

A Christmas Conversation

Wherein an acolyte and mentor from The Survival Files meet again at a Christmas party and find themselves leading an impromptu discussion on the origin and meanings of the stories of Jesus' birth.¹

His red shirt and black slacks made him look even more like Santa Claus than when I had first met him at the New Zealand embassy a little over two years before. Setting a half-consumed cup of eggnog aside and peering over his steel-rimmed glasses, he flashed a hearty grin and waved me to a seat beside his wing-backed chair.

“Welcome young man!” he said. (Such was his stature and longevity in D.C. circles that I could take no offense at being so addressed, despite being well past 40 myself.)

“I wasn’t expecting to see you here,” I said, although nothing this man did was likely to truly surprise me. “Doesn’t seem like Christmas would be your thing.”

“Oh, I’ve always loved Christmastime. Especially when sitting by a glowing fireplace and watching the snow.”

I followed his gaze out the front window to the glittering flakes drifting through the lights along N street. “This season certainly can be beautiful in Washington ... and a bit treacherous.” I said, thinking of my recent hike up two blocks of icy walks from my car. Then again, I was lucky to find a parking space at all in Georgetown on a Saturday night.

“But I was referring more to the religious aspects than the meteorological.”

“You think my knowledge of the afterlife would make me immune to the dogmas of man? Well, to some extent that is true, but I’ve always considered the teachings of Jesus to be superior advice and one can surely enjoy traditions without swallowing the myths.”

“Are you saying that Christianity is based on myths?” This from a young lady standing nearby who had overheard our conversation. “Uh, oh,” I thought, “now you’ve done it.”

“Christianity is a most complex structure built on a variegated foundation. A social gathering such as this is hardly the appropriate place to exhume that foundation, even if I were prone to do so. But, since we are, at least to some extent, celebrating the birth of Jesus with a tree topped by a star and sheltering a creche full of peasants and royalty, perhaps a few words as to how we came by these traditions would be appropriate.”

With a smile that would disarm a terrorist at a brewers’ convention he softly said: “Pull up a seat, I beg you madam, and tell me about the Christmas of your childhood.”

¹ The facts presented here reflect the current consensus of objective biblical scholars (that is, of scholars who seek the truth as opposed to religiously indoctrinated academics who only seek to validate their own beliefs).

“Oh, well, I guess it was pretty much the typical things, you know,” she mumbled as she blushed a bit and sat down on the couch opposite us. Her name, she said, was Angela. “We put up the tree a week or so before hand, opened one present on Christmas eve, went to church in the morning”

Somewhere during her description of the Christmas feast, I drifted off into memories of my own childhood . . . the American Flyer train puffing oily smoke as it circled the Norway spruce, the smell of cookies in the oven, the candies and oranges in our stockings . . . and I entirely missed the turn of the conversation to the Bible. When I came out of my reverie, I noticed that several others had joined us and ‘the Old Man’² was apparently answering a question about when the first nativity stories were written.

“[*The Gospel According to Matthew* was written] sometime between 35 and 45 years after the death of Jesus; or some 65 to 90 years after his nativity. Although *Matthew* is traditionally placed first among the documents of the *New Testament*, Paul wrote his letters decades earlier and *Mark* was the earliest of the four gospels. *Luke* was written a decade or so after *Matthew*. Paul gives no indication of having heard the nativity tales. so at least two or three generations passed between the time the events were said to occur and their being written down.

“As to who the writers were, there are many lengthy articles and documents devoted to answering (or attempting to answer) that question, but no one really knows. There is general agreement that neither of the authors was a witness to the events described or ever met any of the characters in the stories.”

“Wasn’t Matthew the tax collector?” Angela asked.

“No, the author of *Matthew* was likely not a native of the Israel/Palestine area and was certainly not one of Jesus’ disciples.”

“A lot of people don’t even realize that there are two different accounts of Jesus’ birth,” I chimed in. “And they aren’t all that consistent.”

“Other than the basics that Jesus was born of Mary in Bethlehem,” he responded, “the stories of *Matthew* and *Luke* actually have very little in common. *Matthew* tells of astrologers seeing a star and giving gifts to the babe — *Luke* tells of shepherds seeing angels.”

“Which could both be true,” Angela pointed out.

“Yes, possibly,” he admitted, then continued, “*Matthew* has the newborn in a house — *Luke* places him in a stable. *Matthew* claims that the family fled from Bethlehem to Egypt in fear for their lives — *Luke* states that they went to Jerusalem to have Jesus circumcised and then went home to Nazareth. This latter contradiction is absolute and cannot be reconciled in any sane manner. One of the stories (at least) is not totally correct.”

² As I pointed out in my earlier account of our talks, he did have a name, but everyone I knew called him ‘sir’ and referred to him as ‘the Old Man’ so I will continue that custom here.

Noticing the tightness around Angela's mouth, I asked: "What about their historical accuracy?"

