

NATIVITY
AND
BEYOND

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First published 2021 by The British and Foreign Bible Society.

ISBN: 978-0-564-04997-4

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BSRL/3M/2021

Printed in Great Britain

NATIVITY AND BEYOND

The Christmas story examined

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POINSETTIA

Even supermarkets feel different at this time of year.

The Christmas tunes from the loudspeakers clash with the beep of the checkout terminals. Conveyor belts are laden with last-minute token gifts, brandy and Prosecco, glitter-sprinkled cards and mince pie multipacks. The annual challenge of fitting it all into already packed cupboards and fridge-freezers at home is only a short car journey away.

Not to forget the obligatory poinsettia: marvels that wove their magic of colour during the nights of November, now crammed into a corner of the store, their blood-red leaves straining against cellophane wrapping. They are cheap add-on gifts, soon to be placed in overheated living rooms, where their leaves will shrivel before long until, come February, they are tossed on to the compost heap.

There is another way. Move the poinsettia to a cooler room; trim it back in spring, let it regrow through summer, give it 12 hours of complete darkness in late autumn, and by December it should have turned red and beautiful once again.

By the same token, we may be happy to put up the artificial tree in a jiffy, chuckle at missed school nativity cues and blunder through Carols by Candlelight, before shelving the whole thing till next year. Or we might give the Bethlehem baby boy a little more time and attention, discover the magnificence of the Christmas message and allow it to take root in our lives.

THE MAN

Most of what was written about Jesus two millennia ago was not about the baby in the manger but but the carpenter turned preacher who drew crowds, healed the sick, gave the Sermon on the Mount and died on a Roman cross.

His birth isn't even mentioned in two of the four Gospels – summary accounts of Jesus' public ministry, which survived the ages and are found in the collection of ancient holy writings we call the Bible.

Essentially the Gospels talk about Jesus, the adult. They are a record of his unique words and deeds. They describe how his life was cut short by political and religious power struggles. And they all home in on the event of the first Easter morning, which kept his band of followers from dispersing and, instead, drove them to tell the world that Jesus had come back to life.

Unless we get the bigger picture of the Gospel narratives, the nativity makes little sense. On the other hand, if Jesus, the man, has nothing to say to us, what's the point of looking beyond the heart-warming story of the baby in the manger? If the poinsettia's leaves will never turn red again, why bother with a year of watering, feeding, and precise timing of daylight exposure?

So, let's start off by taking a more careful look at the man, before we talk about the child. Let's consider the facts, before we think about what they might mean. Who was Jesus? What was he about? Was he real at all, a proper historical figure? Or is the whole thing about as believable as children in tea towel headgear pretending to be Bethlehem's shepherds?

A BRIEF HISTORY

As we try to get a better idea of who Jesus was and what he had come to do, it helps to know a little about the times he lived in.

The Jesus story was first told against a backdrop of sorrow: the trauma of a people under Roman occupation.

This was not simply a political matter. It posed a profound identity crisis, since the Hebrews had a unique faith that set them apart from every other ancient nation.

Other cultures believed in a kind of primordial soup, from which all else had emerged: gods and humans, angels and demons, good and evil, Jersey Royals and turnips. The whole spectrum. Everything.

But this is not what Jewish people believed. If they had, their faith and ethnic identity would have long evaporated by the time the boy from Bethlehem began to make headlines.

Six centuries earlier, Jerusalem had been sacked by Babylonian

armies, who happened to worship a god called Marduk. They had also destroyed the temple, the house of God, or, to use his Hebrew name, Yahweh, from which we get the word Jehovah. In pagan thinking, this meant: Marduk 1 – Yahweh 0. The God of Israel, who was supposed to guard Jerusalem and its inhabitants, had been exposed as inferior and impotent.

Surviving Jews were dragged off to Babylon. When their descendants returned 70 years later, to raise Jerusalem from the ashes, they rebuilt the temple too. Faith in Yahweh had survived the trauma of exile.

Here's why: Judaism didn't share the pagan idea of a primordial moral soup with humans, gods, good and evil all floating on the surface. Nor did they believe in local gods ruling over a specific city or tribe.

