

How do we know? *The Christmass Stories*

Have you ever wondered how we know about Jesus' birth?

Was there a first century Kate Adie or Piers Morgan standing around, slate and chalk in hand, writing it all down? Or was it all supernatural, the Holy Spirit whispering all the details in the gospel writers' ears six decades after the event?

Have you ever wondered whether it is even true at all?

I have wondered about both questions. The answer I have found to the second question is pretty short: I believe it is true. But the answer to the first question of how we know is a little more complex. And I want to unpack it a little.

The first thing we need to be clear about is that the earliest writings in the New Testament show very little interest in Jesus' birth. Paul writes a great deal about Jesus' resurrection and crucifixion; he refers to the occasional teaching; he gives an account of the Last Supper; but of Jesus' birth he says little of any significance. His writings are dominated by the belief that Jesus is alive and his Spirit is working in the church.

The gospel writers, too, seem to write backwards as it were. Mark is the earliest gospel and he devotes half of his account to the last week of Jesus' life and he begins the story with Jesus' baptism by John just three years before he dies. There is some evidence that Luke's gospel also began here in its original version – he added the birth stories later. The gospels, too, are dominated by the belief that Jesus is alive and his Spirit is working in the church.

In that context it was only after they had recorded what they knew of Jesus' resurrection, death, life and teaching that they began to think about recording his birth. So how did Luke and Matthew put together their famous accounts?

There must have been some witnesses accounts not least that of Mary herself for she outlived Jesus on earth and is mentioned as being part of the early church. And we know from other writers about the census and about the meteor that lit up the sky. And there can be no doubt that Matthew and Luke were guided by the Holy Spirit in deciding exactly what to record – and they came to different conclusions there. But the other very obvious source for their writing is the Old Testament. They wrote down what was already recorded in the scriptures.

Now from our perspective this might seem a very odd practice. If I were writing an account of an event fifty or sixty years ago - say the Cuban Revolution and the Bay of Pigs – I would not use the works of Shakespeare as a primary source!

But the gospel writers were not writing a straightforward history. They were explaining who Jesus was. Their starting point was that Jesus had risen from the dead and was alive and was present in the church. And they wanted to tell the world who this Jesus was. And the most important thing to say about his birth was that he was the one who had been foretold by the Old Testament prophets.

And so into the framework of Mary's memory and well-known public facts, they inserted details from the Old Testament. Sometimes it is little phrase like when the angels say to Mary

You are to conceive in your womb and bear a son Luke 1:31

where Luke quotes from Isaiah 7:14; or where the angels say of Elizabeth's conception of John,

Nothing is impossible to God

Luke 1:38

they use the same word that God spoke to Abraham and Sarah when they too conceived a child in their old age. And the whole of Mary's hymn, *My Soul doth magnify the Lord* (Luke 1:46-55) is modelled very closely on the Song of Hannah, (1 Samuel 2:1-10) spoken by another woman who gave birth to a son, Samuel, who was to play a crucial part the history of God's people.

These are but a few examples. A good bible with footnotes will reveal that the birth stories are packed with Old Testament quotations.

Now you may object that this is cheating. You cannot write an account of an event in the not too distant past by piecing together quotations from ancient texts. That is not how you write history.

It is a natural reaction. And it is mistaken in two ways. First because the stories of Jesus' birth are not history in the way that we understand. They are attempts to explain who is this Jesus who is alive in the church. The second mistake is to assume that the present is independent of the past. Even at a human level it is not true. A few weeks ago I read about Henry V, the great warrior king:

'Once more into the breach dear friends' and
'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'

I read about how he besieged cities and starved their inhabitants to death – men women and children, all civilians. It sounded pretty much like the present war in Syria; or last week I read about the creation of modern Germany, about how many independent states came together in a customs union which then began to collapse – it sounded pretty much like our own European Union. At a secular level history repeats itself. The gospel writers knew that. But they took this a stage further: it was not just that events repeated themselves but that God was constantly present, constantly working through events. So Jesus was born in David's town, Bethlehem, because just as God had worked through David so he would work through Jesus of Nazareth; Mary's song was like Hannah's song because both of their sons were chosen by God for a very special ministry; and in Matthew's account the birth of Jesus is followed by the massacre of the innocents because that was what happened after the birth of Moses (Exodus 1:22) and that was what was foretold by the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 31:15).

The key purpose of the gospel writers is to answer the question that John the Baptist asked just before his death

Are you the one who is to come?
Or are we to expect some other?

Matthew 11:2

The resounding answer of the gospel writers is "Yes, Jesus is the one who was to come." And it is in that sense that I believe the birth stories completely. Whether I believe every detail is an open question – not least because I do not for a moment think those were the questions that Matthew and Luke wanted to answer. If you are happy to accept every detail as historical fact – that is fine. If you are rather sceptical – that is fine too. The important question is this: Do you believe that Jesus is the one who was to come? Are you prepared, like the shepherds, to glorify God for all you have heard and seen?

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