"Well," he continued, "neither governments nor historians of the time paid much attention to births, so it is not surprising that there are no records of Jesus' entry into this world. There are, however, several elements of the biblical narratives that have raised serious questions among biblical scholars and dabblers alike. These are the star, the tax (or census), and Herod's bloody reaction.

"Why is the star significant?"

"Many people have tried very hard to find a reasonable celestial explanation for the star that is mentioned in *Matthew* — supernovas, planetary conjunctions, comets, etc. — none of their theories really hold water. And, even though the Romans, the Egyptians, and the Chinese were very good at both watching the heavens and keeping records, no one noted any event that fits the description.

The astrologers are first quoted as saying that they "observed the rising of his star." This sounds very much like a typical astrological reference to a natural movement of the heavens. The ascendent star being given royal significance in the same way that, say, a conjunction of Mars and Neptune might be interpreted as especially ominous. Currently, though, no records have been found indicating that the Persians thought that any particular alignment of heavenly bodies would signify the birth of a new 'king of the Jews.'"

"Why do you call them 'astrologers,' asked Angela, "weren't they three kings from the Orient?"

"No. There's more of song³ than story in that idea," he said in what seemed to me to be an uncharacteristically curt manner.

I tried to smooth over the moment by asking: "Couldn't the 'star' have been a local event such as a meteor or simply a unique and miraculous phenomenon?"

"Miracles are notoriously tough to disprove, but consider this: If the star was a local phenomenon, how could it have been seen in Persia some 500 miles away? And if it were visible from a great distance (and thus very high), how could anyone tell over what house it stopped?"

"Yes," I said, "present-day illustrations often picture a celestial light with a tail pointing downward to illuminate the blessed scene. They remind me of drawings showing a UFO shining a brilliant beam upon some isolated shack."

I'm not sure if he was joking when he raised his eyes to the ceiling and murmured: "Of course, we can't entirely rule out that explanation either."

³ The carol *We Three Kings*, written in 1857 for a Christmas pageant at the New York City Theological Seminary, took its characters from a 6th century Latin text that both numbered and named what the Bible simply refers to as an unspecified number of astrologers (or "wise men" if you prefer the King James version).

At that point, I called for a break as I hadn't yet found either the bar or the restroom. Such is the old man's magnetism that when I returned, drink in hand, the now even larger group was sitting quietly as if waiting for class to begin.

Falling into the role of teacher's aide, I got the discussion back in gear by asking, "Why is Luke's taxation/census a problem?"

"Four reasons," he began. "First, because there is no record that Caesar Augustus, or any other Roman dignitary ever issued such a decree, and the Roman bureaucracy kept good records of matters concerning money.

"Second, because the governor named in the story⁴ was not appointed until after Herod's death."

"Another good argument against those who claim that the Bible is always right," I interjected.

"Yes, but there are much better ones and I'm not going to get into all that tonight.

"The third problem with the tax story is that uprooting families all over the province and having them all travel simultaneously to the paternal birthplace would be economically disruptive and politically impossible, not to mention unnecessary and downright stupid. When you take a census, you send the census takers to the people, you don't have the people come to the census takers."

He paused to sip from his cup and I took the opportunity to add: "Especially when transportation was slow and difficult."

"Exactly. Which brings us to the fourth problem. In the event that such an insanity did take place, only men would need to take part because wives in Judea neither voted nor paid taxes." He looked squarely at Angela and asked: "Are we to assume that Joseph put his about-to-give-birth wife on a donkey and traveled over 100 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem just because he enjoyed her company?"

At that thought, I noticed that several women in the company seemed to lose the glow of the holiday spirits they had consumed. I said, "Even in the super-patriarchal, women-are-property culture of ancient Palestine, no man would risk the life of a coming child in such a reckless action."

He nodded, "Especially if that man had been told that the child was male."

We all considered that idea for a moment, and then Angela, in a rather subdued voice said, "Okay, so what's wrong with Matthew's story of Herod?"

"Ah that," he sighed. "One of the most tragic stories in the Bible is of King Herod ordering the killing of all the infants in Bethlehem."

⁴ Quirinius

I was surprised to hear a new voice: “When Herod saw how the astrologers had tricked him he fell into a passion, and gave orders for the massacre of all children in Bethlehem and its neighborhood.” Someone had found a Bible on a nearby bookshelf and was reading the relevant passage from *Matthew*.

“Fortunately for the children of Bethlehem, and for all of humanity, that tale is one of the most clearly fictitious in the Bible. Herod was despised by the great majority of his subjects. Historians of the time took great care to document his every evil deed — and there were enough to fill volumes. Yet in all the records of Herod's crimes, both petty and terrible, there is not one mention of any such murderous decree. It is simply inconceivable that none of Herod's legion of enemies bothered to take note of such a barbarity.”

“Sort of like condemning Hitler for being a tyrant without mentioning the war or the Holocaust.”

“Yes. And, even if you could conceive of such an oversight, there is no way that any king (even a beloved one) could get away with murdering the newborn sons of everyone — including merchants, princes, soldiers, generals, priests, etc. — residing in a city.”

