

# Christmas Pageant Pandemonium: Untangling—and Untaming Christmas

David R. Weiss – December 1, 2020 / revised December 5, 2021

*NOTE: I originally presented a summary of this essay via Zoom for Journey of Faith on December 16, 2020. This year, on December 8, I'll reprise that presentation. I've only very slightly tweaked the essay – caught a couple typos, smoothed out a few sentences, and reworked a few time-dated references. In my Journey of Faith presentation*

Some of my best childhood church memories are of Christmas Eve Sunday School pageants. “Best” because in the pageant as on few other occasions we kids *became* church. Sure, our parents and grandparents and pretty much everyone else in church knew the story, but we brought it to life for them each year with our earnest reenactment. We made it real all over again—only cuter. The Christmas pageant is a *participatory catechism* through which kids act out the cuteness that marks the Gospel.

Except.

Here is the sad truth. In a world that needs the transformative power of Jesus’ teachings more than ever, the standard Christmas pageant doesn’t deliver. Whether retelling the Bible story or telling a more contemporary tale, pageants are often the first and most effective step *by which we inoculate our children against ever accessing the power inside Christmas*. And, tragically, we do so with love.

Someday I’d like to write a Christmas Pageant that does the opposite: introducing children to the real power of Jesus that is foreshadowed in the tales of his birth. And then harnessing the cuteness of these kids to introduce their parents and grandparents and pretty much everyone else in church to the Jesus they’ve likely never met, but whose wisdom and faith they—and the rest of the world—need more than ever today.

Let me explain what I mean.

The two birth tales we have for Jesus—found in Matthew and Luke—are just that: *two* and *tales*. “Two,” in that they’re quite distinct, having far less in common than most Christmas pageants (or Christmas carols) suggest. And “tales,” in that they’re *not* history. Each one is a unique *imaginative* account that serves as something like a musical overture, introducing themes to be developed in the chapters that follow in each specific gospel.

These tales didn’t appear until about fifty years after Jesus died ... and about eighty years after his birth. Much as we might wish otherwise, they’re *not* newspaper accounts of actual events. But that doesn’t at all render them worthless. In fact, I’ll argue that recognizing them as primarily symbolic tales helps us access their worth. *And their worth is a lot*.

We know Jesus was born sometime around 4 BCE and died around 30 CE. Neither date is certain, in large part because both at the start and end of his life Jesus was simply too inconsequential for his birth or death to be noted in any detail by those who recorded the history of the day. And even though the resurrection (whatever reality that word names) was clearly a transformative event among Jesus’ followers, it also didn’t make it into any history recorded outside the Bible.

The first written mention of Jesus within the church is found in Paul’s letters to early Christian communities. Dating from roughly 48-62 CE, these letters never mention anything about Jesus’ birth (and very little about his ministry either for that matter). A bit later—sometime between 65-70 CE—Mark brings the first collected set of traditions about Jesus together in the written form we know as gospel. Many of these snippets of teachings, miracles, and crucifixion have already been circulating for decades by now, but Mark puts his own theological stamp on them as he arranges them. (*None of the gospels identify their author by name—the names are provided by tradition decades later. I’ll use these names as a shorthand convenience.*) As the first to be written, Mark’s Gospel is noteworthy in a

couple of ways. It barely has a resurrection: it records a tale of an empty grave, but no description of a risen Jesus. And it includes nothing at all about Jesus' birth.

Given the importance Mark places on Jesus—his opening verse (Mk 1:1) reads, “The beginning of the Gospel (“good news”/“glad tidings”) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”—it seems likely that had he known of resurrection appearances or birth stories featuring angels or stars, he would've included them to support his claim. That he doesn't, is strong evidence that he wasn't aware of them and suggests that neither Easter appearances nor Christmas tales developed until *after* 70 CE.

The fact that stories about both the very start and the very end of Jesus' life “developed” decades after he lived is helpful to bear in mind. *Both Christmas and Easter as we know them today began with the early church's efforts to make sense of Jesus' life and death.*

Between his relatively brief public ministry (just a couple years at most), the manner of his death (crucified by Rome as a threat to public order) and the miraculous persistence of his followers after his death (the very antithesis of crucifixion's intent), the church found itself compelled to be audaciously creative in fashioning stories that aimed to mediate good news to the people who encountered them. Indeed, that's the defining purpose of “gospel” as a genre. The word itself literally means “good news” or “glad tidings” in Greek. But as a *literary genre* it doesn't mean this in any abstract sense. It means good news that YOU experience as you encounter it. It DOES the thing it communicates—to you.

By the time Matthew and Luke write their gospels, ten to fifteen years after Mark, it's possible that some birth traditions have begun to circulate in certain regions; it's also possible these two writers chose to fashion their own. Regardless of how much is original with them (regardless of how much of each tale *they made up themselves*), they clearly spun the final versions so that they aligned with their respective gospels.

That's a long introduction, but you need at least that much to appreciate my central claim: the real power—the real truth ... the *JOY TO THE WORLD*—in these two Christmas tales is *not* about miraculous things that occurred in conjunction with Jesus' birth.

