

— JUST —

HAY
IN THE
MANGER?

The deeper meaning of the nativity

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THE MARMITE FACTOR

Some look forward to it. Others dread it.

A nativity play can trigger conflicting emotions in parents, depending on whether they enjoy shopping for royal robes, whether their child is going to be a herald angel or a speechless shepherd, or whether people think religion and raising children should go together in the first place.

Then again, hasn't the nativity always had the Marmite factor?

Back in the ancient Middle East, where Jesus was born, some people celebrated his birth, while others tried to kill him. In our day, those who love the nativity call it 'the greatest story ever told'. Others argue that this is where the problem lies: it is just a story, a fairytale.

Whatever your own feelings about the nativity, there is one thing on which believers and sceptics agree: the story that began in the little town of Bethlehem has shaped the Western world like no other. This fact alone makes it worthy of our attention.

As children and parents across the land gear themselves up for that big moment in the limelight, this short guide will take you back to the real nativity. We'll discover how our plays compare to what we read in the Bible, how much we can know historically about the world into which Jesus was born, and how this ancient narrative and its message of peace on earth might tie in with our own life stories today.

NOT FOR THE FAINT-HEARTED

About that time the Emperor Augustus gave orders ...

Luke 2.1

Tea-towel headgear, baby Jesus dolls and missed cues – as endearing as nativity plays may be, they are nothing like the original. This was a gritty and subversive story, set in a time when ancient Rome ruled the nations with an iron fist.

Back then, Jewish lands were just a backwater of the Roman Empire. There was no Geneva Convention to protect civilians from invading soldiers; there were no universal human rights, no antibiotics or pension plans. Life tended to be short, not sweet.

Add to that the heavy burden of taxation and the ever-present irritation of Roman religion and lifestyle, and you begin to

understand why biblical prophecies of the Messiah had begun to capture the Jewish imagination.

This promised 'Messiah' would be a great leader who would bring peace and justice back to the land. So how much longer would God allow Caesar to put Roman boots on holy ground? When would he send the Messiah to drive out the Jews' enemies and establish his rule on earth?

There was a strange rumour about the Roman emperor at the time, Caesar Augustus (63^{BC}–AD14). It said that he was in fact a son of the god Apollo, born ten months after a serpent had visited his mother in her sleep.

Such a mysterious birth would perfectly suit the purpose of turning a mortal ruler into a mythical figure and securing his power. After all, who would dream of provoking Apollo's anger by showing his son, Augustus, anything but unconditional loyalty?

Jesus, the Jewish boy in the manger, was born during the reign of Augustus, and there were rumours that he hadn't been conceived in the usual way. Could he be the promised Messiah?

Naturally, the Messiah would need to be a formidable figure, with oodles of power, charisma and influence. Jesus, on the other hand, was born in the humblest of circumstances. He was

a carpenter's son who grew up in a tiny hamlet in Galilee, a place with no political influence to speak of. The first to hear about his birth were not the famous and powerful, but shepherds and foreign star-gazers.

A strange Messiah indeed. Unlike Augustus the 'son of Apollo', Jesus had not come to conquer.

So who was he?

JUST A STORY?

We know he is telling the truth ...

John 21.24

Before we delve deeper into the meaning of 'the greatest story ever told', we ought to ask, is it more than a story? More than the legends of King Arthur or Robin Hood? Are we talking fact or fiction?

In other words, did the nativity happen? Did the baby in the manger grow up? Was there a man called Jesus of Nazareth, who stirred up the wrath of the empire of Rome for proclaiming the kingdom of God?

Of course, the Bible says so; but Bible writers wanted people to believe in Jesus. So did anyone else mention him? Someone less biased?

2,000 years ago, news largely travelled by word of mouth.

Very few people could read and write. There was no reed and parchment shop in every high street. Moreover, to the Romans, the Jewish lands were not terribly important, and only a few historians bothered to write about what was going on in that remote part of the empire.

Little wonder then that, outside the Bible, we have only a handful of written records about Jesus. Yet – and this is the crucial point – these records do exist.

The Roman historian Tacitus (AD56–120) mentions Pontius Pilate, Rome's representative in Jerusalem, having Jesus crucified.

So does the Jewish historian Josephus (AD37–100), who also refers to Jesus' brother, James, and the fact that the Christian movement carried on after its leader's execution.

Tacitus and Josephus are joined by Roman governor Pliny the Younger (AD61–113) and another historian of the empire, Suetonius (AD69–122), though his reference to Jesus is less clear.

In other words, we have famous Roman and Jewish writers in the first century confirming the existence of Jesus. None of them was a Christian. None of them wrote about Jesus so that their readers would believe in him.

The biblical writers and their non-Christian counterparts agree that Jesus of Nazareth was a real person – someone who gathered followers who came to believe in him as the Son of God, and whose young life was cruelly cut short on a Roman cross.

The Jesus story is rooted in history.