Introduction

The New Testament Scholars Who Stole Christmas

Imagine, if you will, a typical nativity scene. In it, no doubt, there will be a stable. Mary and Joseph will be standing or sitting around a manger in which the baby Jesus lies. Perhaps to one side you will have shepherds, of varying numbers, with assorted lambs, and on the other side three wise men, looking more or less like kings, bearing a single gift each. Above the stable a large star might glisten and there might even be the odd angel hovering in the night sky having not yet returned to heaven after their appearance to the shepherds.

Enter, stage left, the baddie. No I don't mean King Herod – I mean the New Testament scholar, here with the sole intent of spoiling your picture. It isn't entirely our fault. Sometimes it feels as though people want us to chip away at the picture. I have lost count of the times I have been invited to offer my opinion and in doing so to ruin this kind of tableau. 'Tell us,' people insist. 'What is wrong with the scene? Who shouldn't be there?'

As you may know, there are, from the perspective of New Testament studies, a number of problems with the traditional scene: Jesus may not have been born in a stable but in a house; the presence of an inn (with accompanying innkeeper) is unlikely; the shepherds probably didn't visit at the same time as the wise men; the angels appeared on the hills around Bethlehem but probably didn't hang around afterwards; there is no evidence that there were three wise men (only that there were three gifts – these could have been brought by two or 25 people); the wise men were probably not kings; the star may or may not have 'hung' over the place

where Jesus lay. Then there are problems of dating. Ironically Jesus may not have been born in the year zero, since Herod the Great died in 4 BC and the major census attributed to Quirinius, governor of Syria, was between AD 6 and 7. Put all of these together and you can begin to feel the Christmas tableau crumble before your very eyes. Over the years New Testament scholars have stripped away details of our beloved nativity scenes until we are left with a few forlorn characters on an entirely unfamiliar stage. No wonder people avoid our company around Christmas time!

Let me be clear from the start: I have no desire in this book to be a New Testament scholarly Grinch, intent on stealing your Christmas away slice by slice. I am a fan of the traditional nativity scene. I attend nativity plays with delight year after year. We have three crib sets in our house, which I set up each year, summoning shepherds, wise men, sheep, oxen, camels, angels and stars to the scene with joyful abandon. While I agree with many of the New Testament scholarly points made about an accurate reading of the text, there is a time and a place for these points and that time and place is not the nativity play, nor even necessarily Christmas morning.

Indeed our traditional portrayals of the Christmas story draw on ancient and respectable interpretative traditions, which encourage an imaginative inhabitation of the text. These traditions, found in both Judaism and Christianity, encourage us to imagine further details about the story, to see with our mind's eye not only the characters mentioned in the text but others too. A nativity play that stayed faithful to exactly what we can find in either Luke or Matthew would be very short and a little disappointing.

In my view there is nothing wrong at all with supplying additional details or with conflating the accounts of Matthew and Luke together, so long as we do not forget that this is what we have done. If we remain clear that extra characters, additional details and conflation of stories are necessary to make the story easier to engage with, then there is little wrong with that. The problems arise when our additions to the narrative are taken as seriously as, or more seriously than, the original itself.

The key question is at what point we mention this fact. It is easy to work out which are the wrong occasions in which to mention this, much harder to work out which are the right ones. A book such as this is surely one of those right occasions, so long as you know that it is not designed to tell you what you can or cannot think about Christmas or the birth narratives. Christmas presents to us, mostly in narrative form, some of the most wonderful truths about our faith – truths about a God who loves us, who was prepared to risk everything to live among us in human form, who drew the most unlikely people to him by doing this and who continues today to seek to draw people to him from all walks of life. Christmas is a feast that encourages our imaginative engagement with the mysterious truths it seeks to portray – and no one has the right to criticize the invitation to imaginative engagement.

