

Matthew's Nativity Narrative from a Mythic Perspective

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Introduction

This paper began as a comparative study between the two narratives of the birth of Jesus in Matthew and Luke's gospels but, along the journey to completion, became a path to resolving the challenges of being a believer in academic religious studies. There have been more than enough studies done on the discrepancies between the canonical birth narratives, with most scholars conceding that "the two cycles of nativity stories are independent of each other and cannot be fitted together coherently."¹ Whether they are of the opinion that there is little or no historical credibility within the birth narratives,² or that "the simplest explanation is that the events of this story are factual history,"³ few scholars would argue that they are intended to be taken as literal history. The point of this paper is not to state that either group must concede that they are wrong, but simply that they *could be, and this would not change how we read the text*. It is this intention I wish to explore in this paper.

¹ H.F. Wickings, "Nativity stories and Docetism," *New Testament Studies* 23 (1977), 457.

² Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 39.

³ Raymond Edward Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 225.

Rather than exploring the well-traveled ground of comparing the birth narratives, I will instead show how post-enlightenment Christianity has played a “keeping up with the academic Joneses” game, trying to prove events from the Bible in a historical or empirical framework. This will be examined in light of both the birth narratives, and will explore some of the problems arising from this approach in both conservative and liberal schools of thought, taking some time to look at the use of midrash in the Matthew account as well as some extremely conjectural approaches, such as that of Emil Bock. I will then look at how a post-modern ‘double ring’ approach to the texts can result in the same conclusion by students of either conservative or liberal perspectives. Using the Matthew birth narrative, I will demonstrate how this double ring approach would lend itself to understanding the historical Jesus and Christ of faith simultaneously with brief commentary on the major points and characters of the Matthew account.

A Very Old Argument That Isn’t Getting Any Younger

The issues surrounding the critical scrutiny of the birth narratives stem from the fact that “of all the religious beliefs in the world...none have more thoroughly based themselves on history than Judaism and Christianity.”⁴ This has been the one of the bases for ‘rational faith’ and therefore an affirmation

⁴ Paul L. Maier, *In the Fullness of Time: A Historian Looks at Christmas, Easter, and the Early Church* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), xv.

of biblical events as historically true. Sadly, the scholarship supporting such rational faith is not always adamant. The pseudo-science of zealous Creationists advocating a literal seven day creation in the face of scientific evidence to the contrary is one of the clearest examples of where wild conjecture is presented as fact. This in turn, then, marks conservative Christianity with a lack of academic credibility. This approach has placed a burden upon the Bible it was never meant to contend with; in response, critical scholarship swings its pendulum to the other extreme, and makes bold statements that “Jesus was not born of a virgin, not born of David’s lineage, not born in Bethlehem, that there was no stable, no shepherds, no star, no Magi, no massacre of the infants, and no flight into Egypt.”⁵

The issues arising from a conservative approach are considerable. Basic discrepancies between the narratives are readily apparent given a parallel reading of the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke. Matthew has the monopoly on magi, the portentous star, and King Herod’s massacre of the innocents, while Luke mentions none of these events, chronicling instead the birth of John the Baptist, the angelic pronouncement of the birth to the shepherds outside Bethlehem, and the presentation of the infant to Simeon and Anna in the temple at Jerusalem. Matthew’s entire account takes place in Bethlehem, where it is assumed Mary and Joseph reside. Luke starts his

⁵ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 28.

narrative in Nazareth; the impetus for the journey to Bethlehem is an empire-wide census, for which we have little historical evidence to attest. In Matthew, Jesus and his parents flee to Egypt, while Luke has them return to Nazareth immediately following the ceremonial rites in Jerusalem. This last event is the most difficult to harmonize in a synoptic fashion; the writer is forced to end Luke 2:39, “When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned...,” followed by the entire round trip journey to Egypt in Matthew 2:1-23 before finishing Luke 2:39 with, “to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth.”⁶ This is unfortunately only the beginning of a long list of difficulties critics of the conservative, literal approach to the birth narratives. The scope of this paper is not large enough to engage a proper dissemination of the material on this subject. Some of this will be addressed in the commentary on the Matthew birth narrative, but for now we will move on to some of the issues facing the radically liberal approach.

