

I suppose a lot of people have the birth of Jesus on their minds these days. Hard not to. It occurred to me that it might be interesting to do a series of posts on what ancient Gospels – mainly the two of the New Testament, but also some of the others outside – say about it. When I indicate that there are two in the NT that talk about it, it is because Matthew and Luke are the only ones that say anything about the birth of Jesus. I think what I’ll do in these posts is talk about features of each one separately and then talk about the two of them together, with a few posts here at the beginning to provide different angles to introduce to the matter. But I’ll also talk about other Gospels, like the Proto-Gospel of James (which in the Middle Ages was in some places at least as popular as the NT Gospels) and the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew.

One of the reasons this is on my mind just now – apart from the obvious thing that it is, after all, the season – is that I have just written an article for Newsweek/The Daily Beast on the infancy narratives. That’s why I had to read the Pope’s new book on the topic, and both things – my article and the book – have had me reflecting on a number of the key issues, including such things as whether Jesus can plausibly be thought to have been born in Bethlehem, what we can say about the traditions of the virgin birth (in the New Testament it is a virginal conception, not a virgin birth), and, well, other things.

I decided to write this article without looking at articles about Christmas I had written in previous years. And just now I looked at them. Unfortunately, I can’t remember where they were published – I think both of the ones I’ll reproduce here were in some kind of national media, but I didn’t make a note of it.

This is the one I wrote in 2005, just after I finished writing *Misquoting Jesus*. As you’ll see – possibly to your surprise (it was to mine!) – I actually embrace the Christmas story here in a sense. And why not, I ask myself! It’s a great story, and we shouldn’t deny its greatness even if we deny its historicity. Or at least that’s the theme behind this piece I wrote seven years ago, for some unknown venue:

An Agnostic Reflects on Christmas

Growing up as a church-going Episcopalian in Kansas, my favorite time of year was always Christmas. Nothing could match the romance of the season: the cold weather, the falling of snow, the expectations leading up to the Big Day. I always loved the presents – giving as well as receiving – the music, the food, the tree. Especially the tree. It had to be real – freshly cut if possible; loaded with lights, the more the better; draped with ornaments, each of them full of meaning. There was nothing better than darkening the room and sitting in rapt contemplation before the tree as it glowed with its bright, multi-colored lights. It was a kind of hallowed moment, reverent, silent.

My faith in God began to slip away as I moved into my 30s. I had shifted from being a reasonably devout Episcopalian, to becoming a born-again Christian, to being an ultra-conservative evangelical. But graduate studies in the New Testament began to take their toll on my faith, as I began to see that the revered words of the Bible were not infallible but were, in fact, very human words. They were copied by human scribes, who often altered the words when they copied them; and they had been originally written by human authors, who naturally allowed their own views, beliefs, perspectives, situations, loves, hates, and passions affect what they wrote. And I began having trouble believing that a good God

could be in charge of a world filled with such pain and suffering: famine, drought, war, earthquakes, mudslides, hurricanes, tsunamis. I moved from being a conservative evangelical to being a liberal evangelical to being a liberal non-evangelical to becoming an agnostic. And that's where I am now. For now. It may seem sad to have lost one's faith, but on the other hand, I'm happy, very happy, with my life, my career, my amazing wife, my loving family. I'm one of the luckiest people on the face of the earth, despite what I've lost.

One of the things I haven't lost, oddly enough, is my love of Christmas. I no longer believe the Christmas story told every year. I now know that the story of Jesus' birth in the Gospel of Matthew is very different from the story in the Gospel of Luke, that their accounts are not simply differently nuanced, but factually at odds. And I know that we don't have their original accounts, but only the accounts as handed down by scribes who often changed the accounts, making it sometimes impossible to know what the originals said. In one sense, I've lost something of the wonder of Jesus coming into the world, for I now realize that the biblical narratives are not history, but are in fact, stories.

But they are beautiful stories. Angelic visitors, heavenly inspired dreams, miraculous works: a virgin conceives and bears a son! There are shepherds and wise men and wicked kings and murdering soldiers and near escapes; tragedy and salvation.

The stories live on, with or without my faith in them as history. And the meaning of the stories continues to touch me. This is a season of giving: God giving his son, the wise men giving their gifts, the Son giving his life, and his followers giving themselves. It is a season of brightness, of music, of lights, a season of winter and snow and Christmas trees — especially the trees.



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