At the same time, Christmas can also raise for us serious problems about the nature of this engagement. For those who know the biblical stories (and there are not as many as there used to be), one of the greatest barriers to deep theological reflection is overfamiliarity. When we know the stories too well, it is very difficult to read them with fresh eyes. When the narratives become too much a part of our inner world, we come to them encumbered by half-remembered reflections of years gone by, years of interpretation through nativity plays and crib services and centuries of Christian art, so that it becomes almost impossible to read them as they are for what they might have to say to us.

The purpose of this book is not to be prescriptive. It does not seek to tell you what can and cannot be believed. Instead it seeks to be suggestive, to open up new ways of seeing these well-known and well-loved stories and to read the text in detail so that we can encounter afresh some of what it tells us that has become lost beneath layers of overfamiliarity.

On History and Historicity

It is almost impossible these days to study the New Testament without asking questions of history and historicity. Questions

abound about when events took place; when stories were captured in oral or written form; when the Gospels reached their final form and so on. These questions have been incredibly helpful in shaping our understanding of the New Testament world and how the texts reached us in the form that they did. However, they only take us so far. They explain the origins of the biblical books we read but they do not always offer much help on what they actually mean. By and large in the pages that follow we will be much more interested in what the text means than in when it was written. We cannot, however, avoid history entirely. The birth narratives raise particular questions for us about history and historicity – when exploring the birth narratives of Jesus we simply cannot help bumping up against them. Specific questions – such as the dates of Herod the Great and the great census of Governor Quirinius – we can explore as they arise in the text, but we need first to spend a moment reflecting on more general issues about historicity.

Here we cannot help but struggle with widely differing but firmly held views. For some people the birth narratives are historically true in every detail; for others they are fictional in whole or in part. In fact the choice often offered to us is whether we deem them fact or fable. So strongly do people hold the opposing views that they hold, that it is often difficult even to begin talking about the issues surrounding this question. This book does not seek to persuade you to take one side or another – indeed I am yet to be persuaded that the choice is an either/or one. It is up to you to decide what you think – or even to decide that you can't decide right now. I will tell you what I think shortly, but before I do, let us explore the issues that raise the question in the first place.

One of the issues often raised by those questioning the historicity of the birth narratives is that the accounts themselves are really quite different. Only two of the four Gospels report Jesus' birth at all, and the two that do give quite different accounts. Luke focuses on Mary's story; Matthew concentrates on Joseph. Luke has the shepherds visit the baby; Matthew the wise men. Matthew tells the story of the threat to Jesus' life after his birth; Luke makes no mention of this at all. Herod the Great plays a key role in

Matthew; in Luke he does not. In Luke Mary appears to live in Nazareth before the birth of Jesus; in Matthew Mary and Joseph seem to settle there only after their return from Egypt.

The contrasts between the accounts are great but it is important not to overstate them. There is remarkable overlap: the name of Jesus' mother is Mary in both accounts and the name of his adoptive father is Joseph; both Matthew and Luke assert the virginal conception of Jesus and that he was born in Bethlehem; both recount that his birth was announced by angels and that visitors were guided to where he was. The differences are certainly pronounced but we should not overlook the key similarities either.

The similarities dictate that the accounts cannot simply be attributed to a burst of creativity by either Matthew or Luke. There is a strong 'base' tradition about the birth of Jesus that holds in common the identity of his parents; that Mary was a virgin when he was conceived; that the Holy Spirit was the agent in his conception; that he grew up in Nazareth but was born in Bethlehem; that his birth was announced by supernatural intervention (angels in Luke and an angel and a star in Matthew); that he was visited by surprising guests after his birth. All in all these overlapping details indicate that there was some level of agreed tradition about the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth on which both Matthew and Luke drew.

