

De-constructing the common Christmas stories to refine their meaning for then and now.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS:

I feel that I should take some time to address some common questions about de-constructing Christmas stories. As a comfort to the concerned, I will conclude with a description of what I think is a valid and encouraging basis on which to celebrate Christmas as one of a series of celebrations of the birth, life, and teachings of the founders of great religions.

But if part of this study includes showing that the Christmas stories have no factual basis, what can possibly be their meaning for us today? This is a pressing topic; what with objective science on one side and fake news on the other. So we ask, do a-rational works, not rational like science, or irrational (like Alice in the looking glass), do a-rational works like some poetry, drama and films, do they have the possibility of being meaningful today, even, of being true? Consider Aesop's fables. There are some 50 Aesop's fables, none of them are taken to have any factual basis other than in transmitting a truth about life. Here's one.

It happened that a Dog had got a piece of meat and was carrying it home in his mouth to eat it in peace.

Now, on his way home he had to cross a plank lying across a running brook. As he crossed, he looked down and saw his own shadow reflected in the water beneath. Thinking that it was another dog with another piece of meat, he made up his mind to have that also. So he made a snap at the shadow in the water, but, as he opened his mouth the piece of meat fell out, dropped into the water and was never seen again.

The moral of this story is, beware in case you lose what you have by grasping for a shadow which you think will give you even more.¹ So there can be meaning, even truth, in stories which are not themselves factual, so we can de-construct the Christmas stories without worrying that we are also destroying any good message they contain.

Why de-construct the Christmas stories?

¹ <http://www.taleswithmorals.com/>

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The Christmas stories still have significant cultural currency – pun intended – and some maintain that they should be remembered and celebrated because they are factual accounts of what happened around the birth of Jesus of Nazareth.

I think that it can be shown that the stories are not factual and were developed to bolster the success of one group propagating the theology which underlies them – in this case the Pauline form of Christianity. Thus the meaning of the stories is different for each approach, so it is worth pursuing the de-construction of the Christmas stories to get to the truth which underlies them.

But back to the main point at issue, are the Christmas stories factual?

What does it take to establish a fact? First off, being accepted as a fact requires that credible first-hand witnesses affirm the facts from their personal experience. The more who do so the stronger the case for a factual event - while noting that they may not understand the cause or mechanism at work behind the event. You don't have to understand how an event happened to tell the truth about what you experienced.

Secondly, the case for a reported experience being a fact is weakened if there is a convincing alternative way of looking at how the stories came to be part of the main story. Demonstrating that alternative will be a major focus of this talk.

And thirdly, being a fact also requires that the witnesses are in overall agreement as to what happened. The more contradictions, the missed episodes within the overall story, the less likely is the case for a factual experience.

So, to summarize this small section: to be accepted as a fact requires credible witnesses, no convincing alternative explanation as to how the stories came to be attached to the main story, and consistency in the events described.

The main story is, of course, that a person, Jesus of Nazareth, was born, was an historical human person. It remains the main story around which Christmas is built.

So, now to the first requirement: are there credible witnesses to the Christmas stories?

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Not only are some of the stories incredible themselves (a male coming from a virgin birth) there are no grounds for giving the stories support as first-hand accounts since neither Matthew nor Luke can claim to be eye-witnesses, and, the community of those who were eye-witnesses, particularly Mary the mother of Jesus, denied the core story of a virgin birth.

So we might ask, are there other credible witnesses to the stories which get attached to the birth of Jesus, and my answer has to be, 'No, there are no other credible witnesses'. Why not? And the short answer is that they generally built and justified their understanding and testimony on erroneous grounds – the experience of Paul. To demonstrate our point, we need to re-trace some of the early history of the relevant documents laying the ground-work for an alternative understanding of how the central story, the virgin birth, got incorporated.