If there'd really been a star and Magi and a massacre of infants or angels and shepherds ... *why does no one remember any of this when Jesus begins his public ministry?* The locals know he's Mary's son and that his father was a carpenter—a landless and therefore lower class worker—but not a single person says, “Oh, he's the guy the Magi visited ... the one who sparked that massacre ... the kid the angels sang about.” Such events would *not* be quickly forgotten, but in all four gospel accounts of Jesus' adult life, it's like these things never happened when he was a kid ... *almost certainly because they never did.*

But once we stop trying to make them into historical events, we can instead discover the real joy in these tales—*AND IT IS INDEED JOY ABOUT WHICH HEAVEN AND NATURE OUGHT TO SING*—because they prefigure Jesus' ministry. *And because they beckon us to extend the echo of Jesus in our own lives.*

So I invite you to experience the wonder of Christmas not via “historical” accounts that strain credulity but via *two audaciously imaginative tales that prime you to hear the whole gospel—and that hope to reverberate so thoroughly in your own heart as to render you a whole new (reborn) person committed to making a new world.*

Both Christmas stories are shaped as much by the era in which they were written as the era eighty years earlier in which they're set—and also by everything that occurs in between. Matthew and Luke write with the benefit of hindsight. We need to read their stories that way, too. Let's look at Matthew first.

Matthew writes for a community of Jewish believers who've chosen to follow Jesus' teachings (unlike the majority of Jews who seem to ignore or dismiss him). Knowing this, and thinking about Matthew's birth tale as an "overture" to the rest of his gospel, three themes appear that are developed throughout his gospel.

(1) Jesus is the "fulfillment" of Jewish Scripture; not necessarily as predictions coming true, but as culminations that can be recognized as they happen. This is part of Matthew's overall strategy to aid his audience in justifying their fidelity to Jesus over against the disapproval of their Jewish peers (no doubt including family and friends). Matthew includes well over one hundred allusions to the Hebrew Bible and often uses a formulaic expression about fulfillment of Scripture.

(2) Jesus is portrayed as a successor to Moses, almost like a new Moses—a crucial link for these first Jewish Christian who did NOT see themselves as part of a new religion, but as part of a Jewish renewal movement. Mark and Luke spread Jesus' teachings out across a multitude of short exchanges, but Matthew collects them into long discourses—*five of them*, mirroring Moses' five books of Torah. In another echo of Moses, Matthew places Jesus' most famous "discourse" as the Sermon *on the Mount* (Mt 5-7; Luke sets it on a plain, Lk 6:17-49).

(3) Jesus fulfills/completes both the Abrahamic covenant (blessing to all nations) and the Mosaic covenant (to embody a godly way of life) in ways that reach out to the Gentiles. This is seen clearly in the "Great Commission" at the very conclusion of his gospel where the disciples are instructed to go to all nations (Mt 28:19).

Matthew draws on each of these themes in crafting his story of Jesus' birth—some eighty years after Jesus was born in relative obscurity. His purpose was NOT to fashion a false narrative of Jesus' birth but rather a fitting introduction to his gospel.

Besides these Matthean themes, there are two last bits of context we need. First is the religious-political-economic context, which in the ancient world were always overlapping realities. (These realms still overlap today, but by now our "formal" religion has been so domesticated that it rarely speaks to political-economic concerns, while our "informal" religion IS the faith that places consumer capitalism and national pride at the center of our meaning-making, but that's a whole other discussion ...) In Matthew's case, his birth story "happens" around 4 BCE—shortly before Herod the Great dies. Just as anyone hoping to understand our era must know something about the 2020 pandemic or the Trump presidency, WE need to know something about the decades before and after Herod's death to understand the difference it makes that Jesus was born at the end of Herod's reign.

Herod (who was himself a Jew since birth because his father converted before he was born), ruled Judea, as Caesar's appointed king, with ruthless paranoia and fearsome exploitation. He taxed his fellow Jews to the breaking point in order to expand the Temple and build other ostentatious monuments while people went hungry. And he was so paranoid about people plotting against him that he had scores of people executed to protect his throne—including his wife, mother-in-law, and three of his own sons. He was despised and feared—equally. After he died a whole series of movements, some armed and some nonviolent, sought unsuccessfully to reclaim independence from Roman rule. Matthew and his readers have *lived* that history, and his birth tale expects us to know this.

The other bit of "cultural trivia" we need to be aware of concerns Moses and the popular imagination of the era in which Matthew wrote. Most of us know in broad strokes the tale of Moses' birth: Pharaoh had grown alarmed at the rising number of Hebrew slaves, issued an order for all baby boys to be killed at birth, and Moses was rescued from the reeds by a princess who raised him safely right there in Egypt until he was called to lead God's people to in the Exodus.

We know that movies like *The Ten Commandments* and Disney's *Prince of Egypt* take artistic license in filling out the story for popular consumption. *So did Jewish lore in Matthew's day*. In the decade just before he wrote his gospel there was popular expansion of the Moses' story (dating from 70-80 CE) that embellished the biblical account. In this popularized tale, Egypt's "sacred scribes" (another word for sacred scribe *is Magi!*) warn Pharaoh that a boy child will soon be born who will be Pharaoh's downfall. In this version, it's the prediction of these Magi that sparks Pharaoh's edict to kill the boy children. *Hmm ...*

NOW, keeping all of this in mind—and I realize it's a lot, but we're talking about Holy Scripture: who ever said this was supposed to be uncomplicated?—we're finally set to hear Matthew's tale on something close to Matthew's terms.

Matthew opens with a genealogy (Matt. 1:1-17) that traces Jesus back to Abraham—thus, he is a "true" Jew; and through David—thus, also legitimate contender to be a messianic king. Because he's writing for a people who've seen their national fortunes wane far more than wax, he arranges Jewish history in three neat sets of fourteen generations (albeit collapsing generations here and there—sometimes telling the truth is more important than hewing to mere fact). From Abraham to David (Israel's pinnacle); then from David to Exile (Israel's collapse); and then from Exile to Jesus (a long stretch of stumbling toward a renewal never fully realized), but now in this fourteenth generation something great must surely transpire. A renewal like under David: throwing off oppression and reclaiming inward identity. Matthew's genealogy itself sows hope.