At this point it is worth reminding ourselves that it is much easier to record and retain details about someone after their significance is widely recognized than it is before. If the accounts of Jesus' birth do not match in every detail, this could simply be because his birth became more important in people's minds only once he was an adult. Despite the excitement his and John's births created, it is highly unlikely that their every move was watched from their birth onwards in expectation of the moment they would reveal themselves to the world. It is much more likely that once people worked out who they were as adults, memories of their births were recalled. This does not necessarily mean that the reports are 'unhistorical' but that they are dependent even more than the rest of the Gospel accounts on memory of times past.

The problem with this is that it can sometimes be difficult to recall precise – though important – detail.

Another point often made is the strong connection between the accounts of Jesus' birth and Old Testament references. This is especially true of Matthew but can also be said of Luke. There can be no doubt that there are strong and compelling parallels between Matthew's account and the Old Testament. Particularly striking is the clear resonance between Isaiah 60, verses 3 and 6, and the account of the magi's visit to Jesus. This has caused a good number of scholars to conclude that Matthew has stitched together his account of Jesus' birth from various Old Testament stories – including Numbers 22—24; 2 Samuel 5.2; Micah 5.2; Psalm 72.10, 15, as well as Isaiah 60.3, 6.

It is here that we need to remember something important about the nature of history in the minds of Matthew and Luke. As becomes clear when we turn our attention to genealogies in Chapter 1 below, Matthew and Luke have a very different view of history from that of the modern world. In fact it may not be too much of an exaggeration to observe that their view of history is the opposite of ours. In our context, something copied or borrowed from the past might be considered less true rather than more true; in the ancient world the opposite was the case. If you could prove that the story you told was old or that the roots of your beliefs went far back into history, this would demonstrate that what you said was reliable and trustworthy. This is why, for example, when Josephus told the story of Judaism to the Romans in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, he went out of his way to stress how ancient their story was – the more ancient the more reliable it was.

Oddly this is why we find ourselves with the problems we do in determining the historicity of the birth narratives. The very things Matthew and Luke believed would support the veracity of their narratives undermine them for us. In my view it is not that Matthew was making up his story but that he told the story with the particular intention of demonstrating how it fulfilled many Old Testament texts therefore proving, in his mind, that Jesus was who Matthew said he was. If there had been no passages to support his story, Matthew might well have felt that his argument about

who Jesus was was not so strong. The central problem that we face as modern readers is precisely this: what Matthew and Luke needed to do to prove the truth of their narrative to their audience – that this was a story with ancient roots – actually raises questions for us about whether their accounts can be trusted.

There are many people today who struggle to accept the historicity of the birth narratives. There can be no doubt that the narratives raise some very challenging questions about historicity, but we need to be careful not to overexaggerate them. In my view (and it really is only my view; you can decide whether to agree with me or not), we have a tendency to be like the Pharisees in Matthew 23.24 who strain out gnats but swallow camels. The birth narratives are about the mind-blowing, brain-boggling truth that the God who shaped the universe into existence was prepared to be born as a tiny, vulnerable baby. This God trusted his whole well-being to a young girl, who had never had a baby before and wasn't even married. This God chose a ludicrously risky means of redeeming the world he loved so much. Whenever I think about this my brain is so taken up with the wonder and mystery of it that there is minimal space left for the historical questions that seem to trouble others so deeply.

Of course, you may respond that the veracity – or not – of the birth narratives proves or disproves the theological points I've just laid out. This may be true if we were able to come to a final, indisputable position about the issues raised. If we could prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the facts of Jesus' birth were entirely fictional in all parts it might – but only might – undermine the wondrous theology we explore at Christmas. The problem is that we can't prove them to be true any more than we can prove them to be false. This is why I am driven back time and time again to the theology of what they tell us about Jesus – which is something we can continue talking about – over and against historical discussions that regularly end up in an 'Oh yes it did happen'/'Oh no it didn't' impasse.

