

An Adult and the Christmas Story

Dear Bishop Spong,

I find Christmas to be a challenge to my faith and have difficulty believing all the events around Jesus' birth to be literally true. Am I losing my faith? Thank you for any help you can give me.

Paul

Dear Paul,

Thank you for your question, which is perfect for the column that goes out on Christmas Eve. There is no doubt that most people have literalized the images that Matthew and Luke have in their birth stories of Jesus (See Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2), but I do believe it is quite clear that neither Matthew nor Luke thought of them as literal events. The great majority of biblical scholars share that perspective.

The facts are that stars do not travel across the sky so slowly that wise men can keep up with them; angels do not break through the midnight sky to sing to hillside shepherds; and human beings do not follow stars to pay homage to a newborn king of a foreign nation, especially when the same gospel that tells us that Jesus was the son of a carpenter. To continue this train of thought, no real head of state, including King Herod, would deputize eastern magi that he had never seen before to be his CIA to bring him a report of this threat to his throne. Virgins do not conceive except in mythology, of which there were many examples in the Mediterranean world. A man does not take his wife, who is "great with child," on a 94-mile donkey ride from Nazareth to Bethlehem so that the expected messiah can be born in David's city. One lay Roman Catholic woman theologian said of that account, "Only a man who had never had a baby could have written that story!" Kings do not order people to return to their ancestral home for enrolling for taxation. There were 1000 years between David and Joseph, or some 50 generations. David had multiple wives and concubines. In 50 generations, the descendants of David would number in the billions. If they had all returned to Bethlehem, there would be no wonder that there was no room at the inn!

Certainly, both Matthew and Luke were aware that they were using these stories to try to interpret the power of God experienced in the adult life of Jesus of Nazareth. Matthew drew his wise men story out of Isaiah 60, I Kings 10 and Numbers 22-24. He wrapped his interpretation around the well-known story of Moses. That is why he repeated the story of Pharaoh killing the boy babies in Egypt at the time of Moses' birth, transforming it to be a story of Herod killing the boy babies in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth.

What these narratives were designed by the Gospel writers to proclaim are:

- Human life could not have produced the presence of God that people believed they had met in Jesus.
- The importance of his birth was symbolized by having it announced with heavenly signs, a star in Matthew and angels in Luke.
- In the life of Jesus, they believed that heaven and earth had come together and that divinity and humanity had merged.
- Messiah for the Jews had many facets. Messiah had to be both a new Moses and the heir to the throne of David. The heir to David was the reason his birth was located in David's place of birth (Bethlehem) instead of in Nazareth, where Jesus was in all probability born.
- This Jesus draws the whole world to himself, symbolized in the Gentile Magi as well as the humble lives of the shepherds.

These are the interpretive details of the Christian story. All of them came into the Christian faith only in the 9th decade. None of them is original to the memory of Jesus. Neither Paul nor Mark (the earliest Gospel) had ever heard of them. John, the last gospel to be written, must have known of these birth traditions, but he doesn't include them and, on two occasions, calls Jesus the son of Joseph (see John Chapters 1 and 6). Given these pieces of data, there is no way the authors of the Christmas stories in the Bible thought they were writing literal history. They were interpreting the meaning they found in Jesus. As long as we understand that, I see no reason why we can't sing, "While shepherds watched their flocks by night" or "O, little town of Bethlehem", and other Christmas hymns. Your faith can be robust without being literal. My suggestion is that you separate mystery from history and then enter into and enjoy the mystery of the season. Dream of Peace on Earth and good will among men and women, and then dedicate yourself to bringing that vision into being. In that way you will understand the intentions of the Gospel writers.

John Shelby Spong

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From Henry:

Biblical truth is more than literal or factual truth.

Some who read Spong's comments may come to the mistaken conclusion that the Christmas stories are not true. The reason for this conclusion is our modern mindset that equates truth with factuality, which arose during the scientific and industrial revolutions and which is so very prevalent now in our technocratic age. The understanding of truth to the ancient mindset was broader than ours. Our minds have become, to some degree, mono and one dimensional. Take the word "myth" for

example. We have become accustomed to equating myth with something that is not true. Yet, the whole purpose of mythological stories is to communicate powerful truths in a symbolic way.

The Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke contain powerful truths about Jesus, even though one does not have to view them as factually true. The heart of their truth is found in the bullet points above. Challenges pastors face when presenting this scholarship. Anyone who has studied in a mainstream seminary during the past sixty or more years has been exposed to the scholarship that has led Spang to these conclusions. However, because many pastors are frightened to present this material for fear of being accused of heresy, they have avoided talking or writing about it.

When one looks closely at the details surrounding the Infancy Narratives, problems such as those mentioned above arise if one seeks to view them as history in the sense that we have become accustomed to viewing history. Some believe that the use of modern scholarship to study scripture leads to a corruption of the text, but nothing could be further from the truth. Modern study of scripture attempts to sort through the historical culture and literary genre in which the scriptures were written to find the true intent of the author.

In the case of the Infancy Narratives, the intent of the author was to communicate that in Jesus they found the new Moses, the presence of God, and the promised Messiah within the lineage of King David. Their purpose was to communicate this reality to their Jewish audience in language and imagery they would understand. Their intent was not to record history as we understand history.

If one seeks to view all of scripture as factually true, the primary object of faith is not God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit; it is the Biblical statements themselves. With this understanding, the more spectacular the Biblical statement, such as Jonah living in the belly of a whale for three days or a talking snake in the Garden of Eden, the more faith is necessary to believe them. One must be willing to suspend reason to give mental assent to the historicity of these stories. This may work for some people, but for others it is a problem.

Why some people leave the church. Many young people and adults leaving the church today do so because they can no longer perform the mental gymnastics necessary to believe these stories to be literally true and, not having other options, they leave the church. Most continue their spiritual journeys, but look elsewhere for traveling companions.

The central issue Matthew and Luke wanted to communicate in the Infancy Narratives was that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah and they used every Old Testament scripture referring to the coming of the Messiah they could find. The richness of this understanding In Matthew's Narrative, Jesus is seen as Moses. However, unlike the Old Testament Moses who ascended the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments, Jesus ascends the mountain to deliver the new law - the Sermon on the Mount, see Matthew 5-7. Note that Luke has Jesus delivering his sermon on the plain, see Luke 6:17-49. Matthew purposely put him on a mountain to emphasize that he is the new Moses. In the same way that Pharaoh attempted to kill Moses in the slaughter of the innocents in the Old Testament, Matthew has Herod slaughtering babies in an attempt to kill Jesus in the New Testament. To the Jewish audience, the symbolism was clear, Jesus was the new Moses and therefore worthy of their belief. That was the central issue for Matthew, not the historicity of the slaughter of the innocents.

If one studies the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, they must understand it as having occurred within the context of the Civil War, which was raging during that time because of slavery. Without the context of legalized slavery and what it had done to our country, the historical event of Lincoln's assassination is not properly understood. Similarly, it is impossible to properly understand the original intent of the Biblical authors unless one first understands the cultural situations in which they lived. One must also understand the literary genre in which the scriptures were written and that the intent of the authors was to interpret their experience of Christ in a way that their Jewish audiences would understand and illicit their belief.

The Good News is that the same Christ who inspired the authors of the Infancy Narratives speaks to our hearts today. My experience is that he is indeed the Light of the World, the Word made Flesh, and Emmanuel – God with us! This faith is the result, not of believing in the Bible, but is born from an encounter with the living Jesus.

~ Henry

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