

Was it a supernova? REVIEW THE NATIVITY: HISTORY AND LEGEND by Geza Vermes.

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Very few schoolboys know that of the four Gospels only two offer any account of the conception and birth of Jesus, and even those schoolboys probably care little that Matthew and Luke, the two which do provide Nativity narratives, fail to agree about many important details. Moreover, there are received ideas about the Nativity narrative that have no warrant in either version. So, it may be asked, who cares? Yet to look into these matters is to come on problems both interesting and intractable and, to some people, important. The trickiest, the best known and perhaps the most important of these is the Virgin Conception, of which more later; but some of the others are not much easier.

The two Gospel accounts have been more or less homogenised, strenuously by scholars, but lazily by all who decline to think there are differences between them, or that the differences matter; or who don't mind whether any of the incidents described actually happened. Few of us could say offhand whether the episode of the Roman tax census is reported in Luke or in Matthew, or whether there was such a census; or which of them includes the circumcision, or introduces Herod's crafty consultation with the Magi. The various episodes are either forgotten or mixed randomly together in our minds and the minds of our children, who see no objection to adding Santa Claus, reindeers, Christmas trees, intolerable pop songs, office parties and so forth, to the Nativity mix.

These jovial contaminations have been going on for a long time; even the crib, complete with docile animals, still commonplace in our schools and churches, seems to have been invented by St Francis of Assisi, elaborating a mere hint in Luke. And of course it was Prince Albert who brought in the uncanonical Nordic Christmas tree.

For the laity, and especially its juvenile members, the build-up of extra marvels is acceptable because, whatever some say about the venality and bad taste that can make Christmas tedious, nothing these critics complain of can wholly prevent the celebration of an orgiastic midwinter festival far more ancient than these enfeebled allusions to it. The Saturnalia still underlie all the flummery, even if reduced to a long winter pause that we feel we cannot really manage without – a time during which we can try to stop worrying about the impudent demands of commerce, the unpaid bills and the hurt faces of disappointed children. Yet we still find ourselves wishing it didn't go on quite so long, and regret that it can be claimed that Christmas lasted for *twelve days* (the Saturnalia lasted only seven). Long before it's over we are longing to move on.

Our indifference to the problems of Luke and Matthew does not affect professional scholars, whose exertions are unrelenting. Before the appearance of this little book by Geza Vermes I'd have advised anybody showing an interest in these matters to consult Raymond Brown's *The Birth of the Messiah*, a work of some six hundred pages which, like all Brown's numerous publications, is a monument to his indefatigable though sometimes fatiguing scholarship. Brown's book must be eight or ten times as long as Vermes's, but unless you want every cranny of the topic examined in minute detail, Vermes will probably be enough.

He of course uses Brown, and even allows himself a polite smile at his competitor, a Jesuit scholar, seemingly of sceptical temperament but always alive to the party line; willing to use the liberty, only recently acquired by Catholics, to take note of modern biblical scholarship, but careful not to cross that line. A statement by the Vatican Biblical Commission explains the rules: exegetes have full liberty to report their biblical researches so long as they do not question 'the truths of faith and morals'. The

Church had long refused to allow its scholars participation in two centuries of modern Bible criticism, but it has slowly loosened the reins. The last book placed on the Index of Forbidden Books was added in 1959. It was about the Infancy Narratives. Brown lets you know when he is consciously sailing close to the wind; he enjoys a good measure of freedom but it is far from absolute.

Vermes is in a completely different situation, having no need to fear ecclesiastical censure. Over the years he has written prodigiously about the customs, beliefs and writings of first-century Jews, and has more than once studied Jesus against that background, using material to which only great learning can have full access. He is perhaps best known as an authority on the Dead Sea Scrolls, though they hardly figure at all in this book, which concentrates, in a learned but unfussy way, on the contexts of the Gospel narratives.

Mark, the earliest Gospel, and the main source of Matthew and Luke, says nothing at all about the Nativity. He begins with the baptism of Jesus by John. The evangelist John, the latest of the four, ignores the Nativity, beginning his book with an extraordinary poetico-theological prologue and getting straight into the ministry. There are extra-canonical gospels that expand the tale of childhood, but these are later additions.