There were many attempts to describe and explain the birth and life of Jesus. Only four of those were accepted as 'canonical' by the dominant body of the Christian Church over the second to fifth centuries: Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. Mark was the earliest to be written, but using even earlier sources, but the earliest and most included N.T. writer was St. Paul. Now Paul says nothing about the birth of Jesus, and only over time, about ten years, does he develop the high view of Jesus that he was 'God with us'. His first letter, to the Thessalonians, written about 52 C.E. was written while he was on his second missionary journey.

In 1 Thessalonians Paul refers to the risen Jesus as 'son of God', but be careful how you understand that phrase, 'son of God', it occurs many times in the Bible and does not imply some inherited identity, father to child, rather it implies being of the same attitude and will, usually being obedient to some expression of the will of God. In Luke's ancestral roll for Jesus, 'son of' refers to conception, as in Seth from Adam, 'son of' also covers God creating Adam, and 'son of' describes adoption re. Jesus and Joseph. 'Son of' is not a phrase on which much can be based with regard to the way the relationship was established.

Again, in 1 Thessalonians, Paul calls Jesus 'messiah' as understood by the Church in Judea, and that is a concept from the Hebrew Scriptures, again, reflecting empowered obedience, but not inherited identity.²

² Jesus as Messiah appears at least 6 times in this short letter.

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Paul also calls Jesus 'Lord' and that is to be understood as parallel to the Roman or Egyptian use of the term relative to the supreme deity, that is, to be the authorized representative. We have that term in the Western world in the claim of the divine right of kings – they are not divine themselves, but they are authorized as rulers, and they have derived divinity in some cultures.

But most telling of all, in this letter to the Thessalonians Paul distinguishes between God and Jesus: “Now may God himself, our father, and our Lord Jesus,”³ Note there that Paul not only separates God and Jesus, he also makes Paul and his readers, 'children of God' since God is 'our father'.

Ten years later, (62 C.E.) Paul sets up a totally different relationship between God and Jesus, e.g. in Colossians 1:15-17 “He (Jesus, now Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things consist.”

Now this is echoed by the last Gospel writer, John, in the opening to his Gospel where God and Jesus are identified as one, and Jesus (the Word) is the creative agency. So, the early stages of Pauline Christianity did not identify Jesus as God in the flesh, the later writings do make that claim.

That same progression of ideas about who Jesus was can be seen in the Gospels.

The earliest canonical Gospel, Mark, has no reference at all to the birth of Jesus. For Mark, the call and empowerment of Jesus occurs at his baptism, and the empowering agent is the Holy Spirit, and the status of Jesus as 'Son of God' is by adoption. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus is descended from Abraham and is to be understood from within the history of Israel. In Luke's Gospel Jesus is to be understood within the history of all humanity. In John's Gospel Jesus is not descended from anyone but is God and creator before all creation, and is to be understood in universal terms.

³ e.g. at 1 Thessalonians 3:11

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Do you see the point? As time goes on the most basic claim about Jesus starts with Jesus being a man called and empowered by God and expands to represent and include Israel in himself, then to represent and include all of humanity, and finally expands beyond all creation and includes it all within himself. These changes all reflect the developing Pauline theology. So, what caused the process of the inflating of Jesus which goes on in Paul's theology and over a similar timeline, goes on in Gospel theology?

What apparently pushed early theology in this direction was Paul's very limited knowledge or experience of Jesus. What made that interpretation dominant in the Church was his success as a missionary and the way the ideas mirrored those already widely current and accepted around the middle east. We will come back to that later.

The foundations of Paul's theology.

Paul, or Saul of Tarsus as he was then, had been authorized by the Temple authorities in Jerusalem to hunt down and persecute the spreading sect of Jesus followers, the very early Church. That Church was centered in Jerusalem; it was spreading through outlying Synagogues; it was essentially a sect of Judaism keeping to 'the Law' (including circumcision), and was led by James, the brother of Jesus and by Peter.

