

New Light on the Nativity

The account of Jesus' birth is a good story. It's good history, too.

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Are there "degrees" to the miraculous in Jesus' ministry, ranging perhaps from the modest to the extraordinary?

At one end might be His compelling call to discipleship that led The Twelve to give up everything to follow Him. "Higher" gradations might include, progressively, spiritual healings, physical healings, controlling natural phenomena and--always the ultimate sign--raising the dead.

But there was yet a greater miracle than all these--in fact, the most astounding supernatural phenomenon in the entire Bible and in all of history: the Incarnation; the infinite God crossing the cosmic divide between Himself and His creation; God showing up ... as a baby!

The Christian mind reels in awe and wonder in trying to fathom the profound significance of the first Christmas. The skeptic, however, laughs and scoffs: A virgin birth? A chorus of angels in the sky? Wise men traipsing across the desert after a star? A king killing infants next door? No wonder they call it the Christmas story--good fairy-tale reading for children but hardly adult fare!

Are the world's calendars, then, hinged to a mythological tale that is now 2,000 years old? Or do the past 20 centuries A.D. rest on fact and reality at Bethlehem? Let's sift through some of the evidence.

Our Sources

Two of the four Gospels--Mark and John--are silent on the Nativity, so we must depend on Matthew and Luke for any information on the birth of Jesus.

Why this sparse coverage? Before the age of printing, the Gospels had to be copied and recopied by hand, each onto one scroll with very limited space. For this reason, all four evangelists quickly concentrated on Jesus' public ministry, especially in an era when much less attention was paid to the childhood and youth even of the greats in the ancient world. We should, in fact, be grateful that Matthew and Luke each devoted two chapters to the Nativity so that we might know where Jesus came from before His public debut as an adult.

At various points in these four chapters, both Matthew and Luke drop names of people, places, events and other details that are now very useful in helping to determine if the Nativity has a setting in fantasy, or fact. If these details matched nothing else in this world--as in some other world religious systems--we would certainly have reason for skepticism. In fact, However, there are many meeting points between the Nativity and the surrounding world of antiquity.

Here are some examples:

Augustus and the Census

Luke begins his Christmas Gospel with a very "*un-Christmassy*" personality--the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus--and tells of the census that he ordered (Luke 2:1).

Augustus is not only historical, but the first and greatest of the Roman emperors, who proudly cited the three censuses that he conducted as Number 8 among the 35 *Acts of Augustus* for which he wanted to be remembered. After his death, this listing was engraved on two bronze plaques that were erected in front of his mausoleum in Rome.

The Romans regularly took provincial censuses. An edict from A.D. 104 in Egypt required taxpayers who were living elsewhere to return to their original homes for registration. This is a precise parallel to Joseph's and Mary's situation in neighboring Palestine. Another such census edict from A.D. 119 records that a certain farmer named Horos registered himself, his wife and two sons at the village of Bacchias in Egypt--a document that I have personally examined at the University of Michigan Library.

Joseph and Mary

"Yosef" and "Mariam," as pronounced in their own tongue, were common names among the Jews of that day. While these two do not show up in secular history, both Matthew and Luke carefully give Jesus' genealogy through Joseph (Matt. 1:1 ff.; Luke 3:23 ff.).

It is no secret, however, that these two genealogies do not fully agree, a fact embarrassing to some Christians and gleefully used by critics in trying to undermine the historicity of the Nativity.

But this is no recent problem newly discovered by scoffers! The issue is merely 1,800 years old, and no one has given it a better solution than Eusebius in his *Church History*, who quotes the Christian scholar Julius Africanus (early A.D. 200s) as follows:

"Names in the families of Israel were reckoned either according to nature [physical parentage] or law; by nature in the case of genuine offspring; by law when another man fathered children in the name of a brother who had died childless."

Matthew's genealogy records the normal, biological ancestry of Joseph, and Luke the legal ancestry, according to Deut. 25:5-6. We would, of course, have preferred that both genealogies had focused instead on Mary, but in the patriarchal society of the time, genealogies were always traced through the male line. Since the Israelite tribes were not to intermarry, according to Eusebius, Mary also had Davidic ancestry, and thus the genealogies would also apply to her.

Nazareth, Bethlehem, Jerusalem

The two villages and one city associated with the Nativity were (and are) authentic locations that can be visited today--an unnecessary and obvious statement to Christians, but perhaps news to some who write off the whole Christmas story as imaginary.

Bethlehem, our particular focus of interest, surrounds its great, central site to this day: the Church of the Nativity, constructed over the presumed grotto or cave in which Jesus was born. According to the early church father Justin Martyr, Jesus was not born in a traditional wooden stable, but in a cave that was used as a stable.