Long ago, it had dawned on them that there was only one God, distinct from nature, rather than part of it. This God was the maker and ruler of the universe, the embodiment of goodness and righteousness.

The radical thought that Yahweh wasn't the defeated divine governor of Jerusalem, but the creator of the cosmos, had kept the Hebrews from giving up on him during their exile in

Babylon. In their eyes, Marduk, the Babylonian chief god, had not defeated anyone. He wasn't even real.

In other words, faith in a single, all-powerful creator had enabled Judaism to survive. But it came with question marks. When things went pear-shaped for the people of Philistia, Assyria or Babylonia, gods and humans alike shrugged their shoulders. Their deities were assumed to be as flawed as anyone and certainly not omnipotent. Stuff happened, with no one to blame in particular.

But because the Jews believed that God was both good and almighty, and that he was concerned for Israel in particular, they had a problem. Yes, they were back in their homeland, but it was nothing like the glory days of King David, who had united the Hebrew tribes into one nation a thousand years earlier.

In fact, after their return from Babylon around 512 BC, the land of the Israelites was successively occupied by the Persians, the Greeks led by Alexander the Great, the Egyptian Ptolemies, the Seleucids and eventually the Romans.

The longer this went on, the louder the cries rang for the Messiah: an extraordinary ruler sent by God who would deliver Israel from her enemies and restore her fortunes, just as King David had done.

So, when Jesus turned up on the scene at the time of Roman occupation, challenging the status quo, working miracles and proclaiming that God's kingdom was just round the corner, people paid attention. Might he be the Messiah?

WOULD I LIE TO YOU?

The first thing, then, to say about Jesus Christ ('Christ' being the Greek word for 'Messiah') is that he perfectly fits the context of first-century, Roman-occupied, Jewish lands brimming with messianic hope. In the Gospels, he talks and acts like a first-century Jewish teacher and prophet, and people respond accordingly.

Then again, you might argue, any skilful novelist can make a fictional plot believable, by placing it in a realistic context. Did someone just make up a good story?

The thing about Jesus, though, is that not one but several people wrote about him. In the Bible, we have four Gospel accounts – short portraits of Jesus – written by different authors, as well as the writings of the apostle Paul, who is probably our earliest source. So we have five sources, not just one. They date back to a time when some of the people who had met Jesus

(and are, in fact, mentioned by Paul and the Gospels) were still alive and could be questioned.

Crucially, though, references to Jesus are also found in the writings of people who didn't believe in him.

When the Roman senator and historian Tacitus (AD 56–120) wrote about a fire ravaging Rome in AD 64, and Emperor Nero blaming it on the Christians, there obviously must have been a fair few Christians in Rome at the time. In other words, within three decades or so of Jesus' public appearance in Galilee, a sizeable number of Christian believers could be found 2,500 miles north-west, in Rome. Followers of the new faith had been sharing it with others as they travelled the highways of the Empire. The question is, why? Why bother to carry a message to the ends of the known world if you know it to be fake news?

You may think to yourself: well, this happens all the time. People gladly spread fake news if it benefits them, or just to cause havoc. But the Jesus story was high risk. Jews who declared faith in Messiah Jesus risked fierce opposition from their families and communities. Christians converting from paganism faced a similar problem, once they stopped joining their friends and loved ones in idol worship. And those who publicly put loyalty to Christ above loyalty to Caesar were

effectively signing their own death warrants, as the persecution under Nero shows. So, why would anyone want to invent such a demanding figure? Why risk your life for something you know to be untrue?

Let's return to Tacitus:

Nero fastened the guilt [of starting the fire] and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians, by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome ...

Tacitus, Annals 15.44

Notice the willingness of Christians to suffer and pay the ultimate price for their faith in Jesus, at a time when some of those who had met him were still around to testify that what

they had seen and heard was true. Notice also that Tacitus despised Christians. So, why would he acknowledge the existence of Christ? Why confirm in detail what the Gospels tell us: that Jesus was sentenced to death by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea?

We have another surviving Roman source that refers to Christ and his followers: a letter to the Emperor Trajan, penned by magistrate Pliny the Younger (AD 61–113). Apart from that letter, Pliny is famous for his account of Mount Vesuvius incinerating Pompeii.

Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (AD 37–100) refers to Jesus as well. Josephus had no personal interest in acknowledging the founder of a faith he rejected; yet, as an historian he readily conceded that there had been a Jesus, ‘a wise man,’ ‘condemned to the cross by Roman governor Pilate.’¹

In other words, ancient authors who neither cared about nor believed in Jesus agree on his existence: at the very least, they provide evidence for Jesus of Nazareth having walked the earth.

1 Josephus: Antiquities of the Jews, Book 18, Ch. 3

CONSPIRACY THEORY?

Up to this point we can conclude that, 2000 years ago, there was a Jewish baby boy who grew up to be a man proclaiming the reign of God on earth and launching a movement, radical enough to clash with the powers that be.

But what about the rest? What if, despite its core being true, the Jesus story as we know it today turned out to be a jumble of distortions, misinterpretations and cover-ups?

Those rumours won't go away. Not that long ago, they were even turned into a bestselling novel and a blockbuster movie.

Back in 2003, a mystery thriller entitled *The Da Vinci Code* revolved around the claim that Jesus and his disciple Mary Magdalene had become lovers and started a bloodline which led all the way to the Italian Renaissance painter and polymath Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519). Supposedly, the chief disciple in Leonardo's painting, *The Last Supper*, was no man at all, but the

Lord's sweetheart, Mary Magdalene. According to author Dan Brown, original Christianity had celebrated the divine feminine, which was suppressed once the Church joined forces with the Roman State in the fourth century.

It made a mouth-watering story, and conspiracy fans were quick to lap it up in their millions. But what about the evidence?

Dan Brown based his allegations on the assumption that Jesus couldn't have remained single because, back then, every Jewish man had to marry. In reality, though, we know of a religious group called the Essenes living in a monastic community of celibate men at the time, and of others, like John the Baptist or the apostle Paul, putting their spiritual calling above love and romance.

According to *The Da Vinci Code*, a number of ancient texts suggesting that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene were suppressed by the Church and excluded from the Bible. Wrong again. None of those sources speaks of a marriage between Jesus and Mary.

The Da Vinci Code tells us that it was none other than the fourth-century Roman Emperor Constantine who formally decreed, once and for all, that Jesus was no mere man but

divine. Unfortunately for Dan Brown, not a single written record of the period supports his claim.

Brown maintains that the four Gospels in our Bibles falsely portray Jesus as godlike, whereas other ancient documents showing him just as a human were suppressed by the Church. Yet, the opposite is true. Some ancient texts about Jesus were rejected by the Church, but these present him as more divine and less human than the four Gospels do.

Moving on, then, from the world of dubious conspiracy theories, what can we say about Jesus with reasonable certainty?

BACK TO BASICS

Christian or not, scholars widely agree on a number of things: Jesus grew up in Nazareth, he was baptised, he became a public teacher, he was known as a healer, he died on a Roman cross, and his followers proclaimed that he had returned from the grave.

Nazareth is northern Israel's main city these days. Back then, it was an isolated hamlet. At the age of 30, Jesus of Nazareth left for the bustling towns along the shores of Lake Galilee. A major trade route linking Egypt with Syria ran along the lake. By leaving Nazareth behind, Jesus could reach far more people with his message. It was a deliberate, strategic move.

Secondly, he was baptised as an adult in the River Jordan. The Gospels tell us that a prophetic firebrand nicknamed John the Baptist was calling people to turn from aimless living to a

life devoted to God. As a symbol of their repentance, people allowed John to momentarily dunk them into the river.

The New Testament writers tell us that Jesus also came to be baptised by John. Yet Jesus was meant to be the Messiah and Son of God. Shouldn't it have been the other way round? Well, quite! Historians conclude that if the Gospels recorded the counterintuitive, almost embarrassing event of John baptising Jesus, it must have happened.

We can further safely assume that Jesus was known as a healer, just as the Gospels tell us. Written records of the period reveal that faith healers were not uncommon in Bible times.

The Gospels also note that Jesus had followers. This, too, tallies with the general historic record. Religious teachers known as rabbis commonly surrounded themselves with pupils. Jesus did the same. The disputes recorded in the Bible between him and other religious teachers are also typical of Judaism: learned men had lively debates about what God was trying to tell them through the holy Scriptures.

