The Real Story Behind the Christmas Crèche

By Arthur E. Zannoni

There is no more familiar scene to Christians than the crèche — with its mother and child and the father bending over protectively. They are in the humble stable, watched by animals and kneeling shepherds. Above the tableau is a hovering angel. In the background are the twinkling lights of the little town of Bethlehem. But, wait, a star now rises in the night sky. Shortly, a caravan of camels arrives, the treasure-laden entourage of “three kings.” Elements from Matthew’s Gospel have been mixed with those of the Gospel of Luke.

Origin of the Christmas Crèche

The origin of the Christmas crèche comes from St. Francis of Assisi. In 1223, St. Francis presented a kind of panorama of Christmastide near the village of Greccio, Italy. Because the Gospel according to Luke mentions that the child was placed in a manger (an animal feedbox), one of Francis’ company said there must have been oxen, horses, and mules in a stable. And because the Gospel according to Matthew specifies a visit of an undetermined number of soothsayers or astrologers (the meaning of “magi”), and Luke mentions the presence of shepherds, St. Francis asked friends to represent them, too. From this devout spirit came the picturesque crèche iconography of Christmas night. Taking Francis’s lead, artists representing the nativity scene since his time have often combined all of the Gospel elements into a single lively scene. This has given rise to an overly literal interpretation of these stories.
The Real Story in Two Versions

Only two of the four Gospels have infancy narratives; Matthew and Luke. Each one has its own version of the meaning of Jesus’ birth. Matthew and Luke were not eyewitnesses to the historical Jesus’ birth, nor were their stories meant to be video tapes or DVD’s of the actual birth of the historical Jesus, but rather their stories dealt with the implications and meaning of Jesus’ birth.

Christians including the writers of Matthew & Luke believed that Jesus was the son of God. So the two evangelists, wanted to make that clear right from Jesus’ birth and actually even before his birth. They wrote Gospels that focused both on Jesus’ public career, death and resurrection, and added accounts of his birth. These accounts, which were peppered with fulfillment of prophecies, signs in the sky and angelic annunciations, would make clear the meaning of who Jesus was. The Gospel writers’ concerns were theological not biological. They did not emphasize how much Jesus weighed, how long he was or what color were his eyes at birth. Instead the writers were developing a Christology, what they believed about the now dead and risen Christ, and retrojected this belief all the way back into and even before his birth.

A Method of Jewish Storytelling

During the compilation of the Gospels, a rich tradition of interpretation of the Old Testament, based on Rabbinic Judaism, was available. This tradition introduced a method known as “midrash,” derived from the Hebrew word *darash*, meaning “to interpret.” A midrash
infancy form is a creative imaginative story about someone who turns out to be a great person, but nobody knew this at the time of his birth. Since nobody paid close attention to his birth, it became necessary after he lived to give an imaginative explanation of his birth. This explanation was tinted, of course with the whole person’s lived life.

In developing a midrashic interpretation, writers searched the Scriptures for other occurrences of birth stories. These passages were then used to explain the meaning of the birth of the person the writers were writing about, in our case, Jesus. Thus the midrashic method used Scripture to interpret Scripture.

**Scripture Interpreting Scripture**

To develop their birth narratives of Jesus, the Gospel authors turned to the birth narratives of major persons in the Old Testament. The birth of Isaac (Gen 17: 1-21) influenced Luke. Abraham and Sarah are barren and too old for child bearing; the same is true of Zechariah and Elizabeth. God announces through the use of angels to Abraham he is going to have a child, and an angel announces the same to Zechariah. God tells Abraham to name the boy Isaac, in Luke the angel tells Zechariah to name the child John, and Mary to name the child Jesus. Abraham circumcises Isaac, Jesus is also circumcised in the Gospel of Luke.

Luke turns to the birth of Samuel for parallels (see 1 Sam 1:1-3:4). Elkanah and Hannah the parents of Samuel go the Sanctuary at Shiloh. Mary and Joseph and Jesus go to the Temple in Jerusalem. Eli, an old priest at the Shiloh receives Samuel; Simeon an old man at the Jerusalem Temple receives Jesus. Hannah the mother of Samuel prays a canticle, the parallel of

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which in Luke is Mary’s canticle (the *Magnificat*). The boy Samuel is said to continue to grow before God and the people (1 Sam 2:26) likewise the boy Jesus (Luke 2:52). The Gospel writer is saying that just as God was involved in the birth and safety of these great Old Testament religious heroes of the past God is now involved in the birth and safety of Jesus.

Similarly Matthew will use the birth of Moses (Exod 3:2-12). Moses’ birth story is one of survival against great odds. All the male Hebrew children are to be slaughtered by Pharaoh’s orders (Exod 2:2). Herod is depicted as yet another Pharaoh who orders the slaughter of the male children (Matt 2:16). Moses has to flee for his life into the wilderness (Exod 2:15); the infant Jesus and his parents flee to Egypt to save their lives (Matt 2:13-14). The king of Egypt dies (Exod 2:23), Herod dies (Matt 2:19); Moses and his family return to Egypt (Exod 4:19); Jesus and his family return to Israel (Matt 2:19-20). This was Matthew’s way of presenting to his primarily Jewish audience that Jesus was the new Moses.