The site is remarkably authentic, with a record going back to Constantine--who in 326/-327 A.D. built the first basilica on the spot--and even earlier, to the second century A.D. Origen, the great eastern church father who lived for a time in Palestine, wrote: "In Bethlehem the grotto was shown [to me] where Jesus was born. . . . The heathen themselves tell anyone willing to listen that in the said grotto a certain Jesus was born whom the Christians revere" (*Contra Celsum* 1.51).

The Magi and the Star

Most probably, we will never know the names nor the numbers of the Wise Men who presented their gifts at the Nativity. But the distinguished visitors from the East and the star they followed were not invented by Matthew, as some critics claim.

The Magi belonged to a caste of gifted sages--well known in the history of the Persian Empire--who specialized in everything from astronomy to religion. Those living in Babylonia doubtless came into contact with the descendants of the Jewish leaders and rabbis exiled by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. (A large Jewish community stayed on in Babylon for the next thousand years.) Accordingly, they would have been familiar both with Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament as well as the star as symbol of the Messiah (Num. 24:17), so their famous question upon reaching Jerusalem--"Where is the newborn king of the Jews, for we have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him"--was not asked out of a vacuum.

The star itself--if not a supernatural marker beyond physical explanation--could well have been the rare repeated conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn first noticed by Johannes Kepler in the early 1600s, an astral event that occurred at the Nativity and happens only every 800 years. It also carried a powerful astrological message for all ancients--including the Magi--who paid this worthless pseudo-science any heed: Jupiter (the "King's Planet" in ancient astral lore) approached Saturn (the "Defender of Palestine," Amos 5:26). Thus: "A King is coming to Palestine."

Moreover, that a star was an old Hebrew sign for the Messiah is demonstrated even a century *after* the Nativity, when Rabbi Akiba put a Jewish rebel on horseback, led him through the streets of Jerusalem and shouted, "The Messiah has come!" The rebel's name had been changed--to Bar-Kokhba, Aramaic for "Son of *the Star*."

Herod and the Babies

Far from being any contrived villain, Herod the Great--prominent in both Matthew and Luke's Gospels--has the *longest known biography* of anyone in antiquity, thanks to Flavius Josephus. The first-century Jewish historian devoted two whole books to Herod in his famous *Jewish Antiquities*.

To anyone questioning Matthew's negative portrayal of the Jewish King, Josephus should be assigned reading. His record delivers a *thousand times* as much data on Herod as does Matthew. The portrait of an aging king--darkly suspicious of anyone seeking his throne, crafty, hypocritical and ruthless--is absolutely identical in both sources.

Could Herod have massacred the infants in Bethlehem, as Matthew reports? Critics claim that in his last years, Herod was bad, but not that bad, and that Matthew invented the story for dramatic effect.

While the younger Herod would probably not have played the role of baby-killer, in his last months, the aging king, racked with loathsome diseases, was nearly deranged by all the intrigue and plotting in his palace. Josephus tells us that Herod executed his favorite wife, Mariamme, her grandfather, her mother, his brother-in-law and three of his own sons, not to mention numerous subjects. Eliminating about 10 or 12 babies in the neighboring hamlet of Bethlehem would have been almost expected for the dying monarch.

Tell the world

Other Nativity personalities also are mentioned prominently outside the New Testament--Archelaus, Herod's son and successor (whom Joseph did well to avoid, Matt. 2:22), John the Baptist and, certainly, Jesus Himself--and in a manner that correlates admirably with the Biblical record.

Every person named in the Nativity account is totally historical. Every place is totally locatable--then and now. Prominent episodes, such as the Roman census and the Jewish presentation of Jesus at the Temple, are authentic. To the fair minded, all this is dramatic support that what happened at Bethlehem is history, not myth.

Will it convince everyone? Does this prove the events of the Nativity? No, certainly not. Nor should Christians use facts from the past in place of faith, which must always be part of how we respond to this greatest miracle of all: the Incarnation, God's ultimate gift to humanity. For in the baby of Bethlehem, He implemented His divine design to rescue humanity from self-imposed ruin. When

the baby became a man, His life, death and resurrection would win salvation for us all.

Christians, nevertheless, should also be ready to tell the world that our faith has a very solid basis, not only in faith but in fact, and that even the extraordinary events of the Christmas story are certainly more than a story. They are His story, and another way to spell that is "history."

*For more details on these and other historical matters related to the Nativity, see Dr. Maier's book, *In the Fullness of Time: A Historian Looks at Christmas, Easter, and the Early Church* (Kregel Publications, 1997). He also has written an award-winning children's book, *The Very First Christmas* (Concordia Publishing House, 1998).--Ed.*

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