

The First Christmas

Narratives of Empire and Resistance

Session 4: Beginning Again

The Rev. John Elliot Lein — December 22, 2019

Reminders

These stories were crafted around critical questions from the second generation of “little-Christ” in the 1st century CE:

1. Who is “the Anointed One” who is to usher in the kingdom of God? (King Herod or John the Baptist or Jesus)
2. Who is the Son of God, Lord, Savior of the World, God-With-Us, Prince of Peace? (Caesar Augustus of Rome or Jesus the Anointed of Galilee)
3. How does divine peace come upon the world? (through violence and victory or through nonviolence and suffering)

These stories are not about *fact*, they are about *meaning*. Consider these stories as *overture*: an opening which proclaims the overall theme of a work—related but different for each Matthew and Luke.

IMPORTANT NOTE: The Hebrew Bible is fulfilled/completed in two ways: the *New Testament* for Christians, and the *Mishnah/Talmud* for Jews. Both are “the old covenant re-new-ed”.

Review: History and Interpretation

- Until ~85 CE there was no virgin birth/nativity tradition written down in any canonical books—Paul did not reference these stories in his epistles.
- **Shift in knowledge:** until a few hundred years ago, the focus in reading these stories was on *meaning* because it took no “faith” to “believe” what was taken for granted. After the Enlightenment, truth began to be understood in terms of provable facts which became problematic for the Nativity.

- Jesus primarily taught through parable—what if we read these accounts as parables themselves?

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

- Jesus’ world: 1,000 years after the great kingdom of David, 600 years since the Exile, suffering under the oppressive empire of Rome whose leader Caesar Augustus was proclaimed the divine Son of God, surrounded by both violent and nonviolent resistance/independence movements.
- He was born the same year that King Herod died and as a militant Jewish rebellion centered just 4 miles from his village was violently eliminated by Roman legions.
- Both Greek and Jewish legends had predicted a Fifth Kingdom that would bring peace. Rome claimed this title with the slogan “peace through victory” while the Jews insisted on God’s eschaton bringing “peace through justice.”

*“Empire promises peace through violent force.
Eschaton promises peace through nonviolent justice.”*

Review: *Matthew’s Nativity*

- Matthew deliberately depicts Herod, the claimed “King of the Jews,” in the role of Pharaoh of Egypt and Jesus as the new Moses. Joseph is the hero.
- Matthew describes *five* divine dreams and *five* scriptural fulfillments, mentions Bethlehem *five* times, and calls Jesus “Messiah” *five* times. Then Jesus gives *five* major discourses in his teaching—the *five-part New Torah*.
- He builds the narrative the *fulfillments*—which are not of “oracular *predictions*.” The passages quoted are clearly of their own times or of symbolic hopes. Matthew uses them not to prove Jesus’s predestination to “outsiders,” but to express the convictions of “insiders” of their real experience of him as the *culmination* and *completion* of God’s promises and Israel’s longings.

“This is ‘NT testimony,’ not ‘OT prediction.’”

Review: *Luke’s Nativity*

- For Luke, Jesus is the true Emperor of Peace—the second coming of King David and the rightful ruler of the world in direct contrast to Caesar of Rome.
- To be an “anointed one” (Hebrew: *messiah*, Greek: *Christos*) was to be divinely appointed for a task of leadership, as all kings, priests, and prophets were.
- The genealogies of Jesus are **counter-genealogies** to Caesar Augustus’ claim of divine heritage/predestination.

“...what is always clear is that ancient genealogy was not about history and poetry, but about prophecy and destiny, not about accuracy, but about advertising.”

- Luke also carefully sets up a parallel between John the Baptist and Jesus to show the superiority of the latter.

“Christmas is not about tinsel and mistletoe or even ornaments and presents, but about what means will we use toward the end of a peace from heaven upon our earth.”

One more... *John’s Prologue and Apocalypse*

- John’s Gospel is the latest written in our canon (~95 CE) and his prologue is in the form of cosmic philosophy rather than earthly narrative.
- Here the Greek *Logos* is applied to Jesus—the ordering principle of the world, divine reason, come in the form of a human to bring light into darkness.
- The *Apocalypse of John* (oft called *Revelation*), traditionally attributed to the same author (though unlikely), was written about the same time. There is a birth story in this one!
- Caesar’s birth story featured Apollo in the form of a snake or dragon impregnating his mother; Apollo had inherited this form by previously slaying the primordial dragon/ancient serpent Python who had waited to devour Apollo at his birth only to be thwarted by the intervention of Zeus. Apollo’s victory had brought light and order to dark chaos.
- John’s story recasts Rome as the ancient enemy Python

seeking to kill the predestined child Jesus as Apollo!

- The beast who follows is referred to as “666”; this stands for “Nero Caesar” in Hebrew numerological cryptography, the insane Roman emperor who ruled 37-68 CE and was foretold to return again. His nickname in Rome was “The Beast,” he often dressed as Apollo, and he is regarded as the first persecutor of Christians at the end of his reign (lasting 42 months). His image was stamped on all legal coinage required for buying and selling.
- Nero’s violent rule was reborn under Domitian’s leadership in 81-96 CE (when this book was written), while predictions of Nero’s rising from the dead were still circulated.
- The Book of Revelation is a visionary insistence that Jesus is still the true king and the *benevolent kingdom* will prevail over the *violent empire*.

“*What ought to be was experienced as a present reality.*”

— NT scholar Adela Yarbro Collins on Revelation

Three Eschatological* Expectations

1. **Interventionist/supernatural:** only God can bring about the new world that is promised, and it will come “soon” likely through violent destruction.
2. **Non-eschatological:** salvation is only for individuals, primarily in an after-death context; this world has no hope of transformation.
3. **Participatory:** God has given us a vision of renewed lives and world; we must join in this work if it is to come about.

Keep Reading:

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

* *Eschatology: the study of and teaching about God’s consummation or perfection of the world in “the age to come” in both Jewish and Christian traditions.*