The Gospel accounts of Jesus fatefully clashing first with the religious authorities and then with the Roman governor is equally credible. Jesus challenged traditional Jewish teaching

and proclaimed that one mightier than Caesar was about to establish his reign: the God of Israel.

Things finally came to a head when he challenged the temple practices and caused a major stir in the process.

The temple in Jerusalem was at the heart of Jewish faith. People believed that God himself resided there. To enter the temple, you had to pay a tax, but the common Roman coinage was considered unclean, so you exchanged it for Jewish money. You then went on to purchase one of the sacrificial animals, which a priest would ritually slaughter as a symbolic cleansing of your sins.

The issue seems to have been that, right there in the house of God, the money changers were making good business at the expense of unsuspecting pilgrims. Their tables appear to have been placed in the outer area of the temple, where non-Jewish, God-fearing people were supposed to be allowed in to worship. So the tables and animals got in the way of those people, effectively barring them from entry.

When Jesus saw the corruption and abuse, he began to overturn the money changers' tables and whip the sacrificial animals out of the temple. This ignited the anger of the temple clergy and ultimately caught the attention of Pilate, the Roman

governor, who was keeping an eye on law and order. It was the Jewish festival of Passover at the time, and the Romans were always on tenterhooks during these religious events, when pilgrims flooded the streets of Jerusalem and civil unrest could never be ruled out.

So, the 'cleansing of the temple' is another episode in Jesus' life which historians accept as perfectly plausible. After this bust-up with the religious leaders, Jesus was arrested, accused first of blasphemy, then of sedition and, in the end, brutally executed on a Roman cross.

In sum, even scholars without a Christian agenda agree that the basics of the Gospel accounts are perfectly credible.

If you've followed me this far, you may be thinking: let's assume there is good evidence for Jesus of Nazareth having lived, taught, healed, spoken truth to power and died a violent death. Let's further assume that his followers, grief-stricken by his execution, really had some kind of experience of him returning from the grave. Well, so what? It all happened 2,000 years ago. Why would we care today?

In other words, it is time we moved on, from facts to meaning – which is where Christmas comes in.

THE FIRST NOEL

In a sense, the nativity – the story of the birth of Jesus – is very down to earth. Boy (Joseph) meets girl (Mary) and baby Jesus follows not long after.

It is worth bearing in mind, however, that ancient Israelites handled the boy-meets-girl thing rather differently from what we're used to.

Not only were marriages arranged, but marriage became a serious topic as soon as puberty set in. Fathers on the lookout for a suitable son- or daughter-in-law agreed a marriage contract involving two pre-teen children. And within a year, the girl was married to, and moved in with, the boy. They were husband and wife, aged 13 or so.

The reasoning is obvious. People's average lifespan was much shorter than ours. Child mortality was sky-high, so it made sense to marry girls off at a tender age, in order to maximise their fertility span.

The Jesus story, then, starts off on a pretty mundane note. The Gospel writer Luke tells us that Mary lived in Nazareth, where, as archaeologists have found, some inhabitants must have been too poor to own a house and, instead, lived in caves. The nativity itself involves Mary giving birth among livestock and placing her baby in a feeding trough. It's not a pretty, but a gritty picture. It's as if Christmas foreshadowed the Messiah seeking out people whose predominant experience was that life stinks.

And Mary? She was nothing like the artistic renderings of the Mother of God, sublime as many of them may be: the Eastern Orthodox icons, the fair ladies of the Italian Renaissance paintings, the wooden, bronze and marble sculptures scattered across Europe's churches, and yes, the Marys of our Christmas cards in the 'religious' section. All of them tend to portray a fully grown woman with an ethereal air. The Bible, on the other hand, presents a young girl – possibly an illiterate twelve-year-old from a deprived rural community – visited by an angelic messenger announcing that she'll give birth to the saviour of

the world. Christmas speaks of God picking ordinary looking people in order to do something special. The world's entire value system – who, and what, is important and worthy of respect – is turned on its head.

Mary had been betrothed to Joseph. This arrangement was more binding than our modern engagement and couldn't be dissolved unless something went seriously wrong. Something like a virgin birth, for instance.