These people knew Jesus well and yet, as far as we know, made no claim of divinity for him, or of special events at his birth. ⁴

Now for Saul to be the authorized inquisitor of the very early Church must have meant that Saul was both educated and trusted by the Temple authorities in Jerusalem. This is an important point for our study. Saul's education was without question, and without questioning, the sacrificial theology of the Temple. It is this theology which Paul (as Saul becomes) applies to Jesus, about whose life and teachings he shares almost nothing. What Paul does have, focuses on, and makes the central pillar of his new Christian theology, is the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Now, how is the death and resurrection of Jesus to be understood? Why, in terms of the sacrificial theology of the Temple.

⁴ Look at the Ebionites and the Essenes as other examples of this faith.

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In Temple theology the sacrifice for sin has to be pure, without blemish. Extend that to Jesus as sacrifice and he has to be without sin. The identity of a person and, therefore, in the mistaken biology of the day, the propensity to sin comes through the male. Thus for Jesus to be without blemish he must have a non-human progenitor. For Paul that needed to be God – the only source of sinless creation. For Matthew and Luke, how that was done was through creation by the Holy Spirit.

Here is the point of this section: Paul's training and minimal personal knowledge of Jesus pushes him, and his dominant part of the early Church to this Christmas story: a virgin shall become pregnant and you shall call his name Jesus, and he shall be known as God with us – mistranslated Isaiah 7:14 being the proof-text.

But, another strategic event occurs in 70 C.E. The main alternative to Paul, the Jerusalem Church headed by James and Peter, suffers a massive disruption with the invasion and destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. That first Christian community also suffered a loss of credibility because it had lived expecting the imminent return of Jesus as Messiah, and it had tied that return to the fall of Jerusalem – but no return of the Messiah happened in their lifetime, and certainly not at the fall of Jerusalem.

The Jerusalem Church was discredited and scattered. The Pauline Church was the victor and, as usual, wrote the history of the period, eliminating most of the writings from the Jerusalem Church. They couldn't eliminate such powerfully authored texts as the Letter of James and those of Peter, and they couldn't eliminate the Gospel of Mark since Matthew and Luke were based on it, but, apparently, little else remains.

So we have a credible, historically based argument for how the core story of the birth of Jesus became a part of the faith of the Christian Church.

Now every central story attracts other stories which amplify it's message, stories which fill in some details. If you are a good story teller, and have ever told a fishing story about the one that got away, you will recall embellishing the story: the time, the weather, the waves, the bait perhaps, the depth, the sensation of the bite ... ah, come, tell me a story ... Well, that's what happens to most of the founders of major religions: their births or childhood are replete with

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illustrative stories.

Here is one:

Halimah as-Sa[^]diyyah was honored to be the wet-nurse of the Prophet Mohammad, and she told the following story:

I went to Makkah with other women from my tribe ... We were looking for infants whose parents wanted them wet-nursed. ... It was a year of drought and we had nothing, only an old camel that hardly gave any milk. My own son's hungry crying kept my husband and I awake at night because I did not have a drop of milk in my breasts to feed him.

When we arrived in Makkah, each one of us was offered the Prophet as a nursing son. We all refused at first because he was an orphan, and we depended on the generosity of the child's father for our services. We used to say, "He is an orphan. How generous can his mother be?"

Every woman in our group except for me managed to get a baby to nurse. I hated to return the only one empty handed. I told my husband I would go back and take that orphan, and I did.

When I came back to where my animal was, my husband asked me, "Did you take him?" I told him I had because I could not find any other. He said, "May Allah endow His blessings on us."

By Allah, as soon as I put him in my lap my breasts filled with milk. Both he and his brother (her own son) drank their fill. When my husband went out that night to check our old camel, he found her udder full of milk. We got all the milk we wanted from her. My husband and I drank our fill and slept soundly that night, as did our boys. My husband said, "O Halimah, I think you have put your hands on a blessed creation."⁵

And here is, another.

Twenty-five centuries ago, King Suddhodana ruled a land near the Himalaya Mountains.