His genealogy also comes with an unexpected bit of *gynecology* thrown in. Alongside forty-two generations of men begetting men, four women's names appear. Tamar, twice widowed, ultimately tricked her father-in-law into sleeping with her so that she could bear a child. Rahab, a prostitute-innkeeper, sheltered Hebrew spies at the edge of Canaan. Ruth, a Moabite widow seduced Boaz to marry her. And Bathsheba, raped by King David. Each woman is Gentile—a sort of holy footnote in Matthew's genealogy that foreshadows how the Great Commission (Mt 28:16-20) brings full circle the inclusion of Gentiles in God's plan, begun long ago through these women.

Besides that, each woman bears testament to God's ability, by now long acclaimed by the Jews themselves (after all, they've claimed these women's stories as part of their own prized heritage), to take scandal and use it for holy good. Thus, perhaps these women also appear in order to set Mary's scandalous pre-marital pregnancy (if that was historically the case) in perspective. Or perhaps they stand as counterpoint to the notion of a virgin birth created by Matthew (or someone else) to heighten Jesus' status. We cannot say for sure—but we can be sure they are not there merely by accident.

In Matthew's story of Jesus' birth (Matt. 1:18-25) several things are noteworthy, but NOT the observation that in this tale Mary says nothing and does little. Here, Joseph is the one visited by an angel (in a dream) three times. Mary remains in the background, carrying Jesus, first in her womb then on her shoulder. In a patriarchal culture that's exactly the way you'd expect things to be. (That makes it all the more striking when, in Luke's story, Mary gains both her own agency and her own angelic visitor, leaving Joseph in the background.)

Three things in Matthew's story merit special mention.

First, the link to Moses. Matthews tells us that Joseph initially plans to (a) *divorce* Mary quietly (to break their betrothal) until being (b) *reassured through a dream* that he should (c) *not fear to take her for his wife* because (d) *the child to be born will save the people*. We know that story. But what we don't realize is that *virtually this same scene* plays out in the popularized tale of Moses' birth that appeared just before Matthew's gospel. In that tale all the Jewish men decide to (a) *divorce* their wives (to no longer have sex with them, lest they father children that would be killed by Pharaoh), until one of the men,

Amram, is (b) *reassured through a dream* relayed to him by his daughter Miriam that he should (c) *not fear to take his wife* (have sex with her) because (d) *the child to be born will save the people*.

It turns out we don't know really this scene at all. Each of the italicized phrases (a) through (d) is found in the popularized Moses tale of 70-80 CE and then repeated in Matthew's birth story of Jesus. In these verses Matthew is already setting up the next scene (with the Magi), putting in place the pieces necessary for Matthew's Jewish Christian audience to hear a tale of liberation as significant as the Exodus itself. And we never knew!

Second, more Exodus echoes. The child to be born is to be named "Jesus," which in Hebrew is "Joshua"—the name of the person who took up and carried on the work of liberation begun by Moses. And we are told Jesus will be known as "Emmanuel"—meaning "God with us." We've heard—and sung—Emmanuel for so long that it strikes us as a "but-of-course" moment. But during the Exodus God's presence among the Hebrews leading them out of bondage, through the wilderness, and toward freedom was nothing less than a divine declaration that God is "all in" against oppression. For Matthew's readers—first century Jews living (groaning!) under oppression by Caesar and Herod, the name Emmanuel would be no word of warm comfort sung soothingly in a carol, but more a resounding call to be ready for a new Exodus out of bondage and into beloved community.

Third, Matthew borrows a prophetic text originally uttered by Isaiah (Is. 7:14) seven centuries earlier as a warning and flips it into a promise of hope. But in doing so he takes a Hebrew word that meant "young woman" for Isaiah and translates it with a Greek word that can mean *either* "young woman" or "virgin." And then clearly uses it to mean "virgin," thereby doing his part to shape the tradition of the virgin birth. We tend to hear it as "proof" of Jesus' one-of-a-kind divine origin, *but the Jews of Jesus' day were familiar with claims of virginal birth: such were regularly ascribed—usually retroactively after the deaths—to Roman emperors as signs that the gods had approved of their lives.*

There were no tales of virgin birth about Jesus that circulated prior to Matthew's gospel around 80 CE. But by the time Matthew created or amplified this tradition—Jesus had been ruled a traitor to the Emperor and crucified under Rome's authority. *So, what better way to retroactively assert that Jesus' liberating life had, in point of divine fact, been blessed by God, than to take this Roman method of ultimate endorsement and rest it over Jesus' birth?* The virgin birth is hardly interested in asserting a biological miracle; it asserts something *much* greater—a political-religious miracle: that one nailed to a tree in disgrace was, in truth, blessed by God to liberate God's people.

By the time we turn to the familiar tale of the Magi (2:1-18)—sacred scribes who advised political rulers, astrologers, wise men (but not kings!)—from the East, we might've started to suspect there's more to this scene than we previously thought. And we'd be right.

Besides the now obvious echoes of the Moses birth tale, the scene has almost a farcical quality to it. These Magi (regarded as the savviest advisers around) are so naïve as to ask Herod if he'd heard of a child born to assume Herod's throne. *Really?* Herod was so renowned for his brutal paranoia that Caesar once said of him "Better to be Herod's pig (*hus*) than his son (*huios*)"—the wordplay in Greek implying that the Jewish prohibition against eating pork at least gave Herod's pigs a measure of protection that even his own children lacked. Next, when asked, the Jewish religious advisors (Herod's own palace version of "magi") know immediately where this messianic baby is to be born: Bethlehem. Yet they show no interest in going to find the newborn messiah themselves. Only the pagan Magi do that. *Really?!* Herod then convinces the Magi to find the child and send word back to him so can go and honor it as well. *Really?!* And the Magi seem taken in by Herod's fawning sincerity; it takes an angelic dream to prevent them from notifying Herod. *Really?!* Finally, after all these echoes of Moses' birth, where must Joseph take Jesus to keep him safe? Egypt! *Really?!*

The story drips with irony, as though for Matthew's first readers *it's not even trying to be taken literally* because it carries truth so much deeper than fact. (It's reminiscent of the Book of Jonah, a story that also "broadcasts" fictional irony to amplify its daring truth.)

