A Very Jewish Nativity

How the Jewish scriptures shaped the Christmas story

CHRISTMAS Eve. Time to turn off the history and science channels in your brain network, and switch on those devoted to poetry and imagination. They're the ones you need to make sense of Christmas.

That's because the meaning of Christmas isn't conveyed either by history (the time, place and parentage of Jesus) or science (whether a virgin could conceive a son without the aid of a male). The gospels of Matthew and Luke make much of the latter, the Koran even more so. Today, however, many Christian and Jewish scholars interpret events otherwise. The Jesus Seminar in the United States, for example, has studied the infancy narratives from every angle, and concludes that only four elements are wholly reliable:

□ Jesus was a descendant of Abraham.

□ Joseph was Mary's husband.

□ Mary was Jesus' mother.

□ Jesus was born.

If that is all, there is precious little to celebrate.

Bring in a Jewish perspective, and the investigation grows more interesting. Scholar Geza Vermes has sieved both Christian and Jewish literature of the era to interpret the story of Jesus' birth in the context of the times.

Of Jewish Hungarian origin, Vermes was baptised a Catholic with his family in 1931, though that did not save his parents from the Holocaust. He trained for the Catholic priesthood, but left the church in 1957 and reverted to his Jewish identity. Then he brought both strands together in a notable academic career in Britain.

In his book *The Nativity*, Vermes highlights passages in the Hebrew scriptures which Matthew and Luke drew on in composing their accounts.

Those writers were using the poetry and imagination channels for their narratives – they were more intent on conveying the significance of Jesus than on checking dates and events. Today people usually work the other way round, so miss the point of their transmissions.

The early church made big claims about Jesus, which grew bigger over time. They were based on the impact Jesus had on people as teacher and healer, the shock of his crucifixion – and then their continuing experience of him as a living force in their lives. Such a man, some of them reasoned, must have had no ordinary beginning.

So, late in the 1st century, Matthew and Luke front-loaded their gospels with stories of his miraculous birth. (The earliest records have no such introduction.)

The conventions of the day demanded that the birth of great men would be heralded by signs in the heavens, and attested by witnesses. Matthew provides a star to guide astrologers from the east to the child in Bethlehem, Luke an angel and a heavenly choir to announce his birth to a band of shepherds.

As a good Jew, however, Matthew needs to make connections with the scriptures that had moulded the life of his people, and he does it so enthusiastically that they shape his narrative of events.

Vermes shows Matthew alighting on texts from long-dead seers to convey his conviction that Jesus fulfilled the great promise of the Hebrew scriptures for a messiah (or "christ") who would deliver the people from oppression of every kind and usher in a glorious future.
From a Greek mistranslation of Isaiah comes the notion of a virgin birth (the Hebrew has "a young woman").
From Micah comes the expectation that the long-expected messiah would be born in Bethlehem, the city of King David.
From Hosea, Matthew picks up the idea that the messiah would come out of Egypt. But first he must take the family there, so he has them fleeing from a massacre of infant boys ordered by King Herod.
The incident also serves another of Matthew's purposes: to present Jesus as a new Moses. Centuries earlier, Moses had escaped a parallel pogrom of Hebrew boys in Egypt. A passage from Jeremiah about the ancient Israelites weeping for their lost children adds another imaginative touch.
Luke's account is quite different, which makes it hard to disagree with Vermes' conclusion: "With all due respect to Christian tradition, some of the essentials of the extended Christian complex are a million miles away from fact and reality."
But that would be tuning in to the wrong channels. The poetry and connections with the Jewish heritage are there to enrich and give symbolic colour to the story. They make the theological point that all that we mean by God (or Godness) is to be seen in the man this baby grew up to be: a man showing love, grace and the power to transform lives.
For Christians, Christmas still means that.

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