

The Christmas Story

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There was a time, long ago, when the country of Israel was part of the Empire of Rome. The Emperor of Rome wanted all of the countries of the Empire to help pay for the armies that protected and expanded the Empire. He ordered the districts of Israel to make lists telling how many households were there. Every man had to return to his home district to be counted so the Romans would know how much tax to expect.

At that time there was a carpenter in the town of Nazareth in the North of Israel. His name was Joseph and he was going to be married to a young woman of Nazareth named Mary. Mary was about to have a baby. Joseph's home town was Bethlehem, the birthplace of the great King David, not far from Jerusalem, the capitol city of Israel. It was a long trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem. By the time Mary and Joseph arrived the baby was on the way, too.

Because of the registration, the village of Bethlehem was crowded. But one villager let Mary and Joseph camp in a cave where animals were kept, and during the night the baby was born. The baby was wrapped in strips of clean linen cloth and laid in a manger where the animals were fed.

During the night on the hillsides outside of Bethlehem some shepherds were keeping watch over their sheep. It was the season of green pastures. While they were taking care of their sheep an angel appeared. The shepherds were scared by this sudden appearance, but the angel said, "Don't be afraid. Tonight in the City of David, a baby has been born who will save the people." Right then a whole army of angels showed up and were singing, "Praise God in heaven and peace to people on earth!" Then the angels disappeared. The shepherds agreed to go down to the village to see this baby. When they got there they told Mary about the angels.

Meanwhile, far away in Persia there were some experts who studied the stars in the sky to tell what great events were about to happen. They paid close attention when three stars lined up to look like one big star. According to books in their library, this occurrence was to take place when a new king of the Jewish people was born. The homeland of the Jewish people was Israel, and the kings of Israel were in Jerusalem. The king at that time was named Herod. He was famous for building impressive buildings and whole towns. He had built the great Temple to God in Jerusalem.

The star experts, called "wise men" because of their learning, were appointed by the Emperor of Persia to go pay respects to this new King of the Jews. They knew where to go, but the big star glittered ahead of them as they traveled.

When they got to Jerusalem they expected to find everyone thrilled about the birth of the new King-to-be. It must have surprised the wise men from Persia to find out nobody knew about this important birth. Everyone who heard of the wise men was excited by the news, which finally got to Herod.

Now, Herod was always suspicious that someone would try to become king instead of him. He didn't trust anyone. So, when he heard that this delegation from Persia had arrived and were asking about a new-born King of the Jews, he wanted to know all about them. Pretty soon Herod had the Persian travelers brought to him and he asked them a lot of questions. The one question the travelers had was, "Where is this new-born King of the Jews? We have come with presents for him." Herod asked his experts about where the King of the Jews might come from and they told him that Bethlehem was mentioned in the old writings.

The Persian wise men left Jerusalem right away. As they went on the road past Bethany to Bethlehem, a trip of maybe two hours at most, it seemed the star moved along ahead of them and then shown down on a particular house. It was the house where Mary and Joseph and the baby were staying. The Persians went in and presented the baby gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. They were the type of expensive, symbolic gifts a king would give to another king.

COMMENTS

The traditional Christmas Story has three parts, the part about Mary and Joseph getting to Bethlehem where Jesus was born, the part about the shepherds who were visited by angels, and the part about the wise men. If the Christmas Story is retold on Christmas Eve, this is the way it is recalled. However, there have been a number of traditions added over the centuries.

Going back to the time when the Emperor Constantine's mother, Helena, began to try to spot the exact places where events in Christ's life had taken place, a cave (or grotto) was identified as the birthplace. In Bethlehem, to this day, on the birthplace is a church Helena had built, or one built later on the same site. All that the Gospel of Luke says is that Mary gave birth to Jesus and laid him in a manger because the inn was full. Dr. Ken Baillie, who spent many years in Palestine and studied the customs of the people, says that it is more likely some relative of Joseph's let them stay in their house with them, and in every house was a lower front part where animals were housed at night. The inn would have been no place for privacy, especially if it was crowded. So we could ignore the idea that Jesus was born in a cave and that the inn keeper was hard-hearted, except that they are the way the story is always told.

The season of the Nativity is another tradition that need not be taken as it now is observed. The date for the mass to celebrate Christ's birth was fixed several centuries after the event. One reason for December 25 is that was when the Romans had a winter solstice feast centered on the planet Saturn. The Saturnalia was a rather wild but very popular event. Although there is doubt about this, the explanation formerly given is that Christian leaders in the newly-Christian Roman Empire wanted to turn attention away from Saturn to Christ, so they proposed the Christ-mass to come on the date of the Saturnalia. In the Bible it says that the shepherds were out in the fields with their sheep the night the angels came. That would have been right after the rains had caused the

vegetation to reappear on the arid hillsides around Bethlehem. In other words, March.