According to Luke's Gospel, God sends the angel Gabriel to Mary, not after but during the betrothal period. The celestial messenger announces that she will give birth to a son, except Joseph won't be the dad:

'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.'

Luke 1.35, NRSV

Meanwhile, Joseph is reassured in a dream that Mary hasn't been raped or unfaithful, and that everything is under control.

Shocked at first by the angelic encounter, Mary eventually bursts into song, praising God for his power, justice and mercy. Crucially, her hymn includes a reference to his covenant with her ancestors – a promise of help and protection. We're back to

the history of Israel and the expectation that, after centuries of foreign occupation, and after six decades of Roman legionnaires stomping about the Promised Land, God will remember his people and liberate them through the Messiah. The kingdom of God is just round the corner, and Mary will give birth to Jesus – the one who will usher it in and bring redemption.

Redemption, though, turned out not to be political. The issue from God's perspective was much bigger – not salvation from the evil of Roman oppression, but from evil, full stop. Christmas speaks of Jesus coming to save not just Israel, but the world.

How exactly are we meant to understand the virgin birth – Mary conceiving through God's Holy Spirit? Two of our four Gospels don't even go into the matter. But all four agree that the child in the manger wasn't any old child. Christmas speaks of God sending his Son, to live among us and meet us where we are at our most needy and vulnerable:

'The people who live in darkness will see a great light. On those who live in the dark land of death the light will shine.'

Matthew 4.16, GNB

BIG PICTURE

As we saw earlier, the baby in the manger is only the start. There's the whole public life of Jesus: his message of a Father in heaven, his teachings about love and forgiveness, his deeds of power and compassion, his sacrificial death on a cross and the news of his tomb being empty three days later.

We can approach the Gospels historically, as we have done, and find distinct clues for their truthfulness. We can argue about the miraculous elements in the narratives, look for evidence for the seemingly impossible, or reject them as myth and reduce the Jesus story to what is historically probable. We can shrug our shoulders in the face of many unknowns. We can stop there and move on to other things.

Alternatively, we can keep asking questions which go beyond history and fact-finding: questions of meaning.

The nativity, and the story of Jesus generally, is fundamentally about a close encounter of the divine kind. God, who cannot be seen, appears in human form. Why would he? The answer given in the Bible is that God is love and cares about us.

We're back at the aforementioned covenant relationship between God and his people. Israel's great prophet Moses had told them not only to serve but to love God, who was far more than a boss calling the shots or a ruler laying down the law. The prophets of Judaism likened Israel to a bride and God to a groom. Faith was a relationship with a loving God – a relationship that was extended to all people when Jesus came at the first Christmas.

As I write of God's love, I'm reminded of the newsflash on my phone this afternoon, of a murdered woman's remains being found in a woodland. I'm reminded of a friend currently going through a bone marrow transplant. I'm reminded of the death toll caused by a microscopic virus, a pandemic seeming to make a mockery of the millions of prayers sent heavenwards since the first person died of Covid-19.

It can be tempting to conclude that God's love is wishful thinking, that he doesn't care; that there is nothing but Mother Nature, who never bothers with the individual, but only the

propagation of life at large. Even if Nature was started off by a supreme cosmic mind, perhaps it is now running its course without divine intervention, according to the inexorable laws of physics, chemistry and biology.

Mind you, the world of the early Christians was even tougher. No vaccines. No human rights charter. No minimum wage. And yet, they insisted that God's love was evident in Jesus, who had entered our world of pain and evil and triumphed, defeating hate and even death. Jesus, who had promised that, in the end, God would take charge and do away with all injustice and suffering.

As we've seen, the first Christmas was far less sentimental than what we've made of it. The story is set in a context of tough lives, lived under a brutal regime. It offers no neat solution to the philosophical problem of pain. But it talks of God intervening, through Jesus, who offered to be with us in the midst of it all.

The message of Christmas can be read as an invitation to choose. Either we are a product of chance in a godless universe and this world, in all its beauty and cruelty, is all there is. Or the one who came to us in a manger was telling the truth: that God is good, that he will have the final word, and that he is worthy of our trust and worship.

'Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people. This very day in David's town your Saviour was born – Christ the Lord!'

Luke 2.10–11, GNB

