



into the Melting Pot

the question is more important than the answer

Sunday 08 December 2013 - The Christmas Parables

The Christmas Story that we see every year in church or the 'School Nativity' is a harmonisation of three sources: the birth stories in Matthew's and Luke's gospels and centuries of 'tradition' adding into the mix.

If you go back to the scriptural accounts, then you will find no stable, no three kings, no innkeeper informing us that there is 'no room' and definitely no donkey! Tradition has embellished the accounts and filled in some of the gaps, and papered over the cracks.

However, if you study the gospel stories individually, you cannot help but notice significant differences in their versions of events:

- did Mary & Joseph live in Nazareth (Luke) or Bethlehem (Matthew)?
- how come Luke forgets / ignores the star, the wise men and their gifts, the flight to Egypt and the slaughter of children (that bit doesn't often make the cut in the nativity version)?
- how did Matthew manage to leave out the manger, the shepherds, the heavenly host singing?

And then if you try and fix the stories in history, you have a number of difficulties: Quirinius wasn't Governor of Syria at the same time that Augustus was Emperor; there was a Census - but in Syria not Judah - but this was several years after Jesus likely birth date and only involved men in their place of residence; and what about the star, appearing and moving about and then stopping precisely over the place in Bethlehem?

We can make sense of these apparent contradictions and anomalies if we see both gospel stories as exactly that - stories: metaphorical prologues to introduce their gospels, to give Jesus some authenticity before starting on their accounts of his life and works, his purpose and mission. And this liberates us to read the truth within the fiction.

Matthew's Birth Story

Matthew's gospel was written for a Jewish Christian audience. It references back to the Jewish Scriptures (the protestant Old Testament) throughout, and seeks to persuade those Christian listeners of Jesus' Jewish credentials, and his fulfilment of Scriptural promise.

His account begins with a genealogy that fixes Jesus as a descendant of David (Israel's great king) and Abraham (the father of the Jewish nation). The birth narrative focuses almost entirely on Joseph (who has multiple dreams guiding his actions) but includes the eastern astrologers and the flight to Egypt. Throughout, Matthew seeks to anchor the story in Old Testament scripture suggesting that these were predictions that have now been fulfilled.

The Jewish scriptures had commentaries, just like our Bible, the Talmud and the Midrash, where the content of the scriptures was explained, interpreted and expounded. Matthew's birth account bears remarkable similarities to the Midrash accounts of Exodus 1 and 2 - the birth of Moses. This explains the flight to Egypt, so that, just like Moses, Jesus comes out of Egypt to rescue his people.

The number 'five' is of significance, as Jewish tradition has Moses as the author of the Torah, the first five books of the Scriptures. In Matthew's account, we have five dreams, five 'prediction-fulfilment' episodes, five references to 'Messiah' and 'Bethlehem'. It has long been recognised that Matthew's book contains five sections reflecting the structure of the Torah, and in particular with Jesus' sayings collected in the 'Sermon on the Mount' - a parallel with Moses receiving the ten commandments on Mount Sinai.

In summation, Matthew wishes to set the scene that Jesus is the new Moses, bringing the new law to his people. Matthew's birth narrative is a magnificent introduction to his understanding of the life and purpose of Jesus.

Luke's Birth Story

Luke was writing for a non-Jewish audience (mostly referred to as 'Gentile' or 'Greek') who did not of necessity have all the cultural background found within Judaism.

His story also starts with a genealogy, but Luke takes us back to Adam, the 'everyman' of the creation story, from whom all nations are descended.

The focus of Luke's account is Mary, with Joseph pretty much a bystander. She is the one who received God's message. In fact it is full of an array of characters, all 'ordinary' people who each add to the story. This theme continues with the news first publically announced to the 'Shepherds'. Throughout Luke's gospel, women are mentioned as often as men, including within Jesus' followers, and his focus is very much on the downtrodden and marginalised, the cripples and lepers, the beggars and tax collectors: those whom the (Jewish) Law has excluded - sinners. Jesus has come for them

Perhaps in some early form of liturgy, Luke includes three great 'hymns' of praise. It is worth noting that Mary's song (the Magnificat used in some churches today) is a direct lift from the Old Testament of the song sung by Hannah, the mother of Samuel.

Luke places his story in its political religious context with reference to both the Emperor Caesar Augustus and the (puppet) King of the Jews, Herod. Yet Jesus is announced as 'the Son of the Most High God' and 'king of the descendants of Jacob'. This is subversive, revolutionary talk! In Roman theology, the Emperor was a God, son of a God. The name Augustus means 'the one who is divine', and his successor, Tiberius reinforced the message with 'Son of God' stamped on his coins. His birth story involves a portent: a strange star in the heavens announcing something miraculous; his mother asleep in the temple of Apollo and impregnated by Apollo in the form of a snake (a 'virgin birth'). The Caesars' titles also included 'Saviour of the World' and the bringer of peace (the Pax Romana). When you look at Luke's story, you see a significant parallel - the difference being that Jesus brings non-violent peace through (distributive) justice as opposed to peace through conquest and oppression.

So Luke asks his listeners to see Jesus as the real saviour of the world, bringing a message of hope to the downtrodden, challenging the oppressive power systems (both state and church) so that God's justice can once again be realised.

Paul and John

Paul's authentic letters are the earliest writings in the New Testament. His only two references to Jesus' birth set him as part of humanity; Mark (the earliest gospel, some 70 years after Jesus' birth) sees no need to record anything; Matthew and then Luke (some 10 years later) include their birth parables; by the time of John's gospel (toward the end of the first century), which is a carefully crafted and more spiritually centred book, the early church has elevated Jesus to the point where he was the 'Logos' or word of God, and as such in existence since before time - but that's another story.