Matthew’s Truth Claims

The truth that the Gospel of Matthew reveals through Jesus’ birth is that he is the long awaited Messiah of ancient Israel and the son of God. To substantiate this, Matthew’s genealogy explains *who* Jesus is. He is son of David and Son of Abraham (1:1-17); as son of David Jesus is descended from the line of the Davidic Messiah; as son of Abraham he is Jewish. Matthew then explains *how* Jesus is son of David (1:18-25). Since Jesus cannot be a biological descendent of David through Joseph, for Mary is pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit, Matthew invokes a Jewish custom. When a father names a child, he accepts that child as a gift from God, and the
child receives title to the inheritance of the father. Since Joseph is not the physical father of Jesus, when he names the child, he adopts him into his heritage, the Davidic line since Joseph is from that line. Thus Jesus becomes an adopted son of David.

Matthew then shifts back to his earlier question: who is Jesus and answers it with the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 which states that a child would be born who would be a sign of God’s presence with his people. The child’s name is Emmanuel “God with us.” For Matthew, Jesus is Emmanuel.

Matthew continues by explaining the significance of the place where Jesus was born (2:1-12). In Bethlehem the place where David was anointed king so now Jesus is yet another anointed one of God (the Messiah). To further substantiate this, Matthew quotes the prophet Micah as revealing a ruler will come from Bethlehem (2:6). Finally, Matthew shows whence (from where) Jesus will go (2:13-23). Through the hostility of Jewish authorities, the infant Jesus will become an exile in Egypt; later to return and dwell in Nazareth. The same religious authorities who were hostile at Jesus’ birth instigate his crucifixion, but Jesus returns in the resurrection.

**Truth Claims of Luke**

The truth that Luke’s birth story proclaims about Jesus is that he is the universal savior of humankind replacing the Roman emperor who was often deified and called savior. In fact, Jesus’ name means “God saves.” Luke points out that Jesus follows in the footsteps of the prophets symbolized by John the Baptist. Yet
Jesus is more than just a spokesperson for God as the prophets were. He is the very incarnation of God.

For Luke Jesus, not the Roman emperor is the Prince of Peace and his message is for all of humankind. Thus Luke will trace Jesus’ lineage in his genealogy all the way back to Adam who for Luke is the father of humankind.

In addition, Luke presents Mary as the ideal disciple the one who hears the word of God and keeps it. Mary’s “yes” to God’s activity in her life is presented by Luke as a challenge for all subsequent generations of would-be disciples to also say yes to Jesus and to God’s activity in their lives.

**The Gospels in Miniature**

The Gospel writers show the various reactions of people to the birth of Jesus. In Matthew there is the positive reaction of the Magi (Matt 2:1-12) and the negative reaction of Herod (Matt 2:13-23). These two responses mirror the various reactions toward the adult Jesus found throughout the rest of Matthew’s Gospel. In Luke, the shepherds, representing the poor, visit the new born babe and the people are amazed by what the shepherds report, similarly, the teachers in the Temple were amazed by Jesus’ knowledge. This mirrors Luke’s concern for the poor and “amazement” reactions to Jesus in his Gospel. Finally, in Luke, the mother of Jesus, misunderstands why the twelve year old has to be in the Temple talking with the doctors of the law thus mirroring the later misunderstanding of Jesus by the disciples. It is for this reason that quite often these birth narratives are referred to as the “gospels in miniature.”
From Manger to Empty Tomb

For the Gospel of Luke, Mary's care for Jesus at his birth foreshadows the care shown for Jesus at his death. As Mary wrapped Jesus in bands of cloth and laid him in the hollow rock of the manger (in biblical times mangers were made of stone), Joseph of Aramathea wrapped the body of Jesus in a linen cloth and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb (23:56). The angels proclaimed to the shepherds that the wrapped infant was a sign of the good news (2:12). Similarly at the empty tomb, angels proclaimed the good news that Christ is raised.

The Truth Shall Make You Free

We are not being completely truthful and we are poorer if we reduce the two Gospel stories to the display in the crèche. Freeing oneself from both the crèche depiction and the narrow view that the infancy narratives reveal verifiable historical evidence of the birth of Jesus is not the same as discounting them. There is truth in these stories for the practice of faith. Every generation of Christians is challenged to ask: Who is Jesus? Where does he come from? What is his mission? What are the demands he requires of his followers? For only then will the truth about the adult Christ be revealed through these birth stories.

Questions For Reflection

✦ With which character(s) in the Gospel infancy stories do you identify?

✦ How is Joseph the hero of Matthew's infancy story? How is Mary the ideal disciple in Luke's infancy story?

✦ What do the titles applied to Jesus (savior, prophet, Christ, Emmanuel, Son of God) in these infancy stories mean to you and for the practice of your faith?