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An Historian's Christmas

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Introduction

In the minds of most Christians, indeed of most people even vaguely familiar with the Christmas story, the birth of Jesus summons thoughts of “peace on earth” and “good will toward men.” People think of a glorious albeit unusual birth in a stable glowing with angelic light and the manger surrounded by worshipping shepherds and contented animals.

Perhaps the wise men have also gathered. Angels explain the moment and a heavenly choir exalts the baby's birth. It seems that all is right with the world. Even the weather is cloudless, after all the hymn tells us it was a “midnight clear.” Whatever difficulties or problems that were involved in arriving at this glorious moment are forgotten as we contemplate the idyllic picture of the sleeping babe in a manger.

While much of the image I just described is true - much of it is not. Moreover, the truth has to be set in its proper historical and human context in order to be fully understood and thus fully appreciated. For the Christmas story does not just tell us about Jesus' birth, it also tells us how God works in history, in our lives. Indeed, a deeper understanding of the Christmas story will enhance our faith and help us live it out.

History

The gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus was born when Caesar Augustus was emperor of Rome. Augustus was determined to obtain all of Rome's power in his own hands. The Roman republic had lasted for over five hundred years. It had survived the invasions of Hannibal and the ambitions of countless would be dictators. But the republic would not survive Augustus' lust for power.

Pandering to Roman patriots, Augustus promoted the ideal of a superior Roman civilization with a task of ruling the known world, this vision was embodied in the phrase *tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento*—"Roman, remember by your strength to rule the earth's peoples!"

This attempt to rule the world, which included a small place in the Near East known as Judea, meant that Rome was in constant warfare on its borders. These wars, as all wars are, were expensive hence Caesar's need for more tax revenue. Indeed, it was Caesar's lust for money to fight wars that sent Mary and Joseph on the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem in the dead of winter.

For it was in Bethlehem, Joseph's home town, that Joseph was required to declare the number in his family so that the appropriate tax could be determined. Ironically, this was how the prophecy of Micah 5:2 was fulfilled:

But you Bethlehem, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will rule over Israel.

And so we see that God often uses what we believe are injustices, tragedies, or difficulties to demonstrate and his purpose for us and in history. Has not the Apostle Paul written in Romans 8:28: “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God...” Note that the things that happen to God’s people are not always good, but God’s purpose is.

The people of Judea were doubly unfortunate in that Caesar allowed Herod the Great to rule over them as his representative. Herod was an ambitious butcher whose solution to most problems was to kill them. Now near the end of his reign he was terrified of losing his throne to enemies or even family.

He had one of his wives and his two sons with her executed. He also had another son by another wife executed. If Herod brought peace to Judea he did it through tyranny.

And so the Jews suffered and died under the double weight of Caesar’s and Herod’s oppression and looked for a Messiah that would deliver them from bondage in a way similar to Moses’ deliverance of their forebears from Egyptian slavery.

But trouble in life does not stem only from the factors over which we have little control like government or economics. Indeed, most of our troubles are self-inflicted or caused by those closest to us. This is why family gatherings for events like Christmas are so painful for so many. Indeed, many people simply choose not to participate and make fun of those who do.

But human nature was no different 2,000 years ago and we should not think that Mary and Joseph had some supernatural peace as they traveled the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem. We should not think that God had miraculously made them warm or carefree for the Bible says nothing along those lines. Had we been there and watched Joseph and Mary, we would have seen two tired and anxious people struggling to get to Bethlehem so as to register for taxation. This was not a joyful thought or purpose.

Mary was very late in her pregnancy and any travel was quite uncomfortable, even dangerous. Joseph would have worried over his wife’s condition and also about the trip itself. For many sojourners were on the road for the same reason that moved Mary and Joseph. Joseph no doubt worried if there would be trouble amongst the pilgrims, perhaps even thieves, or worse.

Then too he had to wonder about his dream, the dream that assured him that his wife was not unfaithful but rather special, favored of God. Most of the time he was as sure as a man could be of this promise. But men are never wholly without doubt. And when he grew tired or some small trouble intervened, that was when doubt crossed his mind. A

voice in his head surely said, “Joseph thou art a fool for believing a dream. Mary takes advantage of you and your friends laugh behind your back.”