Christians often interpret the three gifts brought by the Magi as signifying that Jesus is king (gold); priest (frankincense); and prophet-martyr (myrrh). But, given how much Matthew's narrative is built on images from the Exodus, it's *at least as likely* that the gifts are chosen to recall key things associated with the Tabernacle that "held" the presence of God as the people of Israel journeyed through the wilderness (Ex 30:1-10; 22-25; 34-38). In that case, serving like a bookend to the four Gentile women named in his genealogy, these Gentile Magi provide the three gifts that will allow this babe—more specifically the man he grew into—to *be* a Tabernacle of God's presence that will once again lead the children of Abraham out of bondage.

Each year the retelling of the Passover story heightened Jewish hunger for liberation and freedom so much so that Rome always sent its "national guard" troops out in force around Jerusalem during the Passover festival. In the same way, Matthew's birth tale, offered to his Jewish Christian audience, is no tame story of a baby's birth. *It is the opening salvo in a gospel that says God's promise of liberation remains true even under Herod's paranoia, even under Rome's watchfulness, even AFTER the crucifixion ... even still today.*

Now, Luke.

Here are three themes. (1) Luke uses a larger canvas than Matthew. His story of Jesus, still very much grounded in Jewish origins, is pitched to a Gentile Christian audience. While Matthew ends his gospel with the Great Commission, Luke adds an entire sequel—the Book of Acts—in which he *chronicles* the great commission being carried out. (2) Luke also has a noteworthy emphasis on women *as persons with agency* throughout his gospel. (3) He also lifts up prayer as the lifeblood of faith, both for Jesus and for the early church. Each theme makes its initial appearance in his birth story.

Luke's genealogy (Lk 3:23-38) doesn't match the biblical chronology exactly. (Neither does Matthew's.) But, while he follows Matthew in including both David and Abraham, because he's additionally committed to pitch the story of Jesus as a story *for everyone*, he traces Jesus' ancestry *all the way back to Adam*. Luke's Jesus is Jewish, *but most of all human*. For the same reason, while Matthew set his Jesus over against Herod, the king of the Jews, Luke sets his Jesus over against Caesar himself, the emperor of the entire Roman Empire. We'll come back to that theme.

While Matthew sets Jesus alongside Moses, Luke uses the birth of John the Baptist (Lk 1:5-25; 57-80) to sum up all the Hebrew prophets and then make clear that with Jesus something far greater than John has come to pass. Both of these stories—John's birth and Jesus' birth—involve angelic announcements of special births; telling others about the birth; naming the child; a prophecy about the child; and a reference to the child growing up. It's a pattern done with intent to show that with John one chapter of God's salvation history is brought to completion and with Jesus a new chapter is beginning.

But there are a couple pieces of Luke's tale of Jesus' birth that require special attention: the annunciation by Gabriel; Mary's visit to Elizabeth; and the birth itself, including the announcement to the shepherds. Each vignette is brimful of imagery that symbolically challenges the world into which Jesus was born—foreshadowing that Jesus himself would challenge that world as an adult ... and suggesting that any pageant hoping to do justice to his birth would make clear that he challenges our world today just as much.

With Gabriel's angelic announcement to Mary (Lk 1:26-38) we encounter Luke's choice to make women active agents in the salvation-liberation of God's people. We hear Gabriel's announcement: "Son of the Most High ... throne of David ... a kingdom with no end," and we nod in polite

recognition. But for Luke's audience *Caesar* was "Son of the Most High" and *his rule* seemed to have no end. Hold that thought, we'll come back to it.

Moreover, when Mary responds, "I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word," Luke isn't recording those words as if he were an on-the-scene reporter. *He's crafting words he hopes his readers will echo in response to his tale.*

Soon after, Mary, newly pregnant, goes to visit her older cousin Elizabeth, six months pregnant with John the Baptist (Lk 1:39-56). Elizabeth greets Mary with the exclamation, "Blessed are you among women! And blessed is the fruit of your womb." The words are *explosive* for anyone with a knowledge of Jewish stories, and for those who don't, they lie in waiting to be revealed. Most of us are waiting still.

The phrase "Blessed are you among women"—these words *exactly*—appear just twice in Hebrew Scriptures (Judges 5:24/Judith 13:18). Both times they're offered in acclamation to a woman whose heroic fidelity to God has been decisive to saving God's people. In the Book of Judges, Jael drives a tent peg through the head of an enemy general. Judith decapitates a general and carries his head back to her village in a basket. *In both cases women take up a weapon and wield it successfully on behalf of liberation and freedom.* Mary's "weapon," as the second part of Elizabeth's greeting clarifies, is the fruit of her womb. As noted above, the decades before Jesus' ministry and after his death were crowded with movements seeking to renew and liberate the Jewish people. Some by violence, others by nonviolence. Luke uses Elizabeth's greeting to set his story of Jesus smack in the middle of these efforts.

