us to discern.

For my part, it is as if the words attributed to Pontius Pilate at the end of Jesus' life might just as well have been the same as those first uttered perhaps on the lips of a joyful peasant father to some curious shepherd lowlifes on the night his first-born son came into this world: "Behold the man." (John 19:5)

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I was somewhat relieved, and mostly gratified, to find out my dear spouse wanted little else for what would be a quiet Christmas for us, except me. Our best gift came early this year, with the historically verifiable birth of a golden child. If there is anything else I wanted for Christmas this year, it would be a little good cheer, goodwill and a little more world peace.

That, and the hope my grandchild will one day hear the best of tales about the life and teachings of a human Jesus, and an ancient, longed for prophecy come to pass.

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