

The Nativity Revisited

Big Sky Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

By Bill Kronholm

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When I was a child growing up in Oklahoma, I remember Christmas. I remember borrowing my dad's long bathrobe, because it looked like what I thought shepherds would wear. I took a wooden stick, and attached a coat-wire hook to the top. We built it up with papier-mache, and painted the whole thing brown. That was my shepherd's crook.

And at our Lutheran church, during the Christmas pageant, I appropriately cringed in fear with the other shepherds -- as we abided in our fields, keeping watch over our flocks by night -- while a multitude of angels announced their glad tidings of great joy -- though for us the multitude was more like two or three little girls wearing white sheets and wings made of aluminum foil.

But it was an inspirational story for me, as it was for generations before me and still is for multitudes of children who still borrow their fathers' bathrobes and make papier-mache shepherds crooks. And somehow, I didn't notice some of the problems. Such as: Nights can get chilly in Israel in December, and that's also the rainy season. Historical accounts indicate that shepherds of the era typically took their flocks to the field after Passover in the spring, and brought their flocks back to shelter after the fall rains began in September or October. So why were these shepherds camped out -- abiding by night, the story says -- in such nasty weather? It just really doesn't sound like a very good way to take care of your sheep, either.

That's just one of the problems with the traditional Christian Nativity story. I knew there were more problems before I began researching this talk today. But one thing I found surprised me, and that is that outside some fundamentalist faiths, the Nativity story is taken as literal truth in very few Christian traditions.

As we might expect, liberal theologians question the story. Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong goes so far as to say that, "The fact is that no reputable biblical theologian today, Catholic or Protestant, is willing to defend the historical accuracy of the details of the biblical birth stories." But surprisingly, even some fundamentalists disavow Christmas as heretical because it has its roots in pagan traditions.

We need look no further than the Puritans. In 1687, the Rev. Increase Mather of Boston observed that "the early Christians who first observed the Nativity on December 25 did not do so thinking that Christ was born in that Month, but because the Heathens' Saturnalia was at that time kept in Rome, and they were willing to have those Pagan Holidays metamorphosed into Christian ones." Because of its pagan origin, Christmas was banned by the Puritans, and in fact between 1659 and 1681 it was illegal in Massachusetts to celebrate Christmas.

Of course, this doesn't take away from the fact that the Christmas story is inspirational to millions. But that inspiration does not require literal truth, and today I'd like to spend some time separating out the myths of Christmas.

When I mentioned Increase Mather, I mentioned the Roman festival of Saturnalia. This was a week-long celebration beginning in mid-December during the early Christian era.

Saturnalia was a feast in honor of the God of agriculture and harvest, Saturn. Gifts were given to children. Even slaves were given time off. In a reversal of the social order, masters were expected to share their wealth with, and even wait on, their servants and the poor. It was tolerated by the elite, perhaps as a kind of safety valve that contained class resentments. And it was a highly popular festival for the common people of the Roman Empire.

In the fourth century A.D., Christianity imported the Saturnalia festival. Christian leaders succeeded in converting large numbers of pagans by promising them that they could continue to celebrate the Saturnalia as Christians. The problem was that there was nothing Christian about Saturnalia -- but that problem was solved by naming Saturnalia's concluding day, December 25th, to be Jesus' birthday.

Christians had little success, however, refining the practices of Saturnalia, and the earliest Christmas holidays were celebrated by drinking, feasting, and singing naked in the streets -- a precursor of modern caroling.

Beyond the issue of a wrong date, though, there are other problems with the Nativity story. Many of them are found in the Bible.

Consider: Of the 27 books of the New Testament, the nativity is described only in two, the gospels of Luke and Matthew, both written some 80 years after the fact. There is no mention of a miraculous birth for Jesus in the writings of Paul, in the gospel of Mark, or in the gospel of John.

This is particularly significant in the writings of Paul, for several reasons. He was the earliest author of a book in the New Testament, writing between 50 and 64 A.D., only about 20 to 30 years after Christ's death. He also is one of its most prolific writers, credited with between seven and 14 books of the New Testament. And most of those books are the epistles, letters to new Christian congregations in the Mediterranean explaining Christianity. But all Paul says in his writings about the birth is that Jesus was "born of a woman, born under the law" (Galatians 4:4) and "according to the flesh" he was "descended from the House of David" (Romans 1:3). Paul never mentions the names of Mary or Joseph.

Mark, who wrote his gospel around 70-75 A.D., also offers us no story of Jesus' birth and never mentions Joseph. He begins his gospel with the baptism of the adult Jesus.

So it would seem the birth of Jesus was simply not a central concern of early Christians.

When you do look at the stories in Luke and Matthew, it's almost like they are describing two different events. Luke has shepherds and angels, but no wise men and no star. Luke has the inn and the manger, but no jealous king and slaughter of innocents. Matthew has wise men following a star but no shepherds

and no angels; he has Herod and his mass murder of infants, but no inn and no manger.

So if you think of the nativity as Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus in a manger with shepherds, assorted livestock, three kings on camels, some angels and a big star overhead, you are thinking of a story that doesn't really exist in the Bible.

I found a good summary explanation for the sharply different stories of Matthew and Luke in a sermon by a UU minister in Massachusetts, the Rev. Frederick Emerson Small.

He explains it as reflecting the different agendas of the authors. Matthew was a Jew writing for Jews. His Jesus is heir to the royal tradition of King David, and his story invokes parallels with stories of the Old Testament and describes the fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy. Luke, who was Greek, was a gentile writing for gentiles. Luke is more interested in Jesus' ministry to the poor and disenfranchised.