Mary responds to Elizabeth's greeting with the prayer-song we've come to know as the Magnificat. Here she confirms explicitly what Elizabeth has hinted at. Remember, this isn't a transcript of an actual exchange, this is Luke's carefully crafted tale. He places these words (drawn in part from Hannah's prayer of thanksgiving in I Sam 2:1-10) on Mary's lips. *And he does so, not for Mary's benefit, but for that of his audience—and us.*

"My soul magnifies the Lord," sings Mary. Her praise is grounded in jubilation and joy ... on account of being loved by God and beholding God's activity to bring about justice. The first ground for this joy is that God reaches out to uplift Mary, a lowly peasant—the word translated as "handmaiden" (Lk 1:48) can also mean *slave*. And if God is lifting up slaves now, *then the world is about to shift on its axis.* The rest of Mary's song sings that shift, rippling from her person across the world. The very structures of the world that secure the rich and mighty on top and maintain the poor and the hungry on the bottom are tilted sideways—and then altogether flipped. Mary's song has been set to music more than any other Scriptural passage, but only because we reduce it to pious wistful imagery. For Mary, and for the first Christians, her song anticipated a truly transformed world. It was—IT IS—a song seeking to seed a revolution.

Finally, Luke introduces the birth itself (Lk 2:1-20)—against the backdrop of Roman tribute. There is no historical record of this particular census and while some scholars try to find it "between the lines" of history, many regard it as merely a literary device used by Luke to get Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem for Jesus' birth (as likely to sync with a couple prophetic texts regardless of whether Jesus was actually born there). But the census carries much more literary weight than that. Tribute (plus Rome's endless military conquests) fueled the Roman Empire materially, and religious language honoring the Emperor held the empire together culturally-religiously. And Luke wants his audience to have both in mind.

The manger scene—the height of most Christmas pageants—has its own importance, but probably not the importance we typically attach to it. We hear "no room in the inn," and we picture Joseph trudging from one little inn to the next with no luck (Lk 2:7). Until finally some kind-hearted innkeeper offers up a stable, with a manger.

But the word translated as “inn” here is NOT the Greek word reserved for a place that rented out rooms. In fact, it’s the same word translated as the “upper room” in which Jesus kept the Passover with his disciples. Elsewhere it’s rendered as “guest room.” And most Palestinian homes of Jesus’ day (and many peasant homes in present day Palestine) feature a manger—often a hole dug into the dirt floor and filled with straw—inside the house and right off the main living area. (The family’s most important animals would be brought inside at night, both to safeguard the animals and to add warmth to the family’s living area.)

The point of Luke’s description is most likely to report that Mary and Joseph lodged *with family* in Bethlehem (it was, after all, Joseph’s ancestral home), joined by other relatives who’d also traveled to Bethlehem to be taxed—to be economically exploited and politically humiliated—by Caesar. And because the “upper room/guest room” was already occupied by some of those other relatives, they stayed down on the main floor alongside the family—Mary no doubt attended to throughout her birth by female relatives—and then she laid her baby in a manger, a straw-filled hole right there in the main room, with animals on one side—and a whole bunch of relatives on the other.

*Thus, in Luke’s telling, Jesus was born against the backdrop of oppression (the census) but squarely in the midst of his people: sheltered by family, fellow peasants. He was “just one of us” from the very start.*

Presuming that “us” means primarily “the wretched of the Earth,” the lowly ones that Mary sang about. On the other hand, if “peasant” doesn’t describe *us*, well, no wonder we find it easier to make the manger scene the object of personal piety rather than the birthplace of revolutionary solidarity.

The shepherds, though, they were—as much as anyone in first century Palestine—the wretched of the Earth. To be a shepherd almost certainly meant that at some point in the past you or your family had “lost the farm” ... and had almost certainly done so because of Herod’s or Caesar’s taxes. To be a shepherd meant you weren’t even a hired hand tilling someone else’s land; it meant you followed flocks while they grazed on land not even worth tilling. As marginal as the terrain under your feet, exactly that marginal was your standing in society. To be a shepherd was to *be* the edge of society.

And yet, as Luke continues, BAM! the angel appears right there *at the edge* to announce Jesus’ birth. Just as Mary sang, the world *is* tilting sideways and then some. The angel tells the shepherds, “I bring you good news / glad tidings (in Greek: “gospel”) of great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” The angel choir adds, “who will bring peace on earth.” (Lk 2: 10-11; 14)

Luke isn’t plagiarizing, he’s intentionally echoing the words used to announce the birth of a new emperor. That announcement would be carried by messengers (in Greek: “angels”) across the empire, declaring in each town, “I bring you good news / glad tidings (“gospel”) of great joy to all the people; for to you is born this day a Savior, who will bring peace.”

Of course, for the wealthy, “peace” looks like Law and Order. For shepherds, peace looks a little more like Mary’s song. *A lot more*, actually. And as Luke’s gospel overture reaches its climax we have a “multitude of the heavenly host” filling the sky and singing praise to God. But the word for host ... means *army*. Those aren’t angels with harps or trumpets; *those are battle-hardened winged-warriors singing ... with their swords drawn.*

If we want a Christmas pageant that carries the truth of this scene, then let’s maybe give those haloed little angels battle axes to carry as they sing “Glory to God.” No, *this isn’t ultimately a tale of violent revolution*. And later on Luke is clear to present Jesus as choosing nonviolent resistance. But in this opening scene, he’s being overtly clear in proclaiming that this child will challenge the very foundation of Caesar’s realm. And, nonviolent though the challenge will be, *the armies of Heaven will have his back—and ours*. And a handful of cute but well-armed cherubs might help us remember that.

Luke concludes his tale with the shepherds—those most marginal of men—becoming the first evangelists, bearing to everyone they meet the glad tidings of a tiny peasant-born challenge to Caesar himself. Mary, meanwhile, ponders everything—holds it prayerfully—in her heart. I like to imagine Luke thinking about the reaction to *his* Christmas pageant. Some folks will no doubt be eager to animatedly share what they’ve heard. Others will want to let it percolate a bit.

