

The First Christmas

Narratives of Empire and Resistance

Session 1: Text and Context

The Rev. John Elliott Lein — December 1, 2019

The Texts

Within early Christianity we have several references to Jesus' conception and birth:

- **Paul's Epistles (50-60 CE)**—contain two references in total: “[Jesus was] born from David’s seed according to the flesh, marked out by resurrection of the dead as God’s Son in power according to a spirit of holiness” (Rom 1:3-4) *and* “coming to be from a woman, coming to be under the Law, so that he might redeem those under Law” (Gal 4:4-5).
- **Matthew and Luke's Gospels (80-85 CE)**—Two unique accounts, with conflicting details (the earliest, Mark's, and latest, John's, Gospels do not record a birth narrative).

Most Christian churches in the first 100-200 years would have had access to at *most* one Gospel—many would not have a copy containing a story of Christmas. There is no evidence of the first generation of Christians (until 50 years after Jesus's crucifixion) having this story at all. And while Paul repeatedly emphasizes the importance of the crucifixion and resurrection, he doesn't seem to have heard of or value strongly these narratives. He never refers to either Mary or Joseph by name.

“Read the texts, and pay attention.”

Interpretation—Pre/Modern/Post

- **Premodern:** Until a few hundred years ago, the focus in reading these stories was on *meaning*. It took no “faith” to “believe” what was taken for granted.
- **Modern:** After the Enlightenment, truth began to be understood in terms of provable facts.

With the world-shaking shifts in *epistemology* (“How do we know? What is true?”) and *ontology* (“What is real/possible?”), difficulties arose for Christians:

- **Scientific discoveries:** “Events like these in the stories don’t happen in the real world.”
- **History & Literature:** “Fantastical stories of conception were fairly common then.”
- **Analysis:** “Notice all the differences!”

These new insights split interpretations into two camps: the “skeptics” who dismiss these stories as made-up/untrue (sometimes at the expense of all religious belonging), and “believers” who have reinterpreted “faith” as trusting in intentionally impossible things without which the entire religion is untrue.

Biblical literalism is a recent phenomenon for both believers and unbelievers—not an ancient perspective—based on what pluralist 20th century religious scholar Houston Smith dismissed as “Fact Fundamentalism.”

- **Postmodern...**

“To be concerned with [these stories’] factuality risks missing their meaning and truth.”

Is there another way to read these stories? Jesus’ favorite method of teaching was...the parable! No one asks if the Prodigal Son was real before deciding if the story is worth considering. What if we read these as parables about Jesus, primarily about the meaning his followers saw through him, rather than attempts to record “history” in a modernist style?

Historical Context

Into what world was Jesus born? We read about him through Christianity-within-Judaism-within-Roman-Empire...

- **The Kingdom of Judah** was taken into exile by the Babylonian empire from 586 to 539 BCE. The Second Temple was begun in 537 under Persian rule, and the Bible becomes the center of Judaism.
- **Judea** continues under Persian and then Greek Empires, before gaining independence under the Maccabees from 110-63 BCE (after which they came under Roman control).
- Rome moved from a Republic to an **Empire** under Caesar Augustus in 27 BCE after years of civil war, and he ruled until 14 CE.
- **Herod the Great** ruled the Roman client kingdom of Palestine from 37 BCE to 4 BCE with an iron fist, and claimed to be the legitimate King of the Jews.
- Upon Herod's death, a rebel named Judas attacked the capital of Galilee, Sepphoris, leading to Roman legions storming south from Syria and razing the town—killing, raping and enslaving the people. *It* was likely, based on similar events, that neighboring villagers also had to flee or die.
- **Jesus** was born in the same year, and his hometown was Nazareth, 4 miles from Sepphoris in the rural fishing region of Galilee.
- **Herod Antipas** took over Galilee after his father's death, and rebuilt Sepphoris.
- The **Census of Quirinius** was taken of Judean residents only (not including Galileans) in 6 CE, nine years after the death of Herod the Great and the birth of Jesus of Nazareth.
- Rome held ultimate power through the economy, military, politics, and ideology—**Caesar as Son of God**.

The Fifth Kingdom:

Greek and Jewish legends around the 2nd century BCE told of a fifth and final kingdom to come, an ideal culmination of history. Rome saw itself as inheritor of this prophecy; Judaism insisted differently—the Kingdom of God as *eschaton* (final).

In the book of Daniel (160 BCE), the first four kingdoms are depicted as inhuman beasts; the fifth is to be “one like a human being” (son of man)—a truly human/humane civilization.

The Jewish *Sybylline Oracles* of 30 BCE began describing what this might look like (borrowing from Roman tradition of fictional prophecies):

*“The earth will belong equally to all,
undivided by walls or fences.*

*It will then bear more abundant fruits spontaneously.
Lives will be in common and wealth will have no division.*

*For there will be no poor man there,
no rich, and no tyrant, no slave.*

Further, no one will be either great or small anymore.

No kings, no leaders. All will be on a par together.”

Two outstanding questions remained inside Judaism in the first century:

- **What then of the Gentiles?** Two contrasting answers in the tradition: extermination at “Armageddon” or “the Great Final Feast” (Isaiah 2:2-4).
- **Will there be an intermediary** that God uses, an Anointed/Appointed One?

We cannot contrast Rome and God here with “earthly vs. heavenly.” Both claim divine credentials for the good of humanity, with different visions. “*Empire* promises peace through violent force. *Eschaton* promises peace through nonviolent justice.”

Keep Reading:

- *The First Christmas*
Marcus Borg & John Dominic Crossan