

Preacher's Pen points

Was Jesus Born in Bethlehem?



This week's cover story in Newsweek discusses the birth of Christ. The story is subtitled, "Faith and History. How the story of Christmas came to be?" Inside Jon Meacham, managing editor of Newsweek, writes, "*Jesus lived in a world ruled by the Romans, and there is scholarly debate over whether a figure so associated with Nazareth was really born in Bethlehem, expected birthplace of the Messiah.*" Debate over where Jesus was born? How so?

Meacham's Form Critical Explanation

Many "scholars" approach the gospel with an anti-supernatural bias. They don't believe that miracles have occurred since they contradict known natural processes. Therefore, they contend that the "miracles" of the gospel accounts are not real events but mythical inventions of Jesus' followers created by them for the purpose of winning others to the faith. The logic goes something like this (in the gospel according to Meacham):

"The evangelists believed the salvation of the world was in the balance. They strove to convince other Jews, to convert pagans and to control rival Christian factions whose views of Jesus differed from their own. To lose on any of these fronts would set back the cause, so when we read and hear the story now, we are reading and hearing some of the original Christian attempts to ensure the survival and success of a religion that began as little more than one sect within first-century Judaism, a milieu of great religious ferment. To make their case in this congested theological universe, the Gospel writers collected traditions in circulation and told Jesus' story—not in a clinical way but, as John put it, so "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name."

Thus according to form critics, Matthew's account

of the angel's appearance to Joseph, the visit of the wise men, Herod's slaughter of the innocents, the journey to Egypt along with Luke's account of Gabriel's appearance to Mary, the birth in Bethlehem, and the visit of the shepherds are all non-historical events. It is argued that they were invented by the early church in keeping with features of other ancient Jewish and pagan literature to convince both Jews and pagans to become Christians, but were not real events. Thus Meacham writes, "*If we dissect the stories with care, we can see that the Nativity saga is neither fully fanciful nor fully factual but a layered narrative of early tradition and enduring theology.*"

Three Brief Responses

First, the key issue in this discussion of course is whether or not miracles can occur. My answer: It depends upon whether you spell "god" with lower case or a capital "g". A god who can create a universe would not have any problems producing "a virgin birth". So, the fundamental question is, "Does God exist at all?" If He does, then it is not necessary to excise the gospel of its miracles.

Second, it amazes me when "scholars" assert that people, who believed in Jesus, fabricated stories to convince others to believe. Why did they feel compelled to do so, if they had believed without them? And why resort to fictional stories to persuade people to live a life of transparent truthfulness?

Third, I am amazed that "scholars" imagine that both Matthew and Luke had to create out of thin air details about Jesus' birth. Has it never occurred to them that both of them had access to the one woman who knew the whole story—Mary?! Is it even conceivable that in all their interactions with this prominent disciple of the Jerusalem church that they never once asked this simple question, "Where were you when Jesus was born?" Incredible! —Johnny Felker (www.truthchasers.com)