Mary too was human, had her own worries. She was pregnant just as the Angel had said, but few of the people she knew believed her story. That Elizabeth her cousin had believed her was the great comfort so far of her teenage life. But there was no Elizabeth now and she did not know her husband very well. What did he think of her, did he really believe the angel’s message? Was he going to dump her in Bethlehem? She could not be sure of these earthly things, only that God had promised her she was blessed and so she held to that promise.

There were other problems that bothered both Mary and Joseph. It was not likely they could return to Nazareth immediately. What would Joseph do for work, where would they live? Even their provisions were running low.

No, the common picture of Mary and Joseph traveling serenely to Bethlehem in some kind of super-human condition of serenity is simply not true. It is not how God’s people live their lives and it is not what the Scripture says. Mary and Joseph did indeed cling to God’s promises; but it was in spite of all that was going on around them, and in their own minds, as they made the difficult trip to Bethlehem. This is the definition of faith.

Slowly, perhaps even unnoticed, the thought of arriving in Bethlehem began to offer some sort of sanctuary or rest from their tribulations. It must have been with some elation that they trudged into the tiny town.

But their hopes were soon crushed. With all of the travelers on the road, there was no room for them in the inn. No doubt Joseph told the innkeeper that his wife was pregnant and even in some stage of labor. So, the man, unwilling to turn them away entirely, offered his stable. It would at least offer some slight comfort. But it would be amazing if a word of disappointment did not pass between Mary and Joseph. There seemed to be no end of trouble on this journey. Indeed, Mary’s pain had only just begun.

Mary made herself as comfortable as she could in the stable amongst the dirty and unconcerned animals – the cattle are not adoringly lowing - and proceeded to give birth to the Son of God. The Scriptures are silent as to how the actual delivery of the baby went. We should assume then that it was a natural birth with all of the pain and suffering that such events entail.

Moreover, the Scriptures are silent as to Mary’s help. So we must believe she had none save Joseph and he probably was not well prepared for this role. Mary essentially faced this task with only her faith in God and Joseph’s worried face in front of her. More trouble for the teenage mother.

But when all seemed darkest, when the light of morning was still hours away, the baby Jesus came into the world and Mary wrapped him in a cloth and laid him in a manger.

And Now, and Not Before

And now, and not before, as if in response to all of human history and its death, misery, and pain, a great light shattered the darkest of nights, and an Angel of the Lord appeared not to Mary, but to shepherds just outside of Bethlehem who were watching their sheep.

And the shepherds were terrified and cowered in the light with their hands over their heads. But the angel spoke saying, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the City of David a Savior has been born to you: He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths lying in a manger.” Then at that moment, and not before, the heavens split open and a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel praising God and saying:

Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.

Then the shepherds decided to do as they had been told, thus demonstrating that they were unusual human beings, and go to Bethlehem to see the babe.

Luke says the shepherds “hurried” to Bethlehem to worship the newborn Christ. I don’t know about you, but I would have run to Bethlehem as fast as I could go. The Angel had said be not afraid but I would have been afraid anyway thinking that if I did not run fast enough perhaps the angel would change his mind and look for a faster shepherd.

Luke does not write of the scene in the stable when the shepherds arrived all out of breath. But they probably threw themselves face down in the dirty straw and worshipped God and then asked Mary if they could gaze on the child. She said yes and the shepherds, full of awe and simple faith, explained to her what they had seen that night. Luke (2:19) tells us that Mary then, “treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.”

From these words, we know that Mary – though full of faith – was not completely conscious of the significance of all that had happened to her. She pondered, she wondered, she too was amazed, she too was fully human which means uncertain but not unfaithful. For faith means that you believe in spite of evidence or emotions or circumstances to the contrary.

And who had been tested more severely than Mary? Nine months before, an angel had appeared to her and for a moment scared her witless; Luke tells us she was “greatly troubled.” The angel told her she would become miraculously pregnant. Now all that meant in her culture flooded upon her: the criticism, the estrangement from her husband to be, the ostracism. But what had she said? “I am the Lord’s servant, May it be to me as you have said.”

