

An Adult and the Christmas Story

Some people find it difficult to continue in the Christian faith if they are required to have a literal understanding of the Infancy Narratives found in Matthew and Luke's Gospels. For those who feel this way, the comments below may be helpful. Others find a literal understanding of these Narratives helpful to their faith. Within the ELCA, there is room for both.

Below is a letter from Bishop John Spong trying to help a young man who finds a literal understanding of the Christmas story to no longer be helpful. My comments follow his letter. ~ PB

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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 PB:

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. Let me ask you this question: Are the stories of the Prodigal Son and Good Samaritan true? The mind obsessed with factuality would probably say "no" because the Prodigal Son and Good Samaritan were not historical figures. Notice how this one dimensional thinking diminishes these two powerful parables that contain the truth of God's forgiveness and compassion and what he expects of his followers.

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 Spong 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. Also, pastors want to help people's faith grow and looking at these Christmas stories in this way may discourage some, but to others it is

helpful. Those who do not find this material useful can disregard it, but at least they will understand why others find it helpful. Within the ELCA, one is free to understand these stories literally or as parabolic narratives, which, as mentioned above, contain great truth. Whatever helps you become a deeper disciple of Jesus is what is important.

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.

Biblical literalism and the modern mind

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. If they knew there were other options to understand these stories, such as viewing them as parabolic narratives or symbolically or metaphorically, they would be more willing to stay. The worst thing for them is to be perceived as losing their faith, or worse, heretics, when in reality, they are moving to a different level of faith, which should be welcomed and embraced in their ELCA congregations.

The object of faith is the Risen Christ

The ELCA emphasizes that the object of our belief is not the Biblical text, but the Risen Christ himself. We profess that the same Christ that was experienced by members of the early church and who inspired the scriptures they wrote, is experienced in our hearts and church today. 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 assented 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, whom I met through the Bible. Historical statements do not transform people, but an encounter with the Living Christ does. The scriptures continually confront us with the living Christ who beckons us to believe. We are called to look through the printed word to the spiritual reality that Jesus lives today in our hearts and in his church. In this sense, the

scriptures are a finger pointing to Jesus, but the finger is not Jesus. I think this is what Luther meant when he said the Bible is a manger that contains the living Christ. The point is the Living Christ, not the manger. We must be careful not to divinize the manger. The ELCA states that the Bible is a Book of Faith where we meet the living Christ. It is not a history or science book on which we can impose our preconceived ideas.

Understanding the Infancy Narratives in this way, we can still sing our favorite Christmas hymns with gusto because they proclaim that within Jesus is the power of God. Our hymns reflect the stories of his birth that were proclaimed in the best possible way the authors could to their original Jewish audience. These Jewish stories have become our stories, but we must first understand the first century Jewish mindset before we can properly comprehend them.

How one views the Bible determines who they view the Christian life
In the 1970's the use of modern biblical scholarship in a Missouri Synod seminary in Saint Louis created a crisis. In short, when the old guard of the seminary saw that modern scholarship was leading to things such as a metaphorical and symbolic rather than literal understanding of Biblical stories and that the Bible contained cultural limitations, professors were commanded to stop using modern scholarship. This resulted in the majority of professors leaving, many of whom ended up in the ELCA. The main reasons for the differences between the ELCA and many other churches are rooted in how the Bible is viewed.

How one views scripture has huge ramifications on how one understands the Christian life.

In light of all this, read again the words of a favorite Advent hymn:

Oh, Come, Oh, Come Emmanuel

Jesus is the new Moses to lead Israel out of the bondage of Pharaoh:

Oh, come, oh, come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel!

Jesus is the Wisdom of God:

Oh, come, our Wisdom from on high,

Who ordered all things mightily;
To us the path of knowledge show,
and teach us in her ways to go.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel!

Jesus is the New Moses:
Oh, come, oh, come, our Lord of might,
Who to your tribes on Sinai's height
In ancient times gave holy law,
In cloud and majesty and awe.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel!

Jesus is the Messiah in the lineage of King David:
Oh, come, O Key of David, come,
And open wide our heav'nly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel!

During Adult Education after the 9:00 AM service on Sunday, December 19th, I will lead a discussion entitled "Encountering Jesus through the Infancy Narratives". You are invited to come with your questions and comments and be part of the discussion.