What about the angel? There is no description of the angel in the Gospel of Luke. The angel who came to Mary nine months earlier, however, is called Gabriel. Even so, the scripture and customs of those times were very cautious about saying that someone had seen God directly. It was arrogant, criminal, blasphemy to make such a claim. At the same time, people understood that an angel was an emissary, a messenger, from God, and possibly God in disguise. When the unnamed angel “stood before” the shepherds on the hillside in the dead of night, the angel was accompanied by “the glory of the Lord.” Glory is radiance, which is normally light emanating from a source. In this case it “shone all around” the shepherds. This angelic being, standing there, was very “other” and awesome. Only what the terrifying being said separated this angel from other spectral beings (ghosts, demons, and so forth) that inhabited the shepherds’ lore and imaginations. “Keep calm,” the angel said. “I am bringing good news” (not news about your immediate deaths) “and it will be a source of joy for all the people” (not just you). The news was this: “Today a baby has been born who will be a salvation-bringer (a deliverer from trouble, a healer), the Messiah, the Lord.” Messiah is the Hebrew word for an “anointed one” (kings were anointed); the Greek word is Christos. Then the angel told them how to confirm this unusual message presented in such an unusual way: “You will find a/ the baby wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” There couldn’t be many babies like that, wrapped in birthing bands, lying in a cattle-feed trough, in the village of Bethlehem, home to less than 400 people, including the shepherds. In a community of that size there would be, what, five births a year? Then the angel was “suddenly” joined by a large army (i.e. thousands – not a band of five or ten drifting in from afar). The angels were singing, “Glory (be) to God in highest heaven and shalom (be) to all people on earth.” This was inclusive blessing, excluding, presumably for the time being, only those dead who were resident souls in dull, foggy Sheol or those gone on to torment in hell. Shalom or “peace” in Biblical terms is well-being of body, mind and spirit, achievement of expectations and fulfillment of destiny, also including well-being in society and fecundity in nature. This was to be for all people, everyone, everywhere. The word “people” means individuals as well as members of ethnic-cultural groups – nations/peoples. All this was riding on that baby lying in a manger. The spreading of this fantastic news began with the shepherds on the hillside.

The term “wise-men” in English is not as specific as the word “magi”. The best understanding is that the magi were Persian experts in the esoteric arts of divining the future. Astrology was the main source of information about impending events of cosmic significance.

During the Middle Ages a number of ideas about the magi caught on. One is that they were kings, because of the royal nature of their gifts. Supposedly, only kings could have afforded such expensive gifts, or felt obliged to extend them to another royal. There is no firm basis for supposing that the magi were emissaries of the Persian monarch (as I have done). However, magi were usually astrologers by royal appointment to the Persian court. The idea that

there were three of them comes from the fact that three gifts were mentioned, although they could have been three types of gifts or three things given by each one of the magi. Giving a specific collection of items to mark a royal celebration is Asian custom to this day.

Since astronomical phenomena are extremely predictable, it should be possible to specify what exactly was the star the wise men saw rising in the East. All we have to know is the date on which the star appeared. Well, dates begin with the birth of Christ, don't they? So we should search the skies at 0 AD. The trouble is that Herod died before that, and he is mentioned by name as the king of Israel (or what we are calling Israel, for simplicity's sake). Calendars have been changed more than once since then, confusing dates even more. So, it is only an educated guess that planetariums use during December to illustrate their Christmas programs. Anyway, it has to have been something of an optical illusion or metaphor if the magi saw the star moving until it stopped over the very place where the child was.

The clear inference is that the star's first appearance coincided with the birth of the Christ-child. If this is to be taken literally rather than figuratively, the elapsed time between the birth and the arrival of the magi in Jerusalem had to have been several months. So Jesus was at least a year old when the wise men found him. That seems confirmed by the account that Herod, conforming to type and precedent, decided to eliminate the potential rival by killing all the boys in Bethlehem less than two years of age. Anyhow the magi did not come to the baby while he was still in swaddling cloths lying in a manger. The child was older than that.

We will leave it that way in the Christmas Story anyhow. The custom attributed to Francis of Assisi is too precious to dismiss, that the most effective way to commemorate the Nativity is to create a crèche, a reenactment of the gathering crowd at the manger: Mary, Joseph, the baby, shepherds and a few sheep, a stray angel or two, then the three kingly wise men along with as many animals as are practical in the circumstances, the cow whose manger was used, the donkey that brought Mary over the roadway, camels for the magi, and possibly a sheep-dog along with birds. Animals are necessary in the scene. Another Christmas legend even contends that Christmas Eve is the magical night the animals talk.

