

Advent/Christmas 2022

It being Advent and Christmas tide I felt a need to share what I learned in my graduate school days and indeed throughout a long life of interpreting biblical literature in a critical and I mean thereby a serious, not fundamentalist way.

The Origin and Nature of the Birth Narratives:

Let me begin by asking: how come the Gospel of Mark, which scholars agree was the first Gospel written, does not have an account of the birth of Jesus while the later Gospels of Matthew and Luke do – and each of them quite different. For one brief example: Matthew has Joseph and the Magi while Luke has Zachary and Elizabeth, a notable difference.

But take any prominent figure – let's say Barak Obama, a two term President of recent times. Initially we focus on his adult presence, deeds, and impact on society – things that made him prominent. And it's only later that one wonders: what was he like as a child, when was he born, where, what were the circumstances, who were his parents . . . and so on. Our interest in the person's past usually awakens *after* we've learned so much about his later rise to fame or notoriety.

The same applies to Jesus. Initially both during his adult life and after his death Jesus attracted widespread

attention. Events of his adult life, his parables, his unjust execution, his appearances as remembered by his disciples, his concept of God as grace, mercy, love: these preoccupied his adherents and caught the curiosity of others, so that by 64 AD (about 35 years after his death) whoever Mark was gathered much of what was known about his career and mission by way of oral tradition and codified it into his Gospel, the first of the four.

But then later, when the earliest followers of Jesus were dying off, the early Church began to scramble to collect even more of what was known – leading to the production of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke – including the need to answer questions about where and when and how he grew up, which both Gospels did with their birth accounts.

My point is that emerging as they did later in the Church's first century the Matthew and Luke birth stories offered an occasion to design them as works of art or graphic theology more than eyewitness, photographic, stenographic descriptions such as a prosaic birth announcement – to show the *real* significance of the adult Jesus as *already resonant at his birth* – for example resonating with the momentum of the Old Testament which he had come to fulfill – so that, for example in Luke the aged figures of Zachary and Elizabeth are a clear reflection of the aged Abraham and Sarah of Genesis – the parents old, the wife barren –

which is a poetic way of saying that their son John the Baptist's birth was in continuity with the divine interventions of the past, another turning point in salvation history.

Also we are aware of contemporary Jewish legends that spoke of astrologers anticipating the births of Abraham and Moses and warning their rulers – who undertake to find and slay them only to be thwarted by God's intervention.

The birth narratives of Matthew and Luke were composed as a forecast of both the wonderful and the tragic nature the future Jesus's career as he becomes himself the crucial turning point of history.

Once we see beyond a literal reading of these stories thanks to the early Church's dramatic approach, they can phase into having a mirror effect upon you the reader. By that I mean, as they open up as does the curtain of a theater, revealing a three-dimensional stage, they challenge you to *enter* the stories yourself as pertaining to *your own* birth. They reveal yourself to be more than your name, rank and serial number but as the Christ that you are meant to be – as expressed by St. Paul when he dared to say: I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me.

Getting *into* the text – Part One

But first let me say a word about how to “get into” a story. Not that you don’t know already. I mean I remember as a boy going to a film, let’s say *The Fighting 69th* about a New York Irish regiment of the 1st World War. I sat through it three times one afternoon – and even after I left I was prancing to the tune of “Garryowen” all the way home. I was still caught up in the film even though I had left the movie theater behind. We tend to carry stories with us or they somehow capture us and take *us* with *them*.

We read a document, whether as printed on a page or displayed upon a computer screen, we place it at a distance from our eyes. We read it as flat, as two dimensional, even though the document may be describing as in a novel or history book a spatial setting – for instance about a man described as standing in the foreground but taking in a distant mountain range in the background. The image remains flat.

The same may be said of the films we watch. We sit there in the dark and gaze at a huge, white rectangle called a screen. The camera projects photographed images upon the screen – for example episodes from *Gone With The Wind*. Unlike the writing on the page of a book, the images on that screen *move* and create the illusion of going great distances - which is why we call them movies – but in fact remain two-dimensional.

But what I want to stress is: the letters, the words in a book and the images on a movie or TV screen are always “over there” while we are “over here”. If we were to go up to the movie theater stage and try to step into the filmed action – we would be rebuffed, compelled to keep our distance. We wouldn’t be able to step into the action, the experiences.