The trouble for the liberal school of thought is obviously the opposite of the conservative view; where the conservatives will trip over themselves to prove the supernatural, the liberal will often dismiss it *a priori*. While the arguments are well documented and articulated, the liberal position is as much propaganda as the gospels they seek to deconstruct. The liberal theologian will go on at length about the ambiguity of the texts, the uncertainty of dates and

⁶ Orville E. Daniel, *A Harmony of the Four Gospels* (Burlington, ON: Welch Publishing Company, 1986), 11-13.

authorship, the dubious nature of the mythic adhesions, and then say without reservation that the texts “must be seen clearly for what they are...”.⁷ One wonders how exactly to go about seeing anything clearly amid all the ambiguity and dubious uncertainty.

Whether it is the influential Bultmannian school, the myth-of-God-incarnate advocates of the late 1970's, or the Jesus Seminar of more recent years, the general approach to Jesus, it would seem, is frequently predetermined not by the biblical texts, but what many scholars claim “modern” persons can or cannot legitimately believe.⁸

If the investigation of the evidence begins with the assumption that the information is inherently false, how can one conceive of finding any sort of truth? Everything becomes conjecture at this point. The liberal can claim no academic superiority to the conservative, because both are carrying a bias that precludes any outcome but one that fits into their bias' framework.

Beyond the conservatives and liberals, writers such as Emil Bock, neither validating a traditional, orthodox history of the birth narratives nor refuting that the events actually occurred has constructed a tale that rivals Frank Herbert's science fiction epic *Dune* in Machiavellian scope and imagination. Bock, seeking to decipher and understand the “language of contradictions”⁹ without treating the birth narratives as legends, comes to the

⁷ Crossan, 26.

⁸ James P. Sweeney, “Modern and Ancient Controversies over the Virgin Birth of Jesus,” *Bibliotheca sacra* 160 (2003), 144.

⁹ Emil Bock, *The Childhood of Jesus: The Unknown Years* (trans. Maria St. Goar; Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1997), 34.

fantastic conclusion that the differences in the two accounts refer to the birth of two different children, one from a royal background and the other from a priestly lineage.¹⁰ Bock paints the Sadducees like Herbert's Bene Gesserit sisterhood, manipulating the bloodline of David in order to produce the Messiah, the child of Matthew's birth narrative. In his version Mary is a temple priestess who acts as eugenic consort to Joseph, who is selected through an oracular practice.¹¹

Strangely, both liberal and conservative seem to be arguing the same thing; either all of it is historically true, or none of it is. The trouble in both these approaches is that the texts are being treated as literal historical documents, which they are not, nor likely were ever intended to be:

These accounts were never *meant* to teach interesting facts about the first century. They are meant to teach things about Jesus. For John, he's the Lamb of God (hence the change of the day and time of his death); for Matthew and Luke, he's the Son of God (hence the virgin birth) and the Savior Messiah (hence the birth in Bethlehem).¹²

To approach the text from an exclusively historical perspective leaves us at an impasse, since "the more conservative attempt to resolve all historical problems and the less conservative attempt to deny most or all historicity to the infancy narratives because of historical problems are both inadequate

¹⁰ Bock, 49-50.

¹¹ Bock, 95-96.

¹² Ehrman, 40.

extremes.”¹³ So long as the text is being treated according to a modern, post-enlightenment treatment, the true meaning of the text will be either stripped of its power through sentimentality or rationality. In light of this concept, we will now look at the possibility of a third approach that goes beyond seeking a ‘historical’ solution.

The Double Ring Approach

The birth narratives are “stories of Christ, based on profound theological reflection, to be used in a carefully planned proclamation, seeking to portray artistically, vividly and in a highly critical light the true significance of Jesus as Messiah for the salvation of all the nations”¹⁴ It is a story that might have taken place historically and, as will be seen in the following quotation, while the supernatural may indeed be improbable, it is not impossible:

There are indeed more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in post-Enlightenment metaphysics. The ‘closed continuum’ of cause and effect is a modernist myth. The God who does not ‘intervene’ from outside but is always present and active within the world, sometimes shockingly, may well have been thus active on this occasion. It is all very well to get on one’s high metaphysical horse and insist that God cannot behave like this, but we do not know that ahead of time.¹⁵

Likewise, it is a story that might *not* have taken place historically. Even excluding comments about the supernatural events, the nature of the accounts as

¹³ Robert M. Mulholland, “The Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke: Of History, Theology and Literature,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 7.2 (1981), 59.