Matthew begins in good Old Testament style with a genealogy, and Luke also has one inserted later on. The model for both is the familiar O.T. list of 'begats'. But they are not the same, and this is a point of real interest. Matthew's genealogy is arranged in three periods of 14 generations apiece (not even Vermes knows why). He begins with Abraham and David and departs from ancient practice in naming five women in his list. One of these is Mary, the mother of Jesus. The others are all non-Jews, and three of them are associated with marital irregularities: Tamar seduced her father-in-law, Rahab was a prostitute, Bathsheba committed adultery with David. The last is Ruth, a Moabite, probably guiltless. In one way or another Jewish tradition found reasons to absolve the guilty ones. But why were they in the genealogy? One suggestion – Luther's – is that Matthew had it in mind to please potentially interested Gentiles. But there are many more fertile conjectures.

Joseph is called 'the husband of Mary' in Matthew's genealogy. In Luke, Jesus is called 'the son (as was supposed) of Joseph'. Joseph, who figures in the Infancy stories and nowhere else in the New Testament, has to be present because the evangelist is making the case for a Davidic Messiah, and Joseph is of the house of David. He has to be the husband of Mary, but not the father of Jesus; hence a certain evasiveness in the genealogies.

The root of this problem is, of course, the determination to make Jesus not only a descendant of David but the child of a virgin. As Vermes sums it up, 'Mary became pregnant and gave birth to a son without ceasing to be a virgin and without the participation of a man.' He remarks in passing that no part of the New Testament other than these Infancy stories makes any reference to this or any other virginal conception. There are tales of miraculous conceptions, like that of Sarah, who conceived Isaac at 90, and Elizabeth, who, according to Luke, conceived John, later the Baptist, in old age. Here Luke obviously had his eye on Sarah and also liked the symmetry between Elizabeth, very old, and Mary, about 12 or 13, both pregnant in unusual circumstances; but in the cases of Sarah and Elizabeth and all similar cases a man was involved. Matthew and Luke eliminate the man.

There is a little point of translation, of which some schoolboys may well know something, in Matthew's allusion to the Virgin Conception. He was working from a proof text in Isaiah, translated in the English Bible as 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son.' The Hebrew word here translated as 'virgin' is *almah*, which means a 'young woman', not necessarily a virgin. The great Greek Bible called the

Septuagint, translated for the benefit of the Jewish population of Alexandria in the third century BC, renders *almah* by *parthenos*, which primarily means 'virgin'. Hence Matthew's translation of the original Hebrew gave the story another dimension. Vermes remarks that if Matthew had been writing in Hebrew or Aramaic and not Greek the doctrine of the Virgin Conception could never have taken hold. And of course there would have been no controversy concerning the *perpetual* virginity of Mary, and no need for the story of Joseph's being upset about Mary's pregnancy and considering divorce. Events of this significance were properly attended by angelic Annunciations, in Luke to Mary, in Matthew to Joseph. Sceptics have asked whether this meant, the events being so striking, that the couple did not speak to one another. Brown says ordinary Christians don't bother about points of that sort.

Another extraordinary event was the census decreed by the emperor so that 'all the world should be taxed.' Such an order would produce disturbances over the whole empire, but nobody except Luke seems to have noticed it in Judea. He alone has the story of Joseph's journey with his pregnant wife, from Galilee to Bethlehem, to comply with the imperial order. Matthew has Herod's slaughter of the innocents, perhaps borrowed from Pharaoh's misdemeanours long before, and the flight into Egypt, the point of which may have been to have them led back from there for typological reasons also. Then there is Matthew's star, the star that led the wise men. Was it a supernova? A comet? A planetary conjunction? Mars, Saturn and Jupiter come close together every 805 years; and this happened in 7-6 BC. All these improbable possibilities are carefully studied by Brown and dismissed as literary figments, with many ancient analogues, by Vermes. But, as Brown astutely remarked, ordinary persons do not care. These apparently false historical claims may be a problem for fundamentalists of various sorts, but not for the reader who can hold together scriptural inerrancy and historical fantasy in a single thought.

To make a story more relevant, or to explain its hidden meaning, by inventing new bits for it, was a regular Jewish practice. The Infancy narratives are, as Vermes mildly remarks, not the stuff of which history is made. Under critical eyes the detail fades: the manger, the shepherds, the star, the heavenly choir. What else do we expect? Some of these things may have happened – it seems to be true, for example, that Herod was a sadistic killer. But sorting out fact from fiction is here a futile occupation.

Vermes closes his account with the just observation that if we looked at the narratives carefully we'd find it a little harder to talk about a happy Christmas. We take the singing angels, the gift-bearing kings, the star, but forget 'Joseph's psychological torture' and the fear and panic caused by Herod's massacre of the Bethlehem children. One or both may be fictive, but they belong to the story as much as the happy shepherds and the gift-laden tree. A moment spent on thought about them might even enhance our Saturnalian delights.