





IS THE NATIVITY STORY A MYTH?

The account of Jesus' birth is controversial among modern-day Christians. Although Biblical scholars generally agree that many of the finer points are inaccurate, there is still value in honoring the legend.

By Arturo Mora

When I was a child, the Nativity played the starring role in our family Christmas celebrations. Joseph and the Virgin Mary, the three Magi, angels, a star, shepherds and their lambs stood in adoration of the baby Jesus in his manger.

A song was performed depicting Mary and Joseph pleading with the innkeeper for a room, only to be turned away. At midnight, the Christ child was declared born, and we passed his figurine around to be kissed. Only then did modern Christmas intervene, and we scrambled for our presents.

Somewhere on the way to growing up, I accepted that Santa was just a big fairy tale. Years later, through voracious reading, my pleasant “truths” about the Nativity were also shattered. I learned that much in that childhood Nativity scene was probably just as made up as elves at the North Pole.

But fear not for the joy of Christmas. Stories have power beyond facts. Truth, spiritual truth, is deeper than what is in history books.

Those books, and sometimes Biblical scholars, have not been kind to the Christmas story we hold so dear. Much has been written about how the two Gospel accounts of Jesus’s birth—which appear in Matthew and Luke—not only contradict each other, but are sometimes just plain inaccurate.

Rev. Ed Townley, senior minister at Unity of Greater Hartford, Connecticut, and host of *The Bible Alive!* on Unity Online Radio at www.unity.fm, said, “It’s not even remotely possible that (these Gospels) were historically accurate. No one was there at Jesus’s birth.”

Rev. E.J. Niles, who teaches Bible studies at Unity Institute® and Seminary, adds, “There are a lot of contradictions, and very little that could have really happened. In particular, I love how Joseph was said to take his pregnant wife Mary 94 miles to Bethlehem to fulfill a type of civic duty (a census) that most women would never have even participated in during those times.”

They and others cite a list of errant Gospel factoids and inconsistencies, including:

- The genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:1-17), claiming 14 sets of generations between key events in Jewish history, is inaccurate.
- Matthew 1:25 has Jesus born during the reign of Herod; Luke 2:2 has his birth while Quirinius was governor of Syria. Only problem is, Quirinius was not governor until after Herod died.
- Scholars question the timing of the census mentioned in Luke 2:1-3. Regardless, efficient Rome would never have ordered everyone back to their ancestral land, a recipe for chaos.
- Matthew adds events not in Luke, and then cites them as fulfillments of Jewish prophecies. These include Bethlehem as the birthplace (Micah 5:2, 4), the flight to Egypt (Hosea 11:1), and Herod’s slaughter of the innocents (Jeremiah 31:15).
- The virgin birth is said to fulfill Isaiah 7:14. Yet many Biblicists say the writers relied on a mistranslation in Isaiah of the Hebrew word *almah* as “virgin,” though it probably meant “young woman.”

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How can there be so many inconsistencies? Were the writers, who lived at best decades after the life of Jesus, intent on a work of fiction?

The writings have to be put in context. In the time of the New Testament, ancient mythology dominated. Fantastical births, magical stars and angelic annunciations spoke to people then—and on some level still do.

The Nativity story, said Rev. Townley, “Is storytelling and mythology. These are after-the-fact attempts to communicate the story. They are spiritually accurate.”

What is more valuable, spiritual truth or factual truth? Both have their place, but stories help shape the world of our souls. We are affected by them, uplifted, inspired and changed.

“Myths reveal the human spirit,” said Niles. “They help us understand who we are. They have deeper meaning for us than historical truth.”

The Christmas story has value far beyond Quirinius or Herod. It has value in what it awakens in us.

Rev. Patricia Bass, senior minister at Unity Church of Overland Park, said, “It’s not important to me whether every word about the Nativity is factually accurate. What’s more important is how does the Nativity story live in me today? Does it show me a way to live a better life?”

There are many ways to see the story of the birth of Jesus, if we go beyond the superficial narrative. “The less literal, the deeper we can go into the story,” says Townley.

The Nativity, he said, “Is about the birth of Christ awareness opening in me, now. When we let it inside us, everything is going to shift. It’s an ongoing story, not just something that happened 2,000 years ago. It’s always meaningful.”

“The ultimate message,” said Rev. Bass, “is that the Christ lives in you. Christmas is a great time to remember that. You may have forgotten it somewhere along the way, for whatever reason. This is a great opportunity to reawaken that Christ consciousness.”

More traditional Christians, she notes, “Are more likely to see it in terms of salvation, where (Jesus’) physical

birth is seen as bringing about a literal salvation of humankind. In Unity we stress the symbolism of the reawakening of the Christ in all of us.”

Rev. Townley places great emphasis on the difficulties of the individual characters in the story. “It’s the same process we all go through,” he said. “There’s the same element of support and fear, a great deal of reassurance for all of us in the story. We are all forced to face challenges. The wise men traveled hundreds of miles; the shepherds had to leave their flocks; Mary and Joseph had this unusual pregnancy. Every character involved is forced out of their comfort zone. This can be difficult for us and is clearly always worth it.”

There is also value in the Nativity tradition itself, independent of metaphysical meaning. The story has a narrative beauty and depth that, for the most part, brings people together in a divided world.

Rev. Bass champions the power of such tradition. “We can use that for our benefit,” she said. “Christmas is a teachable moment. The stories open our hearts in ways that allow the individual to touch the Christ in them. And because it happens all over the world about the same time, there is a global collective consciousness.”

When I look upon the Nativity scene, and I still do so fondly despite my intellectual questions, I see all of this and more. I feel the scene in my heart and soul. I see love in all the faces and take that love in. I feel a sacred awe. I feel kinder and at peace.

This may be partly the result of my religious upbringing, my embedded theology. I don’t care. The feelings are real. Quirinius is just a name in a book. At Christmastime, and all year long if I remember it often enough, the Christ awareness is alive inside me. ■

Christpower

By John Shelby Spong



John Shelby Spong

Look at him!

**Look not at his divinity,
But look, rather, at
his freedom.**

**Look not at the exaggerated
tales of his power,
But look, rather, at his
infinite capacity
To give himself away.**

**Look not at the first-century
mythology that
surrounds him,
But look, rather, at his
courage to be,
His ability to live
The contagious quality of
his love.**

**Stop your frantic search!
Be still and know that this
is God:**

**This love,
This freedom,
This life, this being;
and**

**When you are accepted,
Accept yourself,
When you are forgiven,
Forgive yourself,
When you are loved,
Love yourself.**

**Grasp that Christ power
and
Dare to be yourself!**

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