Addressing his Jewish audience, Matthew makes the case for Jesus as fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah, Micah, and Jeremiah. At the very start of his gospel, to establish that Jesus meets the prophecy of Isaiah, Matthew claims an unbroken line of descent through 42 generations from Abraham to Jesse to David to Joseph, an interesting feat in these days before birth certificates and genealogical archives.

Matthew's royal Jesus is important enough, even as an infant, to attract the adoration of wise men from the East and less friendly attention from King Herod. Nowhere, by the way, are the wise men called kings, nor are they ever numbered at three, nor are camels ever mentioned. The Greek word magi means "astrologers," which would explain how they might follow a star that attracted no one else's attention. For the star is never described as being particularly bright, only that it stopped above Jesus' birthplace. Warned in a dream, the magi avoid betraying Jesus' whereabouts to the jealous Herod, who orders the slaughter of all Bethlehem children two years old or younger.

Of course, this story mimics the decree by Pharaoh at the time of Moses' birth that all male Hebrew infants should be killed. Surviving the massacre, Jesus is heralded as the new Moses, leading his people to the promised land, the kingdom of God. Unfortunately, the records that survive from that era show no trace of any such order for mass murder during Herod's reign.

Luke approaches the Nativity from a different angle. He is writing primarily for a non-Jewish audience. He is less interested in continuity with Hebrew tradition and more with salvation of the poor and oppressed. His Jesus is revealed not to magi or kings but to ordinary working people. Today, shepherds have a benign image. But at the time, they were considered low-lives, in part because they were not good Jews – because of their jobs, they could not observe the Sabbath. But Luke associates his baby Jesus with the lowly and the outcast.

Of course, Matthew and Luke agree that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, thus satisfying a prophecy in the Old Testament book of Micah. Matthew offers no explanation why a heavily pregnant woman from Nazareth would give birth in Bethlehem, a hundred miles away by foot and donkey. Luke does, and his words

open the Christmas pageant in thousands of churches: “And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria. And all went to be taxed, everyone into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be taxed with Mary, his espoused wife, being great with child.”

Nice explanation – but history doesn’t back it. According to Bishop Spong, Roman, Syrian and Jewish records of the era show no such census was ordered under Caesar Augustus. Even if there had been, a Roman census was conducted just as ours are today – people were counted and taxed where they lived, not forced to travel hundreds of miles to register. A census also would have involved only the male head of the household; there not only would have been no reason for Mary to accompany him, but a woman would not have been allowed in that era to participate in such a process.

There is no evidence that Jesus himself ever claimed to be born in Bethlehem, nor did his followers -- until decades after his death. Bishop Spong and other Jesus scholars have concluded that the birth in Bethlehem was pure fabrication, to make Jesus’ birth fulfill the Old Testament prophecies.

And, by the way, Matthew puts the birth of Christ during the reign of Herod. Luke says Christ was born while Cyrenius was governor of Syria. But according to the historical record, Herod died about 10 years before Cyrenius became governor.

I apologize for bogging down in this historical detail. The bottom line is that the Nativity has fatal flaws from the standpoint of literal truth.

That creates a problem for some Christians today who believe in the literal truth of the Bible. But it probably did not pose any problem for the Jews and early Christians of the time.

Indeed, Bishop Spong takes the position that Matthew and Luke never intended their stories to be taken as literal accounts – that that is something Western believers have since imposed on the Bible. He describes them as part of an ancient Jewish storytelling tradition. They were designed to introduce Jesus as a unique, transcendent person who would change the world, not to recount the factual details of his birth. And, says Bishop Spong, those who heard the stories of Matthew and Luke in First and Second centuries would have understood them in that way.

Reverend Small, in Massachusetts, fits them in the tradition of didactic, or instructional biography, typical of ancient texts, that sought not historical accuracy but moral authority.

And in some ways, the ‘literalization’ of the Nativity story also does harm to both the power and the significance of the narrative. When we search for literalism, we lose the poetry. And the Nativity, without the burden of literal truth, is beautiful poetry.

Consider the story again, in its basics: A husband and wife, she pregnant and near birth, having only each other, make their way alone and friendless in a foreign land. They are turned away by an innkeeper and make their bed in a

stable. Shepherds mired in poverty and hopelessness are visited by angels from God and told their salvation has arrived. Astrologers from far away are led by faith and conviction on a long and arduous pilgrimage. An evil king is moved to mass murder by jealousy and fear, in hopes of stopping a possible rival. And finally, somehow serene amidst it all, the Christ child, helpless and vulnerable as a newborn, radiates a moral and spiritual force that will change the world. It is a beautiful story.

I can't say the question of literal truth was a big issue for me in Oklahoma, back when I wore my dad's bathrobe and carried my papier-mache shepherd's crook at the pageant. But I do remember walking out of our church into the dark on Christmas Eve. I remember the cold still air taking my breath away, and the way the stars overhead shone especially bright and hard and clear. The night was perfectly still, and it was full of peace and awe and magic. For me, the Christmas story was just as true as it needed to be.

Merry Christmas.

Today's sermon is drawn from and incorporates parts of a four-part essay on the Nativity by The Rt. Rev. John Shelby Spong, retired bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Newark, available on <http://www.beliefnet.com/>; from essays by Marcus Borg, professor of religion and culture at Oregon State University, and John Dominic Crossan, professor emeritus of religious studies at DePaul University, Chicago; from an essay by Rabbi Lawrence Kelemen, an author and professor at Neve Yerushalayim, a prominent women's seminary in Israel; and from a sermon, *The First Noel*, by the Rev. Frederick Emerson Small of the First Church Unitarian in Littleton, Mass.