Either response is fine. So long as Elizabeth’s acclamation has been shouted, Mary’s Magnificat has been sung, and the glad tidings of a God-child born to remake the world have been delivered *to the edge*—well, that’s a start. Time to sing Joy to the World. *And mean it.*

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**NOTE:** *After the list of sources, see my brief follow-up reflections, “Beyond Christmas Pageant Pandemonium: What Now? A Little Q & A.*

**SOURCES** – I’ve chosen not to footnote this essay to keep it easier to read. However, for most of you (as for me initially!) *this is new stuff*. Here’s a brief annotated bibliography that tells you where my information came from.

**Bailey**, Kenneth, “The Manger and the Inn: The Cultural Background of Luke 2:7,” *Theological Review of the Near East School of Theology*, 2:2 (11/1979), 33-44, accessed November 24, 2020, Associates for Biblical Research, <https://biblearchaeology.org/new-testament-era-list/2803-the-manger-and-the-inn>.

ABR describes itself as “A Christian Apologetics Ministry Dedicated to Demonstrating the Historical Reliability of the Bible through Archaeological and Biblical Research.” My focus is a little different. Nonetheless, this article, even while presuming the historicity of Luke’s account, was very helpful in my work to understand the manger and the inn.

**Borg**, Marcus: *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1999, “The Meaning of the Birth Stories,” 179-186.

The subtitle says “two visions” because this book is co-authored by Borg and N.T. Wright, an Anglican scholar with a much more conservative perspective than Borg. (I don’t cite Wright’s chapter on the birth stories because, although I read it, I didn’t find it helpful. At all. Borg’s chapter was insightful. The image of these stories as “overtures” comes from Borg. As is his custom, he seeks to let his scholarship inform our personal faith.

**Borg**, Marcus: *Meeting Jesus Again: The Historical Jesus & the Heart of Contemporary Faith*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1994, 23-24.

This book is focused on “the Historical Jesus”—the human being, as best we can find him across the reach of history. Hence, Borg treats only very briefly the birth stories, since (in his view—and mine) they are *not* part of Jesus’ history, but part of the early church’s story about him. Borg asserts that the meaning of the birth stories is revealed when we free them from the constraints of history.

**Brown**, Robert McAfee: *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1984, “Mary’s Song: Whom Do We Hear,” 74-88.

Brown is my main guide into Mary’s Magnificat; several other authors treat this passage as well.

**Byers**, Gary A., “Away in a Manger, but Not in a Barn,” *Bible and Spade* 29:1 (2016), 5-9, accessed November 24, 2020, Associates for Biblical Research, <https://biblearchaeology.org/new-testament-era-list/4111-Away-In-a-Manger-But-Not-In-a-Barn>; <https://biblearchaeology.org/images/articles/Away-in-A-Manger.pdf>.

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**Crossan**, John Dominic: *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1994, “A Tale of Two Gods,” 1-28.

Although Crossan focuses primarily on the Historical Jesus, his initial chapter looks closely at the birth stories—not because he regards them as historical, but because he sees them as vibrant fictions that reflect the impact of Jesus’ adult ministry. He finds in both Matthew and Luke evidence for an adult Jesus that deeply challenged the power structures and dominant values of the day. He was helpful to me especially in the parallels between John’s birth and Jesus’ birth in Luke and in detailing the “crosstalk” between the first century Jewish elaboration of Moses’ birth and Matthew’s account, from Joseph through the Magi.

**Ehrman**, Bart D.: *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 82-87; 103-105.

Ehrman wasn’t a primary source for my thinking. But he contributed a handful of ideas such as the “order” Matthew offers by way of three neat sets of fourteen generations and one point of irony in the Magi account (which I develop *much further*, into the fivefold farcical set of “Really?!” and the comparison to Jonah, so I’ll take credit for all of that!).

**Goldstein**, Daniel, “Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh – Ki Tisa,” *Jewels of Judaism*, accessed November 29, 2020, <https://www.jewelsofjudaism.com/gold-frankincense-myrrh-ki-tisa>.

While writing the essay itself, largely due to my recognition of *how much* Matthew is using Moses and the Exodus tale as an inspiration for his birth story, I began to suspect that the gifts of the Magi were *also* drawn from this source. By googling “gold, frankincense, myrrh, exodus,” I found this article, which at least makes my suspicion quite plausible. But the way I frame the link between the gifts, the Tabernacle, and Jesus-as-Tabernacle in this essay is my own.

**Horsley**, Richard: “The Gospel of the Savior’s Birth” and “Messiah, Magi, and Model Imperial King,” in *Christmas Unwrapped: Consumerism, Christ, and Culture*, ed. by Richard Horsley and James Tracy, Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001) 113-138; 139-161.

Horsley’s work was *the* primary source for me. His pieces are meticulously researched and he brings both a social/power analysis and a strong liberationist perspective to the text that resonates with my own inclinations. There is more Horsley reflected in this essay than anyone else.

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## Beyond Christmas Pageant Pandemonium: What Now? A Little Q & A

David R. Weiss – December 20, 2020

*When I first gave the original presentation to my church the Q & A afterwards was good, though we were a bit pressed for time and Zoom can be a bit clunky for back-and-forth dialogue, so I'm sure there were some sincere questions left unasked. So I decided to address some of the likely unasked questions.*

A presentation like the one I just made sits differently with different folks. For itinerant skeptics, it confirms years of suspicions about the Christmas tales: they're almost certainly early examples of "fan fiction," not real history. While for those who regard these tales with deep wonder and devotion—often cultivated lifelong—that same recognition comes as unsettling or worse. For persons just beginning to integrate their critical adult thinking with simpler lifelong faith convictions, it can be an exhilarating yet disorienting rush. And for those who've embraced the justice/compassion-centered message of the adult Jesus, the message in my presentation can ring deeply and ecstatically true.