'One day during a midsummer festival, his wife, Queen Maya, retired to her quarters to rest, and she fell asleep and dreamed a vivid dream, in which four angels carried her high into white mountain peaks and clothed her in flowers. A magnificent white bull elephant (a symbol of fertility and wisdom) bearing a white lotus in its trunk approached Maya and walked around

5 <http://www.alsunna.org/The-Story-of-the-Nursing-of-Prophet-Muhammad.html>

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her three times. Then the elephant struck her on the right side with its trunk and vanished into her.

When Maya awoke, she told her husband about the dream. The King summoned 64 Brahmins to come and interpret it. Queen Maya would give birth to a son, the Brahmins said, and if the son did not leave the household, he would become a world conqueror. However, if he were to leave the household he would become a Buddha.'⁶

As noted in the resource, this story draws on earlier stories, in Buddha's case the birth of Indra from the Rig Veda. This is true of all of the Christmas stories: they too draw on earlier stories, prophecies or expectations; some from the Hebrew Scriptures and some from other cultural images.

But, before going to those earlier stories, let's look at another of the grounds required for stories of experience being accepted as a fact.

The third requirement is that the witnesses are consistent with each other and coherent within themselves?

Here is an outline of the birth stories according to Matthew and Luke.

The Matthean Infancy Narrative (Matthew 1, 2)

A. The Birth of Jesus 18–25

The Visit of the Wise Men 2:1–12

The Flight into Egypt.

The Killing of the Babies.

The Return from Egypt 13–23⁷

The Lucan Infancy Narrative (Luke 2)

The Birth of Jesus 2:1–20

The angelic announcement to, and visit of the Shepherds

The Circumcision of Jesus and the Presentation in the Temple 21–40

⁶ <https://www.thoughtco.com/the-birth-of-the-buddha-449783>

⁷ Throckmorton, B. H., Jr. (1995). *Gospel Parallels-NRSV: A comparison of the Synoptic Gospels*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

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Jesus at Twelve Years 41–52⁸

It is clear that these two Gospels are not telling the same stories – they are not consistent. Nor are they coherent. Look at the story of the Magi. The Magi are being guided by a light, a star, but the star doesn't seem to know where to go. Instead of going to Bethlehem the star takes the Magi to Jerusalem where they have to ask where the 'child born King of the Jews' was born. Not a good move, it alerts the king and leads to the death of boys two years old or younger. Not a good move – unless, unless your point is not logical coherence, not factuality, but proof-texting the Hebrew Scriptures to show that Jesus recapitulates the essentials of the history of Israel – including, the oppression of the boy babies around the birth of Moses, and Matthew noting the prophecy, “This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”⁹ In 23 verses of Matthew 2, about the birth of Jesus, Matthew includes 5 proof texts.

So now we have a credible understanding as to how the process of changing the nature of Jesus went from him being a human child to God incarnate in response to the needs of Paul's sacrificial theology. The Christmas stories embellish the core virgin birth to provide convincing images and proof-texts for their intended audience. Factual history is not their primary objective.

We have, even though briefly, shown little consistency between the stories being included, and incoherence within at least one story and between stories – add for e.g. did Jesus grow up in Bethlehem or did the family have to go to Egypt? How could Mary and Joseph, with Christmas behind them, be so bewildered at the Temple when Jesus was 12 years old? Were Joseph and Mary residents of Nazareth prior to the birth of Jesus (per Luke) or only after a return from exile (per Matthew)?

Since we have demonstrated that the Christmas stories are not to be taken as factual - they have no eye-witness support, no internal consistency, and we have a credible alternative explanation

8 Throckmorton, B. H., Jr. (1995). [*Gospel Parallels-NRSV: A comparison of the Synoptic Gospels*](#). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

9 Throckmorton, B. H., Jr. (1995). [*Gospel Parallels-NRSV: A comparison of the Synoptic Gospels*](#). Nashville: Thomas Nelson. Matthew 2:15

De-constructing the common Christmas stories to refine their meaning for then and now. D.A. Parry as to why the stories were added - the questions arise, what is their meaning for the intended audience, and what is their meaning, is there any truth in them for us now? Something can be true to human experience but not stated in scientific formulae or scientific procedures – like Aesop's fables, remember?