“But, why would Matthew and Luke make up all those strange events?” (I knew the answer, but I sensed he was waiting to be asked.)

“Quite simply, because their audiences expected it.

“The author of *Matthew* was a scribe who identified strongly with his Jewish heritage. He wrote his story to convince Jews that Jesus was the incarnation of God and the fulfillment of their messianic expectations. He included lots of miraculous events that his Jewish readers would understand as a drawing of parallels to earlier scripture. He was thereby saying something about the character of Jesus rather than giving a factual history.”

“Such as?”

“Well, the tale of Herod’s slaughter of newborns was meant to evoke images of the Egyptian Pharaoh seeking to kill the infant Moses; thus linking Jesus and Moses in the readers’ minds.”

“And what audience was Luke aimed at?” I continued to feed him questions.

“The author of *Luke* was a gentile who wrote to convince the Romans that Christianity was a natural outgrowth of an accepted and law-abiding religion (Judaism) that included all peoples — as opposed to a dissident cult whose members should be fed to the lions. By the time he was compiling his tale, the story had spread that Jesus was a Galilean, whereas the ancient scriptures suggested that a legitimate messiah should be born in Bethlehem. So, “Luke” probably invented the taxation decree both as a device to have Jesus born in Bethlehem and to demonstrate that the family of his hero was obedient to Roman law.

“Both writers took much of their tale from other traditions known throughout the world.”

“You mean like Mary being a virgin?”

He shook his head slightly and spoke as if to clarify my comment. “The divine insemination of Mary is a prime example of this. Being fathered by a god used to be an almost universal qualification for saviors and other great men. Prior to Jesus, those said to be so favored included Plato, Alexander the Great, Caesar Augustus, and Ghengis Khan.⁵ Over the decades, verbal traditions would likely have incorporated this feature in an attempt to put Jesus in league with such luminaries. *Luke*, whose Roman audience would appreciate, even expect, divine fatherhood of a savior, makes a very big deal of it. *Matthew*, written for Jews with no such tradition, barely mentions it.

“But,” he continued, glancing in my direction, “being impregnated by a god did not typically require one to be a virgin. That little twist to the story apparently stems from the fact that the author of *Matthew* could read Greek but not Hebrew. In an attempt to show that Jesus’ birth was the fulfillment of prophecy, Matthew cites a passage from the book of Isaiah. The Greek version of the scripture that he referenced, however, inaccurately read ‘Behold a virgin shall conceive ...’ The original Hebrew text actually reads ‘Behold a young woman shall conceive ...’ This mistake was recognized long ago, but don’t expect the Catholic church to start building shrines to ‘the young woman Mary’ anytime soon.”

“You mean that the whole virginity thing — the sin, the shame, the repression, the guilt — started because some translator goofed?!”

“Unfortunately, sometimes the devil really *is* in the details.” Picking up his now empty cup he asked, “Shall we get some refills and try and regain the festive spirit?”

But, before he could rise, the man holding the Bible got in one last question. “Aren’t there other stories of Jesus’ birth?”

“Yes, several books telling of the birth and early life of Jesus did not make it through the selection process that took place in the late fourth century.⁶ The early church leaders wanted to have four gospels because there were four winds and the Holy Spirit was thought to be embodied in the wind. Some candidates were judged supplementary and some were rejected because they contradicted the ones chosen in matters of doctrine. Some, such as the book called “Infancy II” were likely rejected because they painted a less than flattering picture of Jesus. For example, in one scene, a boy running through the streets brushes against Jesus’ shoulder, whereupon Jesus strikes him dead; and, when witnesses complain, Jesus causes them all to go blind.

“Although the older scriptures are chock full of vengeance and mayhem, those who compiled the New Testament were trying to underpin a more compassionate doctrine.”

And, with that, he stood, took up his cane, and headed for the refreshment table.

⁵ Also Zoroaster, Krishna, Apollonius, Alcides, Osiris, Hercules, Mars, Vulcan, and Pythagoras.

⁶ Many of these books are available in the collection: *The Lost Books of the Bible*, Bell Publishing Company, 1979.

Later, when I suggested that I might publish this conversation, the old man wrote me a note:

“I wouldn’t want it thought that I am anti-Christmas or even anti-Christian. Christianity, in its unadulterated form — *Pure Christianity* — one might say, teaches us to be compassionate, tolerant, and, most of all, forgiving people. I emphatically endorse such high ideals. Whether or not certain myths associated with Christianity have any basis in fact does not, in my opinion, detract from those laudable teachings.” — D.W.

I’d best let it rest there.

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For further information on this and related topics, these books are highly recommended:

Born of a Woman — A Bishop Rethinks the Virgin Birth and the Treatment of Women by a Male-Dominated Church, by John Shelby Spong, 1994.

A History of God — The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, by Karen Armstrong, 1993.

Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture by John Shelby Spong, 1992.

The Rise of Christianity— How the Obscure, Marginal, Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force In the Western World In a Few Centuries, by Rodney Stark, 1996.