Many people read biblical books that way. They take the words or episodes as flatly imprinted on a two dimensional page. They read Scripture and literature in general – from “outside” the text and even farther away from the events in the text. For instance, if the text is about Noah’s Flood or even about Romeo and Juliet, that’s where Noah’s Flood and Romeo and Juliet remain – thousands or hundreds of years ago in landscapes long gone. We watch what’s going on and maybe even “experience” something about it; we may be moved by words and episodes as written – but still at arm’s length. We are outside the picture. We are here and now, not there and then as is a character in the story.

Yet within the last century scholars of literature have recovered that ancient way of *experiencing* - not just *looking at* a page, an episode in a novel. To them the written work has a depth dimension. To understand, to know what the story offers you is to *become* the story, *enter into it* even as Alice stepped into a two dimensional looking glass and experienced the

mirrored world as an adventure, travelled through the manifold changes of space and time and spoke with the characters it displayed. Thus scholars today speak of “the world of the text” as something that opens up to you so that you can step into it yourself and thereby get to know your self better. The story becomes you, an environment that reveals a lot about you.

In the Middle Ages, if you were reading a biblical text about Jerusalem, interpreters would tell you it was not just about the actual, literal city of Jerusalem long ago. It would have a depth of reference, threefold deeper than it looked. For instance, take the prophecy of Isaiah 62: 1-7. The prophet foresees beleaguered Jerusalem as about to be revived, vindicated, crowned, no longer forsaken, its land no longer desolate, espoused of God, sentinels posted day and night to remind God never to rest until Jerusalem is recognized all over the earth.

Medieval interpreters (and I suggest the new generation of interpreters as well) would add: everything said there about the Jerusalem of old applies on *one* level to the Church (as Jerusalem) today, that it will not be forsaken. Then on another level it would apply to *you* yourself – as someone, beleaguered, but who will no longer be forsaken, desolate, but crowned, espoused by your Creator.

And finally Jerusalem so described in Isaiah becomes a forecast of humanity’s destiny – that Jerusalem *to come*

which is so beautifully described in the Book of Revelation as a city, a world where tears will be wiped away and all things will be made new. Jerusalem as a type becomes not only threefold in depth but also threefold over time – as past, present and to come, conveyed while widened as to its reference. The words are read as sacramental, possessed of a fluidity like the waters of baptism into which you can be immersed and from which you can emerge as a new being; words that have become more than just informative. They become words with power, empowering you.

Getting *into* the text – Part Two

Having said that and what with Advent arriving and later the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke, I'd like to introduce you to this way of reading Scripture (and literature in general) – and, first to Matthew's Infancy account. Later, in early December, we can do the same with Luke's account, which isn't the same as Matthew's except in exhibiting a power of its own.

Experiencing Matthew's first chapter of the genealogy of Jesus (you know: *Abraham begot Isaac and Isaac begot Jacob and Jacob begot Perez* and so forth) realize that *you yourself* have descended from generations long past – countless since the origin of human beings, indeed of the denizens of animated beings that preceded our species – our human way of existence and mind and imagination and creativity – the marvel that we are by

our very nature. So much for your evolution, your genealogy!

But now as you become the Joseph of Matthew's narrative you are hesitant to believe that there can be anything special about you – until it dawns on you by way of a thought, a dream, a moment of inspiration that out of your own fertile being you are to be related to the birth of something, someone messianic, royal – indeed *yourself* emerging from somewhere deep, with a mission: to save your world from falling short of its true destiny as a creation and not just the consequence of a big bang theory.

You are to be identified even from your infancy with a name that is more profound [notice how you are transitioning into Jesus going here] than whatever name a census can give you. You will be named Emmanuel – because in some way you are to be the presence of God in your community and throughout your life – that is your grand but also fretful destiny. Did you know that before you read this Gospel narrative? It's never too late to discover this sense of who and whence and what you are. You are to become everything that Christ is; you are everything that Joseph is – and more – in this narrative.

And now the scene changes. You are the Magi from the east, among star gazers who try to read the meaning of now and tomorrow by way of the movement of the

planets, the stars, events, history, science – wondering what life is all about, what the future and even the present holds that will clarify why you are here but as the Magi you have come close to an answer, your own conscious not just physical birth.