The key thing here is to reflect for yourself on how you relate to these questions and how important you consider them to be. You may decide that it is vital for your faith that you believe all of the

features of the birth narratives exactly as they are portrayed in every detail. You may decide that it is vital for your faith to believe none of the features of the birth narratives. Or, like me, you may take a roughly middle position, believing the fundamentals to be true but being less concerned about some of the more problematic details. I know many devout Christians who fall into each of these categories. What is important is that you work it out for yourself.

Personally I see no reason at all why the birth narratives couldn't have happened roughly as Luke and Matthew describe. I recognize that there are problems with some details, and we will explore each of these as they come up in the text, but overall there is, as we have already seen, notable agreement between the two accounts about some of the fundamental details of Jesus' birth. If I find myself with any time for further reflection on the issues surrounding Jesus' birth, I would much rather meditate on John 1.1–18 in all its beauty than try to work out how much of Matthew's account happened exactly as he said it did. If you find this approach unsatisfactory, you may like to turn your attention to some of the books in the Further Reading section at the end of this one, most of which explore the history question in much more detail than I do.

The Snowball of History

In my book *The Meaning is in the Waiting*, I've described my view of the way Old Testament history works, but it feels as though it may be helpful to restate it here as it sheds light on what is going on in the birth narratives and why they appear to be so concerned to link their stories to Old Testament texts.

One of the reasons why modern readers of the Bible often struggle with its narrative is because of a difference between how we see the unfolding of time. Most modern people see history as linear: beginning at one point and moving forward. Some modern views of the world also think that humanity progresses onwards as history unfolds. This is not how the biblical writers saw it. Although there is certainly an element of development and moving

forward, there was also a strong belief in repetition – that events that had happened in the past would happen again and again. In particular this seems to be how the biblical writers understood the history of salvation. God's intervention in history to redeem and to save his people was seen as repeated action, happening time and time again through history.

The place where this becomes most apparent is in Psalm 74.12–15:

> Yet God my King is from of old,
> working salvation in the earth.
> [13]You divided the sea by your might;
> you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters.
> [14]You crushed the heads of Leviathan;
> you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.
> [15]You cut openings for springs and torrents;
> you dried up ever-flowing streams.

This passage is intriguing because it is almost impossible to work out which one event is being referred to. The mention of crushing the heads of Leviathan appears to suggest that this is a reference to creation;[1] dividing the sea by might suggests the Exodus; opening springs and torrents suggests the wilderness wanderings. The fact that they are thoroughly intertwined here implies that in the mind of the Psalmist they are the same event played out at different times.

In the same way the Gospel writers seem to have a similar idea when writing the birth narratives. Jesus' birth is a moment in which all the great acts of God's salvation are brought together – it is the same event again, but in a very special way. Jesus is the new Abraham, the new Moses, the new Samson, the new Samuel, he is the return from exile and the moment when the Davidic line begins to rule again. He is all those moments made present again

1 Leviathan was a legendary sea monster. God's defeat of that monster as a part of creation is referred to a few times in the Psalms.

in a unique way because this time God himself is present on earth as a human being.

The image I often use to illustrate this is that of a snowball. If you made a snowball and put a stone in it on the top of a hill and then rolled it down the hill, every time the snowball turned the stone would gain a new layer of snow. The stone would remain as it was but it would have layer after layer of snow on top of it. In my view God's salvation is viewed like this in the Bible. It is the same event simply with new layers on top of it every time it happened again.

I feel that to suggest that the birth narratives are no more than a rehash of a smorgasbord of Old Testament texts is to miss the point entirely. Matthew and Luke are proving to us that this is the grand moment of salvation, the moment when God's intervention in the world happens yet again but in an entirely new way. In order to prove this they *need* to use Old Testament texts, stories and references to demonstrate that this is a genuine act of God's salvation re-enacted before our eyes. They saw the events that unfolded as repetitions of what had happened before.

For Matthew and Luke, the Old Testament allusions, resonances and quotations are the very point of their story. This is the old, old story of God loving his people, calling them back to him, dwelling in their midst, but this time in a way like never before. The story only makes sense if we can look backwards and see how it is both profoundly familiar and profoundly unfamiliar at the same time.