¹⁴ Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* (London: Collins, 1978), 451.

¹⁵ N.T. Wright, “God’s Way of Acting,” *Christian Century* 115 D 16 (1998), 1215.

regards their historical veracity leads some to conclude that such a detail as the birth at Bethlehem “is to be taken not as a historical fact but as a *theologoumenon*, i.e., a theological affirmation ... put into the form of an apparently historical narrative.”¹⁶ As has already been stated, the point of this paper is not to state that either the liberal or conservative scholar is wrong, but rather that neither side’s conclusions should change how the text is read. As Marcus Borg states, “I do not see the basis of the birth stories as history remembered. Yet I think these stories are true ... I see these stories as history metaphorized, that is, as metaphorical narratives.”¹⁷ Borg is speaking of mythic truth, where something does not have actually to have happened to be thought of as true.

This idea of dynamic tension where two opposite things are true is what Leonard Sweet calls double ring concepts, where “opposite things happen at the same time without being contradictory.”¹⁸ Likewise, Jean Baudrillard refers to the mathematical Moebius strip as a place where “near and far, inside and outside, subject and object” exist “within the same spiral.”¹⁹ In his article on “Play”, Sam D. Gill challenges religious study to play inside this conundrum in order to be both modern and postmodern, referring to the hypotheses and theories of

¹⁶ Maier, 216.

¹⁷ Marcus J. Borg, “Light in the Darkness,” *Christian Century* 115 D 16 (1998), 1219.

¹⁸ Leonard Sweet, *SoulTsunami* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 27.

¹⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (trans. S.F. Glaser; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 56.

“imaginative academics” as “fictions” and yet at the same time “demonstrably grounded in the reality of the subject.”²⁰

The nativity story in Matthew displays this mythic quality most clearly, while also grounding the narrative with historical references, so that will be the account I will focus on for the purposes of exploring a double ring approach. It is also the more midrashic of the two accounts, as its author is “notoriously unscrupulous in ripping Old Testament (OT) verses out of context to make them prophecies of gospel stories.”²¹ As is often the case in understanding the Bible, it helps to know the style of writing the author is using. It is generally agreed that Matthew employs a style of “Christian midrashic haggada”²² but this does not imply that Matthew intended to write “pure fancy”.²³ The presence of midrash “doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.”²⁴

Simply put, midrash is a “composition that explains the scriptures and seeks to make them understandable and meaningful for a later generation...”²⁵ While midrash may seem to modern conservative scholars to be taking the OT out of context, the intention of midrash was to “explain the reasons for happenings and draw out applications for the present” by handling the biblical material creatively: “details are changed to fit the purposes of the author and events are

²⁰ Sam D. Gill, “Play,” in W. Braun and R.T. McCutcheon (eds.), *Guide to the Study of Religion* (New York: Cassell, 2000), 451.

²¹ Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 27.

²² Wickings, 457.

²³ Herman Hendrickx, *The Infancy Narratives* (London: Chapman, 1984), 19.

²⁴ Wright, 1216.

²⁵ Hendrickx, 5.

idealized and even embellished with legendary material to make them fuller, more vivid and edifying.”²⁶

The problem for the conservative and liberal alike is that this in some way constitutes a form of lie. If, however, we are thinking metaphorically, or more accurately mythically, then the text becomes something truer than historical or empirical truth could be. The intended use of legendary elements in ancient biography was not to state that the person never lived or that the events never occurred, but was rather meant to “imply that a supernatural aura surrounds the central figure.”²⁷ Using the Matthew birth narrative, I will attempt to demonstrate what I mean.

Matthew’s Birth Narrative as Mythic Story

Matthew’s birth narrative begins with the genealogy, which Matthew uses to tell the reader that “Jesus is the legitimate Messiah, a descendent of the royal Davidic family, ... to trace his descent back to ... Abraham” and “to refute slanderous accusations ... that Jesus was of illegitimate birth.”²⁸ This genealogy establishes themes which Matthew will continue to explore throughout his narrative.

²⁶ Hendrickx , 5.

²⁷ Howard Clark Kee, *Jesus in History: An Approach to the Study of the Gospels* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1996), 296.

²⁸ Samuel Tobias Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1987), 2.