Naturally you consult the authorities of the region over which the star stands, Jerusalem as that apex of the political and intellectual leadership of our unsettled world. You study history as well as the stars. You consult authorities, the Herod and the priests and lawyers and educators who have shaped your culture – but have left you troubled, torn this way and that, suspicious. As Herod you too have assimilated the anxieties and dictates of uncertainty.

Indeed, as the Magi, as a searcher, as a stargazer, you *are inclined to look for more profound insights* into your life and destiny and of your world and as such you awaken that fearful Herod dimension of yourself whose number one priority is self-preservation – and as Herod you decide to muzzle yourself-as-a-stargazer who may open your Herod up to someone or something that might change your constricted way of being.

And in keeping with your Herodian anxiety you use deception; you encourage your stargazer to search for truth only in order to track down what it discovers and suppress it, annihilate it – and thus maintain your comfortable status quo, a false security and under the

influence of this Herod, your star goes out, extinguished; you tend to extinguish yourself! “It can’t be about me.”

Nevertheless as the Magi again you are drawn to Bethlehem -- in effect this Herod, who also inhabits you, wants to ferret out your possibly Christic self for repression, for burial to the nth degree [massacre] before you can change the human race into something courageous and caring. *Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him or her bring me word that I too may go and do him or her homage.* Words that reveal the pretense of interest whereby you repress any chance of your becoming the gracious being you were born to be.

Still, as the Magi, no sooner do you get outside the boundaries of Jerusalem, that worrisome universe in which you as Herod abide uneasy, than the star reappears as your guide, an insight, a directional hint – inspiration, hope, like a summons to fullness of life. You are joyful at the sight of the star (which also reflects something about you). And where does it lead you? Back to the unheralded place of your actual birth which you now, thanks to the poetry of the prophets, know to be “by no means least” among the birth places of this world – your birthplace, your Bethlehem.

Interlude:

As I assist you by way of an interpretation of Matthew's birth story to step into the story and find in all the characters aspects of your own composite self – and since we have arrived at your Bethlehem, have you ever meditated upon where you were born? I was born way back in 1928 in my Italian grandmother's row house in South Philadelphia. The street was lined with brick row houses, as was so much of Philadelphia in general. It was two stories high, three white steps to enter. My mother was still conservative enough to trust only her mother as midwife – not the hospital. My first crib was a wicker clothes basket. I was born around midnight so that today my birth record states January 22nd while my family says it was January 21st – which is probably the correct date because my father who was there recorded it in his handbook of job assignments in pencil that very moment. By this world's standards it was an insignificant event, one among thousands that night. But if you place it, as I have been doing with you, within the way the Gospel dramatizes the birth of Christ, it takes on the deeper dimensions of Christ's birth – and you need to know that – to overcome whatever shyness you have about your worth, your race, your talent, to prevent you from thinking you are nothing but a statistic. Christmas is also about *your* coming into this world as akin to the birth of a messiah, a redeemer – so start behaving as the royalty, the godly being you are.

But now stepping back into the drama of Matthew, how do you - after so long a journey as the Magi led by a star

to find yourself as a newborn being – how do you comport yourself before this newborn you? You open up the treasures, the possibilities that reflect your worth: gold, durable, malleable, reflective of light, weighty with worth; aromatic – frankincense and myrrh – a fragrance issues from you as from God’s own breath.

But you realize: in a world ruled by Herod, even you as Herod, such a presence must be suppressed – and you must find elsewhere to survive. You go under cover, hide your true identity, get lost amid the idols of Egypt – your identity codified, your reduction to anonymity, repressed, so many souls prevented to breathe by – let’s call it behavioral modification dictated by commerce – rarely to become what they really are – marvels of creation. And as background music we hear: *A voice was heard in Ramah, sobbing and loud lamentation; Rachel weeping for her children, inconsolable, since they were no more.*

But the survival of the stargazers, the seekers, the wiser “you” that persists in living your life as a quest unmasks the weakness that characterizes you as Herod along with his nearsighted scribes. This repressed aspect of you is destined to recession. As the composite self you are, you awaken as if from a dream and undertake your own exodus – as Israel of old - from the idols of Egypt – every day you are underway to that Galilee where the Jesus of history awaits you as his disciple.

From here there awaits you the whole rest of the Gospel story – your life - wherein you grow as a person of grace and miracles – among those dimensions of your self that *also* await you as disciple, Pharisee, blind, deaf, mute, lame, defunct and rising from the dead.