



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Observations on Nativity

Jonathan Mason © 17 December 2023

Each year, as we celebrate Christmas, I have wondered what really happened in Bethlehem. The Nativity Scene is embedded in our seasonable culture. In our Unitarian hymn book, we have about 25 hymns that refer to Bethlehem, the Star, and the manger scene. So this year, with the request for sermons, I thought I would review the historical evidence for the Nativity before Christmas. Now the good news is that for events that occurred 2000 years ago, you can believe whatever you wish. And I'll skip over the Immaculate Conception, which Unitarians and even many Christians don't believe.

Now, the first bit of background is to consider a filter for how scholars evaluate events in the Bible. The first filter is whether the event occurs in multiple versions of the Gospels, with special focus paid to the Synoptic Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke and whether the stories are similar in the different versions. The second filter is whether the events are consistent with the practices of the Roman Empire at the time that Jesus lived. The third filter is

whether the story was helpful to building Christianity. If it wasn't, it's more probably true. To give an example of this last issue, there is a letter of Paul that argues that marriage isn't important because the Kingdom of God is so imminent, scholars believe that the letter is more likely to be true, because the Kingdom of God didn't happen in the past 2000 years. We'll come back to this filter later.

So how is the Nativity described in the New Testament? It is not discussed at all in Mark, which is regarded as the earliest Gospel and who begins with Jesus as an adult. It also does not appear in John, the one non-synoptic Gospel. It does appear in Matthew and Luke, but actually with starkly different narratives and I regret to say, I didn't realise how different they were. In Matthew, Mary and Joseph lived in Bethlehem, so no manger. When Jesus was born, there was a bright star over Bethlehem and Three Wise Men visited Herod the Great, the Roman leader in Israel, because they believed the Star was evidence that the Messiah, the King of the Jews, had been born. Herod asked that when the Three Wise Men find the Messiah, that they return to let him know where he is living. The Three Wise Men then travelled to Bethlehem, found and honored Jesus with gold, frankincense and myrrh, but were told in a dream that Herod

wanted to kill Jesus, so they travelled back to their kingdoms by a different route.

Herod waited for the Wise Men, but when he didn't hear back from them, ordered all the babies two years old and younger to be massacred. Joseph and Mary were long gone by this time, having been told by an angel in a dream to flee to Egypt. After Herod's death, they returned to live in Nazareth in Galilee, where Jesus grew into adulthood.

In Luke, Mary and Joseph are living in Nazareth, but are commanded to travel to Bethlehem to comply with a Roman census from Quirinius to go the city of your fathers, because Joseph is from the House of David and David was from Bethlehem. They travelled to Bethlehem with Mary heavily pregnant, couldn't find accommodation other than innkeeper that had a manger, so Jesus was born there. Shepherds heard about the birth and visited the manger, but no Star, Wise Men, or Kings here. No Herod issuing edicts, Joseph and Mary went to Jerusalem to have Jesus circumcised at the Temple then travelled back to Nazareth after they registered for the census with Jesus in tow.

This is an example of how difficult it is to strictly take the Bible as a fundamentalist text. In Matthew and Luke, Joseph and Mary are living in two different places, travel to Egypt in one version but not the other, which I would

regard as reasonably significant differences that makes it illogical to believe both.

Now let me use the three Jesus Seminar filters to describe how the majority of scholars evaluate the Nativity story. The first filter whether multiple versions have it, the story of Jesus's birth in Bethlehem is in two out of four gospels, but the story differs significantly between the two. So I would give this a medium grade of 0.5 on a scale of 0 to 1.

The second filter is whether it is consistent with practices in the Roman Empire. Both Matthew and Luke fail for different reasons. On Matthew, there is no evidence of Massacre of the Innocents, and despite Herod's power, Rome would not have been happy with this action which would threaten a civil war in a restive province. On Luke- there was a census under Quirinus, but it was 10 years after Herod's death so problematic with Matthew's chronology by about 8 years. The Roman Census was not surprisingly based on where you lived not in the City of your Fathers. The concept of going to where your ancestors lived is an unworkable idea in any case. Which city would you go to? Rome did a census to determine where people live now for the purposes of taxing the population and military conscription not where ancestors lived in the past. In my opinion, Luke's explanation of why Jesus was born in Bethlehem is so tortured that it points back to a need to explain why Jesus who was from

Nazareth could possibly have been born in Bethlehem. To go back to a movie analogy, I marvel on why Luke came up with the census idea, versus about another 20 excuses that would have been better explanation for travelling to Bethlehem. So the second filter indicates a very weak case for the Bethlehem Nativity, I'll give a 0 on my ratings scale.

The third filter is whether the story was helpful in building Christianity, the answer is certainly yes. The Old Testament in Micah predicted the Messiah would come from the City of David, Bethlehem, so one can argue that Matthew and Luke gave accounts to explain why Jesus of Nazareth was really born in Bethlehem. Some scholars believe that Matthew structured his account to make Jesus the new Moses, and was focusing on gaining Jewish converts to Christianity. Like Moses, Jesus was threatened by a King/Pharaoh and needed to flee. Also, celestial phenomena in ancient times were associated with the births of great people. Augustus was born a month after a comet appeared in the skies. Matthew threw in an attractive passage for Gentiles, with the Three Wise Men being Gentiles, but acknowledging the spiritual power of Jesus.

Similarly, Luke's account had Gentiles as shepherds but followed Jewish Law with the circumcision. One minor point on the shepherds, they were only out

with their flocks in the winter from March to November, so 25 December is a bit of a problem. On this scale as well from 0 to 1, I'd rate this a 0.

So with three being the strongest score, the Nativity comes in at about a 0.5. But for all of those who want to continue to believe, no one can say you're wrong, because we don't know what happened 2100 years ago.

Regardless of whether the Nativity is historically accurate, it is a popular story, which accounts for 25 hymns in our hymn book. It is also a very old story, dating back to 100 -150 AD, with the first written accounts dating from the 4th century. What is the timeless wisdom in the Nativity?

The first concept is to focus on Luke and the manger and look at the humble beginnings of Jesus. The first nativity display in Christian history to be documented is from 1223, and was organised by St. Francis of Assisi, who organised the Franciscan order around a vow of poverty. Luke's account calls us to be compassionate to those who are less fortunate than ourselves. If the greatest spiritual leader in the Western World had to sleep rough, shouldn't we treat our homeless with compassion? It also contrasted with the ostentatious wealth that the Emperors of the Roman Empire had.

The second symbol from the Nativity that has resonated through the ages is the light from the Star in Matthew. I noted earlier that special phenomena like

comets and bright stars were associated with the births of great people. But over the past 2000 years, the Bethlehem star also has to come to symbolise hope and the possibility of an improved world. I have not researched how chalice lightings have come to be part of Unitarian services, but I'll go out on a limb and say that there is a connection between the Bethlehem Star and our weekly chalice lighting.

So in conclusion, the criticism that Mary and friends give me on movies is probably also valid on my analysis of the Nativity story. Stop looking at all the details and whether it's historically accurate and consider instead what are the stories trying to say. This survey has been important for my personal spiritual journey on Principle #4, as I continue my lifelong search for truth and meaning.