As we look for more meaning, as an example, since Luke is the simpler, let's look at some underlying meanings of his birth story. Luke is looking at the significance of Jesus to all people. But, of all classes of people, who does Luke include as witnesses to the birth of Jesus – only the lowliest, the poorest workers. Shepherds who slept outside with the sheep.

It helps to ask who the majority of converts were to Pauline Christianity? Paul describes them: 'Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things, and the things that are not, to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.'¹⁰ It is a comforting and encouraging message to the converts and those like them. That's why, where Matthew in the beatitudes has, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' (5:3) Luke has 'Blessed are the poor' (6:20).

Luke is declaring to the lowly in society, to the poor and weak and uneducated, even the outcasts, 'You are the perfect person for God to work with. You are the one that God wants in the 'kingdom'. You are children of God, sons and daughters of the most high.'

Is there any more attractive invitation?

We might add that there is a Hebrew image captured here as well, King David was a shepherd boy – oh the sermons that can be preached with those two connections !

What about the angels and the announcement itself, what might they reflect in Hebrew history? The announcement echoes that in Jeremiah 20:15 and Isaiah 9:5. My main resource person, Brown notes that it may also echo Roman imperial announcements.¹¹

¹⁰ I Corinthians 1:26-29

¹¹ This and the above, Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, updated edition, The Anchor Bible Reference Library, Doubleday, N.Y, N.Y. 1999, pages 420, 672-675

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On a broader, societal basis, the stories may reflect 'the Oedipal myth of the royal child found by a shepherd' and even that of the birth of Osiris.¹²

But what can we take of value from these parallels? We know that Jesus was, clearly, biased toward the poor and oppressed, but Oedipus and Osiris do not fit that pattern. So the focus of meaning must shift from the child to the attendants, the shepherds, and there a question arises: are we invited to note and respect the perspective, the experiences, the wisdom, of the poor and oppressed. Not just to be their helpers – a sort of superior to inferior benevolence. Rather, as a student learning from the insights of the oppressed. Are the powerful – that includes most if not all of us – are we blinded to a reality that only the oppressed can identify for us? Should Christmas be a time when we not only give to the poor, but a time when their stories are identified with the Jesus story, and the Jesus teachings applied to our relationship with the oppressed?

We can go through the same process with each image brought into the Christmas story by Matthew and Luke. Matthew essentially draws on Hebrew images and prophecies to re-inforce the claim that Jesus is the continuation and fulfillment of what was already known in the ancient prophecies and scriptures. So, at a more personal level, we could well look back at our own earlier ambitions and ask how they are being fulfilled, or why they are not, how are they being distorted, grieving or celebrating that fact.

So one example from Matthew, that of the Magi. It is often seen to be based on Balaam (Numbers 22-24)¹³. I do not see that connection, rather, even given that there is a difference between Magi and kings, still, both were ruling classes based in eastern empires, Matthew's Magi seem closest to fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah 60:3, and Psalms 68:29, and, particularly 72:10 which reads, 'Let the kings of Tarshish and the islands bring presents; the kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts.'

There seems to be no ancient earlier myth on which this story is based.

The application for us seems to be that wise power will recognize goodness and honour and

¹² Brown, pages 420-421 and 672, 420

¹³ Brown page 608

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support it even though that goodness appears in weakness. Don't be persuaded by the power of something opposing what is good, look for the goodness and align yourself with it.

This has a similar message to that from the shepherds in Luke.

But, these are all the examples I can give for now since time is limited, I want to plead for one other change in our style of celebrating Christmas. There are many respected exemplars (saints) and founders of world religions. Instead of celebrating one and excluding all others, would it not be healthier to develop a rotation of celebrations over a year to remember and study each one for a short period around their 'birthdays', perhaps focusing on a particular theme through any particular year? Would that not make for a greater appreciation of human unity, and respect for religious differences, and growth in the character of all, reinforced by so great a cloud of witnesses, the exemplars, prophets and founders of our great faiths? I think so. Maybe you do too.