Of course, these aren't "fixed" categories. I'm sure there are folks who see themselves in one or more of them. Likewise, the unasked questions might come from any of these angles. So here are some brief thoughtful answers to unasked questions.

My goal, whether teaching in a college classroom or a church setting, is always to present knowledge in a way that can *foster* faith. Even when what I say challenges commonly held understandings, I offer it with the conviction that *the healthiest faith we can hold is one grounded in the best understanding available to us*. So, especially if you found your faith rattled by anything I said, I hope you'll venture here to see if I address it further. One "spoiler" up front: *I don't think we should "cancel" Christmas or pack away our manger scenes; in fact, they're more important than ever.*

Here are the five questions I'll respond to here:

1. Are you *really* saying, No Magi bearing gifts, No Christmas Star, No Slaughter of the Innocents as described in Matthew's Gospel?
2. Are you *really* saying, No census, No trip to Bethlehem, No inn or manger, and no shepherds?
3. But—if God IS God, couldn't these stories have really happened the way they're told?
4. But why would the church have not taught us this sooner? Centuries—millennia!—of Christians have grown up taking them literally.
5. So, what are we supposed to do with Christmas now?

Let's get started.

### **Are you *really* saying, No Magi bearing gifts, No Christmas Star, No Slaughter of the Innocents as described in Matthew's Gospel?**

Short answer: Yes.

There *were* Magi in the ancient world. But, as I say, Matthew's Magi tale borders on fantastical-farcical satire-tragedy. Had any Magi truly visited Herod and then Jesus, there were surely be more than one solitary record of it. In communities where oral memory flourished, *this* would have been remembered.

There *were* heavenly wonders in the ancient skies: meteor showers, shooting stars, super novae, and "wandering" stars (planets) that occasionally "met up" in the skies in striking conjunctions. Such wonders—anything other than the pinpoint stars that drifted lazily across the sky in fixed patterns each night—were naturally sources of curiosity and speculation. Throughout history people have sought to connect them to historical events. Almost every emperor's birth tale mentioned some "heavenly portent" that "predicted" his birth. But the movements of the stars or the planets

do not directly cause or predict earthly events. Not for emperors. And not for messiahs. It makes *perfect sense* for Matthew to feature a star in his story, even if there (almost certainly) was *no* super nova or planetary conjunction in the sky at the time of Jesus' birth. Matthew isn't writing history; he's *retroactively projecting the meaning of Jesus' adult life back to his birth*. And he does a masterful job of that.

And Herod *was* absolutely capable of slaughtering innocent children. His reputation for brutality helps make the symbolic connection with Pharaoh work, but it doesn't make it fact. Enough tales of Herod's terror-laden behavior have survived that it's extremely unlikely that such a slaughter as this would've been covered up—certainly not in the memories of the Jewish people. But only Matthew knows this story—because it's his creation.

So ... no Magi, no Star, no Slaughter. *But their historicity was never the point! Not for Matthew.*

### **Are you *really* saying, No census, No trip to Bethlehem, No inn or manger, and no shepherds?**

Short answer: Yes.

There *were* enrollments (censuses) in the Roman Empire; they were used to collect taxes and were often well documented. But there's no record of *this* enrollment. Which suggests that Luke is using it for symbolic effect (its connection to oppressive taxes).

Bethlehem *was* known as the City of David, and there were a few Scripture passages that suggested a future messiah would come from Bethlehem. Because both Matthew and Luke share this notion of a Bethlehem birth it's "possible" that Jesus was indeed born here, but it seems *more likely* that both of them (writing in the years 80-85 CE) *chose* to *set* Jesus' birth in Bethlehem because it linked him to David and the messianic hopes associated with David.

That means the inn (the upper/guest room) and the manger (Luke never mentions a stable) are almost incidental to the story. Far from making Jesus' birth extraordinary, for Luke, they actually serve to say that Jesus was born *in the most ordinary way*: in a crowded home, packed with extended family because of that oppressive taxation strategy. To a first century Jewish (or almost any Middle Eastern) peasant, the story exudes *normal*.

Of course, shepherds *were* commonplace in the world into which Jesus was born. So they're also very much "at home" in a tale like this. But their role in Luke's story (written 80 years after the birth—and with the knowledge that Jesus had grown up to challenge Caesar) was to show that when *this* child was born, it was the *most lowly* who received first notice. That's something much *more* than history. *It's theology*. And it echoes Elizabeth's greeting and Mary's Magnificat in declaring that the God so active in Jesus' adult life is the same God who has always championed the least of these.

### **But—if God IS God, couldn't these stories have really happened the way they're told?**

Well, Yes ... but—

This gets into some really thorny questions about how we understand God, and how God acts in the cosmos, but I'm going to leave those for another day and just address the "Yes ... but—"

First, the "yes." Well, there *are* conservative, and even some mainstream scholars who will reply "yes, absolutely!"

