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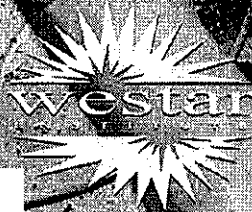
An Advocate for Religious Literacy



The Chimera of Saint George

Dominic Kirkham

3



In this issue

The Prospect of a New Humanity *Roy W. Hoover*

Cross and Cosmos *An Interview with the Author*

First Came the Jesus of History and Then Came
the Christ Child *Julius-Kai Kato*

17

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First Came the Jesus of History and Then Came the Christ Child

Julius-Kei Kato

When the Christmas season comes along, I have to confess that I struggle with the way many churches deal with the stories surrounding Jesus' birth, particularly, the uncritical emphasis on what are the largely mythological stories that are found at the beginning of the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Scholars refer to these as the birth or infancy narratives.

To be sure, not everything is negative. There are praiseworthy efforts to draw profound lessons from the traditional Christmas stories: for example, that God so loved us that divinity itself is incarnated as a human, symbolized as a helpless baby in Bethlehem; or that the holy family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were refugees in a real sense, forced to flee their native land to a foreign country in order to escape persecution and death from the unjust powers-that-be.

Yet the New Testament historian in me finds this way of celebrating Christmas somehow wanting ^{in/lacking of} a more responsibly historical way of making meaning out of those familiar Christmas stories.

It is no secret that many (most?) critical biblical scholars treat the birth narratives as largely mythological, that is, non-historical, although that scholarship is usually unknown to the masses who celebrate Christmas. In line with this reality, we should not forget that there is a profound truth in the oft-heard dictum that when we treat mythological tales as literal, we actually rob them of their profound power and meaning. That is precisely what happens when we treat the Christmas stories as historically true in every respect. Far from being negative, the role of mythology in fields such as religion and literature is supremely important: myths are the privileged ways of conveying the most profound truths of life.

On the other hand, if we declare these Christmas stories to be mere myths and stop at that, we turn them into extravagantly decorated yet vapid, hollow shells.

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Myths and Myth-Making

Let me share how we might make sense of the largely mythological Christmas stories. We can begin by analyzing what precisely is the phenomenon of myth and why humans engage in myth-making in the first place. Myth-making occurs for many reasons but perhaps the major reason why people begin to make up larger-than-life stories (that is, myths) about anyone is because the historical figures about whom myths were created were (past tense because mythologizing frequently occurs after a person's death) charismatically larger-than-life, deeply significant, and powerfully impactful individuals, so much so that the people who were deeply influenced and touched by them cannot help but create grandiose "myths" about their heroes and heroines, imbuing these great people and their origins with wonderful and fantastic circumstances and powers.

Simply stated, that is why the Christmas stories came to be created and written down. I want to emphasize the inseparable and necessary connection between these wonderful and fantastic yet mythological birth stories and the real Jesus of history.

The Jesus of History

When New Testament scholars write a one-page description of the historical Jesus, they are forced to highlight some findings of the scholarly research and simplify others. Here is my brief offering.

Jesus, born of a peasant girl, Mary, lived and worked in Nazareth where he experienced the joys and challenges of ordinary, peasant life. His life journey took a dramatic turn when he responded to what he perceived to be a special call to proclaim the reign of God in word but, more importantly, in deed and lifestyle. Thus, he spent a short yet intense period doing public ministry.

As a historical person, this Jesus was someone deeply united with God as a mystic. He was also courageously



prophetic, a teacher of wisdom, a performer of powerful deeds that concretely brought God's reign into the here and now. Jesus was concerned above all with proclaiming this reign of God and not himself (contrary to the impression John's gospel gives us). He was, moreover, a founder of a movement and community that sought to embody God's reign. All of these aspects of Jesus profoundly impacted people for the better, so much so that, despite his short public career, many people eventually came to believe in his message and also began to think that he was the longed-for messiah sent by God.

Jesus proclaimed and tried to realize a vision of the reign of God that was marked by gracious and unconditional compassion, forgiveness, inclusiveness, and (distributive) justice for all, especially the poor and oppressed. This conflicted, however, with the vision that the powers-that-be of the time had of the ideal world order. Historically, we don't really know the specific reason why Jesus was killed, but the manner of his execution indicates that the Romans perceived him as a threat to their power.

Jesus' career, if we speak in the strictly historical sense, ended on a cross. But the greater "Jesus-tradition" did not end there. Those who were impacted by the historical Jesus' person, teaching, and deeds rebooted the movement that Jesus started, sometime after his ignominious death. Why? Because some prominent disciples of Jesus boldly claimed that they were witnesses of a wondrous event: that God "had raised Jesus from the dead" and showed them that Jesus was alive and active forever. Thus, they proclaimed, God had put a seal of approval on all that Jesus stood for, especially the preferential option of God for the reign (that is, the ideal order) to be realized not through violent means but through loving-compassion and justice.

Back to the Christmas Stories

The impactful life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth was and remains today the heart of the Christian message. How is that related to Christmas? Scholarly studies of the Christmas stories conclude that they were created and written down *after* the above-mentioned *more important* events had been proclaimed and established by those who formed the earliest Christian communities. In short, as I say in the title, first came the Jesus of history, then came the Christ Child.

People naturally want to know more details about someone who has had such a profound impact on them in order to have a more complete picture of their hero. Thus, when the more important points of the early Christian proclamation had been established, there also arose some demand for details about how Jesus was conceived and born.

It is in this context that stories about Jesus' birth and infancy developed. The Christmas stories are, by and large, theological *messages* in mythological narrative (story) form

that make up the beginnings of (note well!) only two out of the four canonical gospels that we have. Only those writers felt that including birth stories was important enough for their particular works. The other two apparently believed that a full account of the life and teachings of Jesus did not require birth and infancy stories. This discrepancy alone shows their secondary importance. Besides, when one compares these two very different accounts in Matthew and Luke, it is impossible to reconcile them with each other. That is a further indication of their mythological nature. Moreover, all the details in the two distinct birth accounts seem like clues early in the particular gospel's story line as to what the grown-up Jesus will become in the overall plot, further bolstering the suggestion that, in the Christmas stories, we are actually dealing not so much with remembered history as with theological introduction in story form.

Christmas and the Historical Jesus

My main point here is that when Christmas comes around, a more mature attitude consists in never losing sight of the inseparable connection between the Christmas stories and what is in fact the heart of the early Christian proclamation, rooted in the historical career and message of Jesus of Nazareth. When we understand the Christmas stories in this way, we can appreciate them as eloquent testimonies that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed an impactful historical figure.

The Christmas stories tell us about a coming savior who would be like a light shining in a dark world; about this new hope for facing challenges and persecution; about this infant being proclaimed to the marginalized and oppressed; about this newborn baby being like Moses and David of old, freeing and leading the people into a state of greater wholeness. Those are just some of the significant messages in the birth narratives. The gospels go on to show that Jesus did indeed realize those things in his life. Those points form part of the impact that the historical carpenter-turned-rabbi from Nazareth had on the people he encountered and changed forever.



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