This is an amazing response based on faith precisely because Mary does not know all the significance, the meaning, of what the angel had told her. But she surely knows there is trouble ahead.

So, the shepherds were sent in part to help assure Mary – and Joseph too - that all was well, that God was in control. Then the shepherds left and told everyone who would listen about the amazing events of that night. And many of those people no doubt said the shepherds were simple men who had too much to drink on a cold winter night because that is how most people behave.

Prophecy

Now Luke tells us that on the eighth day after Jesus' birth Joseph and Mary took the baby to Jerusalem that they might fulfill the law and Jesus might be circumcised. However, Joseph and Mary were unaware that God had made a promise he intended to keep.

When Joseph and Mary entered the temple court, a righteous man named Simeon stopped them and asked if he could hold the baby. Mary assented. Simeon took the baby in his arms and said, "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

Mary and Joseph marveled, they wondered, at what Simeon said. What did it mean? But Simeon was not finished. He warned Joseph and Mary that the child would bring great trouble:

This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against. So that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

At this point, perhaps Mary reached for the baby to protect him, she probably looked in the old man's face searching his eyes for truth, for these words did not cause wonder but fear. The baby would cause much trouble in Israel, so much so that it would be like a sword piercing her soul...

But no sooner had Joseph, Mary and Jesus left Simeon than they encountered Anna, a prophetess who lived in the temple. Anna knew at once who the baby was and, seeing the child, she told all who would listen his identity, and that here was God's messiah, the redeemer of Jerusalem.

Luke now condenses his account and simply tells us that Joseph took his family back to Nazareth. He leaves Matthew to tell us what happens next.

And Matthew tells us another amazing story. There were three wise men, men who studied the heavens and were familiar with ancient writings including the Hebrew scrolls. They had seen a new star in the sky and believed the star foretold the birth of a new king of the Jews, a king foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Thus, the wise men set out to find this king, to worship him. Logically they journeyed to Jerusalem and there inquired of the religious leaders of the city, “Where is the one who has been born the King of the Jews?” They were no doubt astonished to find that the religious leaders had no clue that a new King had been born.

Indeed, Herod would have considered it treason for men to even speak of such things. To protect themselves, the religious leaders informed Herod that three foreigners were looking for some new king.

Herod now demanded of the chief priests and teachers of the law that they learn as much as they could about the foretold Messiah. These men later told him the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem as the prophet Micah had foretold seven hundred years before the birth of Christ.

But you Bethlehem, though you are small among the clans of Judah,
Out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are
from of old, from ancient times. (Micah 5:2)

Herod now summoned the Magi (the wise men) to appear before him, knowing more about where Jesus was supposed to be than did they.

So now the birth of this baby had meant trouble for the leaders of the Jewish community, for Herod, and certainly for the Magi. They appeared before Herod no doubt in fear for their own lives and careful not to add anything to what they had already said.

Herod questioned them about the star, when had it appeared? The journey had taken some time. Matthew does not tell us how long. Perhaps the wise men were vague, not wanting to tell Herod more than they already had. Perhaps they said six months, perhaps a year. No one knows. Herod then told them that he too wished to worship the new king. Carefully search for him he ordered the Magi, and let me know when and where you find him.

The Magi departed, probably questioning just how wise they had been and thanking the Jewish God that they were still alive. Now the star appeared again and moved in an incredible way. It seemed to guide them, guide them on to Bethlehem.

Joseph and Mary

It is very unlikely that the Magi arrived in Bethlehem in the same week that Jesus was born. So, it seems that after the trip to Jerusalem, Joseph brought his family back to the City of David and rented a house.

Perhaps Joseph considered a return to Nazareth too dangerous in the winter, perhaps he did not have the money. A skilled carpenter, maybe Joseph arranged for room and board in exchange for some work. Whatever the reason, Matthew tells us the Magi found Mary

and the baby in a “house” not the stable. So all those manger scenes showing the wise men worshipping the baby Jesus in the manger are wrong.