Now the "but." *But I'm writing for, speaking to, and thinking with progressive Christians*. I'm trying to help all of us (myself included!) wrestle faithfully—using both heart and head—with the story of God who is still speaking. So I'm drawing on solid scholarship that I believe can help progressive Christians do this. I don't find those conservative traditional arguments persuasive. *More importantly, I think they end up missing the mark, distracting us from paying attention to what mattered most for Matthew, for Luke, and, indeed, for God.*

To say that God *could've* done these things seems to miss the point. These stories were written to prepare us to learn about Jesus' *adult* life of faithfulness to God and solidarity with God's people, his miraculous compassion, and his determination to sow the seeds of a community that reflected his—God's—vision for our life together. If THAT'S their purpose, then we *may miss the point of Christmas altogether* if we're more interested in believing these tales as historical fact rather than receiving them as rich symbolic introductions to the Gospels themselves.

The irony is that once we recognize that, from the vantage point of history, nobody noticed when Jesus was born (and that's why there are no *historical* accounts of his birth), THEN we can also recognize that Matthew and Luke have filled these birth tales, these Christmas overtures, with themes that help us meet the adult Jesus. *And THAT'S the real miracle God is working at Christmas.*

**But why would the church have not taught us this sooner? Centuries—millennia!—of Christian have grown up taking them literally.**

This is complicated. And I'm determined to be brief, so some of this answer will get filled out in future presentations. One part of it is that the early church, already by the end of the first century, was trying to reign in and “manage” the impact of Jesus' ministry. His announcement of God's kingdom—God's gracious embrace of the all of us—was shaping a new form of community. Yet we see efforts in some of the last Epistles written, to “roll back” Paul's more radical notion of gospel equality and freedom for the early church.

A second part of the answer is that when Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity (312 CE) the church became a political tool used to unite the Roman Empire. Before long, from its now favored place within the corridors of power, the church became a sort of chaplain to the empire's desire to secure order and maintain social relations *blatantly at odds with Jesus' message*. This dynamic continued throughout Europe's era of colonialism and the U.S. expansion westward. The American church played a central role in the cultural genocide of Native Americans and the enslavement of African Americans. Really, ever since Constantine—for the past 1700 years—the church has largely maintained its own access to power and privilege by “burying” Jesus' solidarity with the poor, so that Christian *charity* is prized, but Christian pursuit of *social justice* is suppressed.

*So this is about MUCH more than just Christmas.* Why did (*large portions*) of the church cooperate with slavery right through the civil war? Why did the church effectively silence women for 1900 years? Why did it promote the condemnation and terrorization of LGBTQ persons for 2000 years? Why has the church consistently found it easier to endorse whatever war its home country is fighting than to stand alongside its “Prince of Peace”? Why did white evangelical Christians overwhelmingly support Donald Trump? I could go on, but this is plenty to make my point. First, if we're honest, the church has been sorely mistaken about—no, it has *betrayed* the love of God on a whole bunch of issues over the past 2000 years. Second, in the big scheme of things, missing the mark on Christmas is a pretty small oversight compared to the other examples just mentioned.

BUT—going a step further, *in some very real ways the church's preference to treat Christmas as a tale of holy wonder rather than an audacious overture to God's gracious-risky-daring-unexpected embrace of the least of these, THAT MISSTEP helped—and still helps—prepare Christians to MISS the very power of Jesus' life.* ☹

Alongside many lonely voices in every age (sometimes acknowledged as saints, sometimes condemned as heretics)—it's taken feminist and womanist voices, slave and black voices, queer and immigrant voices, poor and global voices, in recent years for us to begin to hear more clearly the power of Jesus' life. This is why the UCC has chosen to affirm that “God is still speaking.” It's the honest recognition that we *STILL* have much to learn as we seek to be the church. And with the stakes so high in the multiple crises facing us today, being the church as faithfully as we can is more important than ever. How we celebrate Christmas is *one* part of that ... and a pretty big part, if you ask me.

### **So what are we supposed to do with Christmas now?**

Of course, that's not entirely up to me, but I do have some thoughts on this. Foremost, we should NOT put away our manger scenes or hide the shepherds and magi. Matthew and Luke gave us these stories and filled them with faith-nurturing images. *Our task is to make sure we access them.*

We can—and ought—to be more honest about the powerful social justice imagery in these stories. That ought to be reflected in adult forums like this, but also throughout our Advent worship season and right into our Christmas liturgy. We can—and ought—to “*re-true*” these tales to the powerful message of Jesus’ life. That’s absolutely possible, and our discomfort in changing the way it’s always been celebrated is a real—but *insufficient* reason not to. This would take some thoughtful work, but there are persons already doing it, so we’d have company on this journey.

I don’t think we’d need to “forsake” all our favorite Advent hymns and Christmas carols. In fact, by framing them in worship with prayers, readings, and sermons that help “untame” Christmas, these old familiar songs would find a new voice of their own. And we could balance them with other ones already in our hymnal, and some new ones as well, that help us sing the truth of Christmas yet more clearly.

And, I will say that I fully believe we could imagine a children’s Christmas pageant in which we catechize our children in the *deepest truth* of our faith by inviting them to re-enact the story in ways that help surface the meanings that Matthew and Luke put there. It could be done with sensitivity and creativity alongside audacity. Audacity is what Matthew and Luke display in their telling. It’s time we let it speak in our re-telling. Children are more than up to that. (Which might be why Jesus suggested they could show us the way to the kingdom of God.) I’m betting they could *become the church* and offer *us* a Christmas pageant more poignant and powerful than any we have ever experienced in all of our lives.

Now I’m getting ahead of myself. Bottom line: we have an opportunity to meet Christmas ... in the spirit of Jesus. Doing so will almost certainly put us at odds with the Herods and Caesars of the word today. And we may find ourselves uncomfortably close to those at the edge—today’s hungry, lowly, outcast, oppressed, shepherds. But we might also ... in the voices of children and also in the unexpected gracious yearning within our hearts ... discover angels singing about glad tidings that promise to overturn the ways things are. And that song might sound like gospel as never before.

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