

## ***WARNING: BIBLE LESSON***

**By Michael Ventura**

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The earliest writing we have about Jesus comes from Paul. His letters were written circa 50 AD, about 20 years after Jesus was executed; they constitute the bulk of the New Testament. Paul relates that he met and had extensive conversations with at least two men who knew Jesus and Mary personally: Peter, and James the Just (who is identified by both Paul and The Book of Acts as the brother of Jesus). It's safe to assume that when Paul went to Jerusalem to argue doctrine with Peter and James, he met others who had seen Jesus firsthand. Paul was Christianity's most intense evangelist, dedicated to converting Jews (like himself) and gentiles alike. It's a telling fact, then, that Paul never mentions Mary, Joseph, or the miracle of the virgin birth. Paul probably heard of Mary from her son James, but Mary wasn't important *religiously* to Paul, or surely he would have mentioned her. And he didn't seem to think Jesus' birth was anything out of the ordinary; again, if he had, he would have mentioned it, for no one was more passionate in declaiming that Jesus was the Messiah.

The next account of Jesus is the Gospel According to Mark, though it's printed second (after Matthew) in the Bible. Scholars believe Mark wrote circa 70 AD, and they believe Mark's was the first extant Gospel because it's clear that Matthew and Luke copied Mark. Why is it clear? Because Matthew (written, scholars believe, circa 80 AD) and Luke (written circa 90 AD) only agree on the sequence of their stories when they copy and/or re-write Mark; in everything else the sequence and/or the content of their stories differ from each other. The reasonable assumption is that both Matthew and Luke had copies of Mark, and used Mark for their general structure, adding and subtracting as they saw fit.

Writing only 40 years after Jesus' death, Mark too may have known witnesses to Jesus' life, or people who knew the witnesses. Yet Mark also never mentions anything unusual about Jesus' birth; and, though he mentions Mary several times, he never mentions Joseph. The Gospel of John is thought to be the latest, written circa 100 AD. It differs completely from the other gospels both in sequence and content, so most scholars believe that John didn't know the gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. John had heard of Mary. She appears in his work both at the Wedding in Cana and at the Crucifixion. So it's all the more significant that, having heard of Mary, he never mentions a miraculous birth.

In addition, Paul, Mark, and John speak of many towns and cities where Jesus lived and preached, but they never speak of Bethlehem. All make the assumption that Jesus spent his entire pre-Gospel life in Nazareth.

Thus "the Christmas story" doesn't go back to the earliest witnesses, and even one of the later evangelists didn't know it. We get "Christmas" only from Matthew and Luke, who speak of a Bethlehem virgin birth but contradict each other on all other details. The parts of their tales that can be historically checked don't hold up either.

For instance, in his Chapter 2, Matthew tells us that when Herod the Great heard that a rival "king of the Jews" had recently been born in Bethlehem, he ordered the massacre of all Bethlehem boys two years of age and younger. Yet not only do the historical records of that time - which are rife with massacres - never mention such an atrocity; it also doesn't fit what we know of the character of first-century Jews.

These people were peasants who could not be depended upon to be docile. For example, it's well-documented that when the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, in the year 27, tried merely to install busts of the Emperor Tiberius in Jerusalem (which was not far from Bethlehem), the peasant population rose in a nonviolent protest. When Pilate threatened to kill them all - men, women, and children alike - they told Pilate that they'd choose death rather than be forced to live with the offending statues. They didn't budge; they simply stayed where they had gathered, waiting for the Roman soldiers (who'd surrounded them) to kill them. Pilate didn't want his administration to begin with mass murder - apparently he thought that wouldn't reflect well on his administration in Rome (you can't tax dead people) - so he backed off and took the statues down.

Does this sound like a people who would stand for having all their small males slaughtered at the whim of a king? Given that there is no corroboration in any of the writings of the time, and that the tale of Herod's massacre goes against everything known about the character of first-century Jews (who from roughly 65 to 120 AD would fight a long, bloody war against the Romans, fighting on even when they knew they would lose) - Matthew's massacre doesn't hold historical water. Scholars think that Matthew located Jesus' birth in Bethlehem to convince his audience that prophecy had been fulfilled and the Messiah had been born in the city of David, which was Bethlehem.

Today, even conservative Catholic historians such as John P. Meier, a practicing priest and the author of one of the most respected scholarly works on Jesus (*A Marginal Jew - Rethinking the Historical Jesus*), no longer believe that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Since Fr. Meier publishes with the tacit approval of the Vatican, it seems that the pope no longer insists on Bethlehem either.

If Luke had believed and/or heard of the story of Herod's massacre, he surely would have repeated it; but there's no such massacre in Luke. Like Matthew, Luke sets the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, for the same reason - it was the traditional birthplace of David; and, with Matthew, Luke is the only other writer of that era who'd heard of Joseph and of a virgin birth. But Luke doesn't assume the Joseph family lived in Bethlehem; he gets them to Bethlehem with the excuse that they had to return to the city of Joseph's birth in order to comply with a Roman census.

Then, as now, a census was a crucial government function conducted in order to determine whom to tax, and to determine the extent of the Empire's resources. Copious records were kept of every census, yet there is no record of Luke's census - neither its year, nor its odd way of head-counting. Many scholars have pointed out that a census was taken where people lived and worked; to require everyone to go back to their birthplace would cause major economic disruption. That would take a big bite out of the taxes, and taxes were what the Roman Empire was all about. Luke's audience apparently had heard that Jesus' family had always lived in Nazareth, so Luke strained to invent an unlikely census to get them to Bethlehem.

Here Luke adds a detail worthy of Cecil B. DeMille: that Mary's cousin Elizabeth is the mother of John the Baptist. Making Jesus and John cousins is pure hokum, yet in its way this was an honorable invention: The highly intelligent conversation between Mary and Elizabeth (Luke 1:41-56) is unique, even revolutionary, in the literature of its time. Jews, Greeks, Romans, and, by Luke's time, many Christians would have been appalled at women having the temerity to philosophize about God. Luke tried to counter such prejudice. But the Baptist's origins were obscure, to say the least. Even the contemporary Jewish historian Josephus, who writes extensively of John the Baptist and who certainly knew people who'd seen John, doesn't seem to know where John came from.

Matthew has the Magi and the guiding star; Luke never heard of them. Luke has the manger and the shepherds; Matthew never heard of them. Paul, Mark, and John never heard of any of it. Only Matthew and Luke mention Joseph, and only in their birth-tales; after that, they never mention him again.

All of which presents difficulties for those who take the Bible as literal truth. They are forced to believe that several contradictory accounts are true at the same time. Under such a strain, it's no wonder they anger easily.

In *The God of Jesus*, the Christian minister Stephen J. Patterson writes: "when faith in God is exchanged for faith in the Bible, the nature of faith is altered dramatically and fatally. For in so doing we have exchanged a relationship of trust in a living God for a very different kind of relationship: the possession of a text. ... It reduces God to an object we can easily use. ... But this use of the Bible is idolatrous. The Bible is not God; God is not an object. God does not submit to our desires in this way."

Jesus was a Jewish peasant whose sense of intimacy with God gave him the freedom to behave fearlessly and generously. Jesus said, "Love one another." He rejected no one. He told us that the Kingdom of God (the entire Kingdom!) was within us. He enacted his love at the risk of his life.

Isn't that miracle enough?

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