Upon finding Mary and the baby, the wise men “bowed down and worshipped him.” Then they presented their gifts: Gold, Incense and Myrrh. These valuable gifts may have been used to support the family in its next ordeal, its next trouble. For Herod was not finished in his quest to exterminate any rival to his throne.

Having worshipped the baby Jesus, the Angel of the Lord told the Magi of Herod’s wickedness and suggested they return to their country by another route so as to disrupt Herod’s plans.

Herod soon realized the Magi had betrayed him. So, he sent his soldiers to Bethlehem and the surrounding area with orders to kill all the male children two years old or younger.

It is one of the most shocking orders a king has ever given soldiers; and yet anyone familiar with history knows that human beings are capable of this type of butchery.

Indeed, one of the most important things one learns in studying history is the truth of the Biblical statement that all mankind is sinful and in need of a savior. Yet like Herod, most human beings reject that savior.

The same night the angel spoke to the Magi, he appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to take the baby and his mother and flee to Egypt. Joseph wisely obeyed immediately and left Bethlehem in the middle of that night. Indeed, he was fortunate for Bethlehem is so situated that it is on a main road to Egypt.

Shortly thereafter Herod’s soldiers descended on the town. How many children died that day? No one knows for sure, dozens at least. Did the shepherds who worshipped the baby Jesus lose children to Herod’s depravity? Did anyone know why their children were killed? Did the soldiers know what they were doing? Regardless of the answers there was great trouble in Bethlehem. So much so that Matthew remembered what the prophet Jeremiah had said of Bethlehem:

A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning.
Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are
no more. (Jeremiah 31:15).

Fifteen hundred years before the birth of Christ, Rachel was the beloved wife of Jacob. She had died giving birth to Benjamin and was buried in Bethlehem. Matthew now tells us that she wept for her descendants, the children of Bethlehem.

There is no doubt that Joseph and Mary would later hear what had happened in Bethlehem. And even if the people there did not fully understand why their boys had been killed, Joseph and Mary would have easily pieced it together. And so, they waited in

Egypt, on the one hand thankful that God had protected them, but on the other fearful that the trouble they had seen was not yet over.

And then great news came. Herod was dead. And now the Lord God sent an Angel to Joseph who told him in a dream to take Mary and Jesus out of Egypt and return to Nazareth. In this way, another prophecy was fulfilled:

Hosea 11:1 says “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

Peace on Earth...and More Trouble

So, there was a moment in the history of the earth, of human beings, when all that mattered was that a Baby was born and God the Father announced peace on earth good will toward men. To mark that moment the Angel of the Lord appeared in the midst of a great light and the heavenly host sang praise to God.

And this is commonly mistaken as intended to mean peace on earth good will to men on that beautiful wintry night in Palestine. But that is not the meaning of the Scriptures. In his commentary on Luke 2:14 noted Bible scholar Albert Barnes writes movingly and comprehensively of the passage in his commentary on the new Testament. He wrote not a single word regarding the night Jesus was born. Rather the emphasis is on the fact that God has always intended peace on earth, has always intended good will toward men – and men rejected that peace and fellowship with Him. Thus God moved to reconcile himself to human beings through the life, work, and death of His own Son. And on that wintry night in Bethlehem, that work came to life in human form.

To mark that moment the Angel of the Lord appeared in the midst of a great light and the Heavenly Host sang praise to God And we are right to remember this moment and its meaning for all of us. But we are not to stop there, for the world did not stop there and God certainly did not stop there. For the Son of God came to a world in deep trouble to redeem people like you and I who are beset by troubles of every kind. But this is nothing new. Even the mother of our Lord Jesus and his earthly father faced troubles just as we do.

Indeed, they faced problems that few of us must face. And since they did experience these kinds of problems their example is very helpful. In the midst of their worries, confusion, and trouble, they maintained their faith. Mary lived to see Simeon’s prophecy fulfilled. She saw her son crucified and thus “a sword pierced her soul.” Thus, Mary, full of faith, saw troubles follow her into old age. And so the Christmas story is not the story of our deliverance from our troubles, it is the story of how God saves us in the midst of those trials. And, of course, it also the beginning of the end of the story as to how God will save us from ourselves.

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