Following the genealogy, Matthew describes Mary's betrothal to Joseph. While Mary as mother is obviously a key character in the birth of Christ, unlike Luke, Matthew's focus is on Joseph. The reader must ask why he chooses this focus, especially since the virgin birth seems to make Joseph's paternity and ancestry moot.²⁹ Joseph accepts the "legal fatherhood of the child"³⁰ when he learns Mary is pregnant but refuses to dismiss her, making him an argument of proof against claims of illegitimate birth. One of Matthew's main themes in the birth narratives is that Jesus is a light to the gentiles, so he "is born under a cloud of sexual scandal and must be 'adopted' into the line of David,"³¹ effectively making him the first child of God to be adopted into the family.

The baby is then born in Bethlehem, which is arguably the most mythic element of Matthew's birth narrative. For in the same way that "the wilderness was not just sand and the Jordan was not just water,"³² Bethlehem, "though in itself a comparatively small and unimportant rural village, plays an important role through the entire course of Old Testament history."³³ It was the "city of David"³⁴ which leads some scholars to conclude that Matthew's use of it renders it inadmissible as historical fact.³⁵ Again, while it is possible that Jesus was not born

²⁹ Paul William Roberts, *Journey of the Magi: In Search of the Birth of Jesus* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1995), 8.

³⁰ Hendrickx, 15.

³¹ Dorothy Jean Weaver, "Rewriting the Messianic Script: Matthew's Account of the Birth of Jesus," *Interpretation* 54.4 (2000), 382.

³² Crossan, 43.

³³ Hendrickx, 41.

³⁴ Luke 2:4, 11 (NASB).

³⁵ Lachs, 8.

in Bethlehem, Matthew is constructing a Christological event and includes *the* place which will lead the reader to see that Jesus is the awaited messiah.

At this point, Matthew informs the reader that all this took place during the reign of King Herod. While much has been said about the veracity of Herod being alive at the time of Jesus' birth, we must continue along Matthew's theologically mythic route. Herod by contrast was the epitome of everything Jesus as the messianic king of Israel would *not* be. Jesus was born in low circumstances to a family of low circumstances while Herod was rich and powerful. Jesus would be identified as Isaiah's "Prince of Peace"³⁶ while Herod is a tyrant and murdering despot. In Matthew's narrative, "apparent weakness is demonstrated to be real power and demonstrable power demoted to real weakness."³⁷

To Herod come the magi from the east. The term magi "refers to those engaged in occult arts and covers a wide range of astronomers, fortune tellers, priestly augurers, and magicians of varying plausibility,"³⁸ but since Matthew "is not concerned with the pros and cons of astrology ... but with the attestation of the divine child,"³⁹ the Jewish prohibitions and subsequent negative references to *magoi* in the NT are irrelevant here. A good deal has been written on the historical nature of the magi—for instance, we simply cannot know how many of them there were despite the traditional number of 3—and as to the commonly held

³⁶ Isaiah 9:6 (NASB)

³⁷ Weaver, 381.

³⁸ Brown, 167.

³⁹ John M. Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 128.

conclusion that they were Persian astrologers,⁴⁰ Matthew's inclusion of them in the story is still in keeping with his mythic train of thought. The magi provide a further counterpoint to Herod and his chief priests: "...these gentile magi offer true worship to the Jewish Messiah ... in striking contrast to the deadly threats ... and bloody murders ... with which the Jewish people 'welcome' their Messiah."⁴¹ One does have to wonder why any gentile faction could not have served this purpose, which lends a sense of what Brown calls "verisimilitude" to the tale, but again this is not our purpose here.

Like the magi themselves, the star which they followed has been the source of endless speculation, to which theories abound: was it comet, supernova or planetary conjunction?⁴² The most radically conservative explanation is that it was a supernatural manifestation that actually moved to guide the magi on their journey. However, "a star that rose in the East, appeared over Jerusalem, turned south to Bethlehem and then came to rest over a house would have constituted a celestial phenomenon unparalleled in astronomical history; yet it received no notice in the records of the times,"⁴³ although Brown does admit that "there were remarkable astronomical phenomena in the period around the birth of Jesus."⁴⁴ Others have done extensive work, giving compelling arguments that the star was a

⁴⁰ Gundry, Robert H, *A Survey of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981) 117.

⁴¹ Weaver, 382.

⁴² Maier, 54-61.

⁴³ Brown, 188.

⁴⁴ Brown, 189.