CONNECTIONS

It is the Christmas card version of the Nativity story that older children and young adolescents remember from their early childhood, if they grew up in a culture where the European form of Christianity flourished.

As it is told on Christmas Eve the story lacks drama. There is drama in the extended version. Mary is found to be carrying a child conceived under unbelievable circumstances that could sentence her to death, but an angel intervenes and Joseph does the right thing, saving the day and the baby. Herod is hot on the trail of the child Jesus, thanks to the not-so-wise men. Again an angel tells Joseph what to do and he takes off with his family in the middle of

the night for Egypt. These dramatic parts are often left out of the story kids remember.

The Christmas Story told on Christmas Eve goes for splendor rather than conflict. The pastoral setting on the hillside is transformed into a fabulous opera. The magi are transformed into majestic figures fit for converse with emperors and kings, who prefigure kings and emperors through the ages coming to worship the baby in the manger.

The Christmas crèche form of the Christmas Story begins with the arrival of pregnant Mary and anxious Joseph at over-crowded Bethlehem and (in the standard version) being turned away by innkeepers. That sets the stage for what follows, that usually being the reduction of circumstances to the utmost: the baby being born in a cave fit only for animals.

Despite its muted, pastel tones, one notion the modern Christmas Eve version of the Christmas Story still communicates is that Jesus was not warmly welcomed. He was in an alien environment, even among his own people. That resonates with young adolescents. They can relate to that. Adolescence is a transformative period of life. What has been is ebbing away, but what is coming is not quite clear. A pervasive sense, for a lot of young people, is that their presence is inconvenient. They are not, somehow, where they ought to be. It was that way with Jesus being born far from home among strangers.

The visit of the shepherds and the magi emphasized that sense of displacement, rather than reducing it. For example, the shepherds come to look. "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing..." they said. That is familiar to young adolescents: people gawking, staring, and commenting on "how much you've grown," how "your voice is changing", mentioning teenagers' complexions, contours, emotions. The baby may not have been disquieted by the shepherds' curiosity and their more than curious tale, but young adolescents sympathize, at least subconsciously, with the baby on display and wish the lights would dim.

Then there is a matter of discontinuity between the baby and the guests. Surely the magi felt it, too. They were all prepared to honor a new generation of royalty, and what they found was a carpenter's family in a peasant village. What a let-down.

That leads to another point at which older children and young adolescents connect to the story. Many a kid also feels he or she is a disappointment. This feeling may not dominate, but it tends to lurk in the shadows, sneaking into view more and more frequently as children begin to show their true personalities and discover their orientations and preferences. How many boys can follow their fathers' scripts for them? It matters whether parents are obsessive about their expectations for their children, but even if they are genuinely forgiving and adapt to their children's bents, almost every child bears a measure of guilt for not completely being who their parents and society want them to be.

It is all the more ironic that the Christ-child is heralded by an army of angels, followed by a delegation of royalty. The juxtaposition of poverty and splendor is jarring. It is a discontinuous picture unless the Holy Family is elevated and dressed up or the visitors from heaven and Persepolis are scaled

down. Things are out of proportion. It is meant to be ironic that the world's wisest scholars and the elite in the heavenly realm can recognize the innate status and importance of the baby but nobody close at hand can do it.

Without being theologically disrespectful, I want to submit that this, too, resonates with young adolescents. The Christ-child in the Christmas Story is a form of the anonymous princess archetype. There is an aspect of every child's subconscious that says, "I am somebody." An inner voice whispers, "You are far greater than they know," although the secret identity is known by those with access to sublime realms of truth. "It is my mundane and tawdry guise that is illusory," kids think. "Actually, I am a princess."

The Christmas Story is one source of this affirming good news.

No child in a hushed church on Christmas Eve identifies with anyone in the crèche but the baby Jesus. The introduction of a lame shepherd boy offering the Christ-child his crutch, or the Little Drummer Boy offering his song, "rumma-tum-tum", are distractions. In attempting to be inclusive they actually detract. Instead of offering a youthful role model that seems to be missing from the crèche being assembled, these sentimental additions tend to interfere with children's attraction to the baby in the manger who is the star of the story.

Years later when all nature seems to be telling a young adolescent, "You are a mess," the Christmas Story resonates encouragement. "They missed the truth about Him, too." Maybe only the angels knew for sure.

Note: "The Christmas Story" is a supplemental chapter to *Kiddy Lit: Stories to Grow On*. The full text includes 25 children's stories and analysis of the way the stories are appropriated by older children and young adolescents to handle their growing-up issues and relationships. For information about *Kiddy Lit* please contact me at kdobsoninsiam@gmail.com and have a Merry Christmas.

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