What's in the Book and How to Read It

A brief glance at the Contents list will tell you that I have allowed myself latitude on what we can legitimately put under the heading 'birth narratives'. Indeed you could easily argue that Parts 1 and 2 of the book are not really birth narratives at all. Part 1 is about origins – where Jesus came from. Both Matthew and Luke have a genealogy that attempts to paint a picture of Jesus' human origins, origins that take us back to the ancestors of life

and faith (Abraham and Adam). John's Gospel does something similar but in a completely different way. John's prologue is, in my view, a theological genealogy that matches to perfection the human genealogies of Matthew and Luke. The genealogies trace Jesus' human ancestry; John's prologue traces his divine origins. While not strictly birth narratives, this material gets us ready for the birth and person of Jesus.

On one level Part 2 is even harder to justify. It is about the announcements of John's birth to Zechariah and Jesus' to Mary and to Joseph. Chronologically they took place between 15 and 9 months before Jesus' birth and therefore are not 'birth narratives' by any stretch of the imagination (though John's birth is recorded at the end of Luke 1). Nevertheless these stories are integrally linked to the birth narratives because they prepare us for the birth and all that it will mean. It is almost impossible to explore Jesus' birth if we exclude the announcements of that birth – some of the key details, like the virginal conception, would be missing – and so I have included them.

The final two parts of the book are more 'traditional' Christmas fare exploring Jesus' birth and the varying welcomes he received.

I have allowed the material – rather than a predetermined figure – to decide the length of the chapters. It proved artificial and unsatisfactory, for example, to make the chapter about John's birth as long and important as the one about Jesus' birth. I wrestled with the question for a while but in the end decided that the texts we were reading were more important than keeping to a nice neat chapter division.

The varying lengths of the chapters may affect how you read them. It may be easier to dip in and out looking for particular sections than to read them all the way through. Some people may be looking for a book to read during Advent; for you I have split the material into four sections, one for each week. Alternatively you could read this in Advent and Christmas, saving the post-Christmas material for later on.

Some may want to use this book in a book group or in Bible study. It is to you I offer the greatest apology since some weeks

will involve more arduous reading than others. In the back of the book I have included questions to kick-start discussion. They allow you to focus either on a particular passage – John's prologue; the annunciation to Mary; Luke's birth narrative; the worship of the magi – or on more of the passages in each part. You could if you wanted only read the relevant section of the book for your discussion. The questions are very much only springboards to get a discussion started – your group will need to generate more questions to keep it going for an hour or more. Given the material, though, this shouldn't be a problem!

The main body of the book takes the form of a deep engagement with the biblical text; I have aimed for something that falls between a commentary and a thematic book. The relevant passages are reproduced, and I have taken what seem to me to be the most interesting discussions about the text in New Testament commentaries and gathered them together. Of course, what strikes me as interesting may not be the same as what you consider to be interesting; there are also a number of places where it is impossible to decide authoritatively how to resolve a knotty issue.

Dotted throughout the book, in a different font, are my own reflections evoked by the passages I have been exploring. There is at least one in each chapter but sometimes more, depending on the subject matter of the chapter. At the end of each part of the book I have written a meditative response inspired by my own reading of the text. I am not a poet and they are not poetry; they simply represent a different way of responding to the text.

The birth narratives introduce us for the first time to Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour and Lord. They give us an initial answer to that question – 'Who is this?' – that runs all the way through the Gospels. The birth narratives lay out in story, in poetry and in song something of what we believe about this Jesus, Immanuel, God with us. They help us to think imaginatively and creatively about the one we worship, who came to us in the most precarious manner possible – born as a baby into poverty. They are stories worth savouring since they tell us how the world was transformed 2,000 years ago by the God of love and how that same God will, if only we can let him, transform us too.