“portent formed in Aries by Jupiter and other celestial bodies,”⁴⁵ or by Jupiter and Saturn coming into “extraordinary repeated conjunction”⁴⁶ but in the end these all remain conjecture. The most liberal of scholars simply dismiss it outright; if there were no magi, there is no need for a star.

Matthew’s use of the star to portend the arrival of the messiah is not without precedence: “The appearance of a star or of a phenomenon of light accompanying the birth of a hero or a worthy is commonplace in legend.”⁴⁷ Matthew is underscoring his Christological event with spectacular special effects, giving the story a legendary aspect.

The magi’s gifts are noteworthy here, simply because they have been the source of much speculation in the area of symbolism or metaphor, which is the language of myth. W.K. Lowther Clarke suggested that the gifts of gold, incense and myrrh were “the instruments of their trade”⁴⁸ as an offering of a magician in submission to true power. Others see each gift as having symbolic value, the gold symbolizing kingship, the frankincense, his future priesthood, and the myrrh a portent of his death.⁴⁹ The probability of the magi’s ability to predict the future and thereby give gifts that served as auguries of Jesus’ coming life is secondary to the mythic understanding of the gifts being a possible Christological proclamation

⁴⁵ Michael Molnar, *The star of Bethlehem: the legacy of the Magi*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 125.

⁴⁶ Maier, 54.

⁴⁷ Lachs, 9.

⁴⁸ Hull, 123.

⁴⁹ Maier, 50.

on Matthew's part, working backwards and reflecting upon the life of Jesus and what he wanted it to mean in his Gospel.

Finally we come to the slaughter of the innocents and the flight into Egypt. While Josephus "never mentions a massacre of children at Bethlehem"⁵⁰ in his biography of Herod the Great, it is consistent with Matthew's use of Herod as a mythic tyrant king. At this point Herod becomes a Pharaoh-type in Matthew's Christological retelling of the Exodus: "The basic story line concerns the rescue of the child savior from the machinations of the wicked king by flight to Egypt. This echoes in part the rescue of the infant Moses from the machinations of the wicked Pharaoh in Egypt."⁵¹

This is one of the most dubious moments in Matthew's account, since Luke makes no mention of the journey to Egypt whatsoever. There is evidence from extra-biblical sources (in the form of slander) that Jesus learned magic in Egypt, and some scholars believe that to be the reason for its insertion here.⁵² However, it is simpler to rely again on Brown's verisimilitude and our mythic cycle to understand that "in a certain sense, the Matthean Jesus relives the Exodus and the Exile and fulfills the history of Israel."⁵³ This is far more in keeping with the rest of Matthew's birth narrative and, indeed, his entire Gospel. This is the

⁵⁰ Brown, 226.

⁵¹ Brown, 214.

⁵² Lachs, 11.

⁵³ Brown 180

long awaited Jewish messiah, and his coming is steeped in Jewish mythic archetypes.

Conclusion

We have seen that, despite the ongoing controversy over the birth narratives, which “has a much longer history than Deism, the Enlightenment, or even present-day scholarship,”⁵⁴ neither radical conservative or liberal scholarship gives a satisfactory treatment of the text. As Mulholland writes:

Biblical scholars are assuredly correct in their contention that the Infancy Narratives are the literary expression of the Christian community’s theological reflection upon Jesus’ early life. They are also correct in noting that this theological reflection was set in then-current, acceptable literary forms...But the use of such forms does not force us to conclude that they are merely fictitious vehicles for the conveyance of theological perspectives with minimal regard for historical facts. The literary forms utilized by the writers of the Infancy Narratives may be means to convey and enhance the theological understanding of historical events.⁵⁵

Both polemics are so steeped in their own biases that they refuse to admit (in the case of conservatives) new evidence or (in the case of liberals) the possibility of the supernatural. As a result, a third way utilizing double ring theory must be employed. This third way is a place where both liberal and conservative scholarship meets, where historical evidence and conservative theology can meet, blend, and find new, or perhaps simply reinforce old, truth.

⁵⁴ Sweeny, 158.

⁵⁵ Mulholland, 59.

When I began this paper, I found myself adrift; no longer able to function as a 'bible believing' conservative, yet dissatisfied with the conclusions of the very liberal. In a post-modern world, the double ring approach offers a way for both schools to come together as Christmas approaches, "peace, good will to all men" rests upon all, not simply conservative or liberal.

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