

Entering the Christmas Crèche

by Arthur E. Zannoni

There is no more familiar scene to Christians than the crèche — with its mother and father bending protectively over the baby. They are in a stable, watched by animals and kneeling shepherds. Above the tableau is a hovering angel. In the background are the twinkling lights of the little town of Bethlehem. But, wait, a star now rises in the night sky. Shortly, a caravan of camels arrives, the treasure-laden entourage of the Magi. Elements from Matthew's Gospel have been mixed in with the Gospel of Luke.

The origin of the Christmas crèche comes from St. Francis of Assisi, who in 1223 presented a kind of panorama of Christmastide near the village of Greccio, Italy. The picturesque crèche iconography is a combination of the descriptions of Christ's birth found in two Gospels, Matthew and Luke.

Luke's Version of the Nativity

Luke is a master at creating vivid, carefully arranged scenes, and his account is a skillfully crafted story. Some characters only appear in Luke's account: Zechariah, Elizabeth, John the Baptist, shepherds, angels, Simeon, and Anna.

Luke's infancy story is structured around seven scenes, each of which is laid out in two pairs of stories. The basic pattern is two annunciations (to Zechariah and Mary), followed by a visit of two mothers (Elizabeth and Mary), and then two births (of John the Baptist and Jesus).

For Luke, the action starts with the decree of Emperor Augustus (Luke 2:1). This brought Joseph and pregnant Mary to Bethlehem, as Joseph "...was descended from the house and family of David" (Luke 2:4). Five miles south of Jerusalem, Bethlehem was the hometown of King David and the place where Samuel anointed David king. Both Matthew and Luke placed

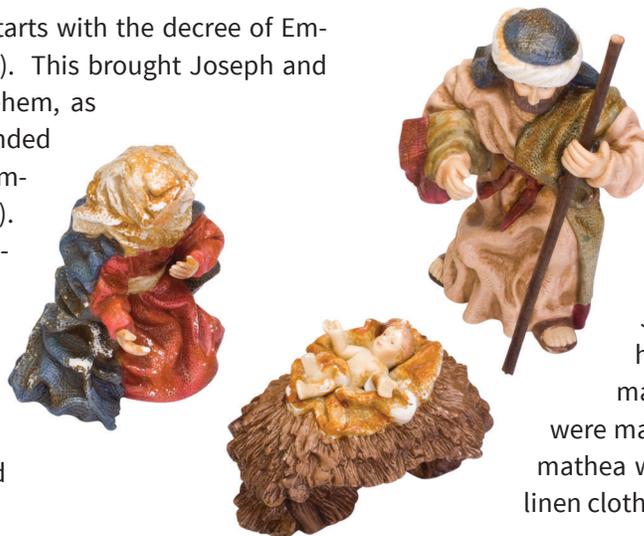
Jesus' birth in Bethlehem to affirm his status as the longed-for Davidic king.

The crucial moment arrives: "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). The note about the inn has colored the setting, but it is ambiguous. Was the inn too crowded or was the inn unsuitable for giving birth to a child? In any event, the implication is that Jesus was born in a place where animals were kept. This supplied the framework for the "signs" that indicate the meaning of the birth.

But what were the references to "bands of cloth" ("swaddling clothes") and "a manger," to tell the reader? Mention of a "manger" would bring to the reader's mind the lines of the prophet Isaiah: "The ox knows its owner and the donkey its master's crib [manger]; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand" (Isaiah 1:2-3). The shepherds, who were considered one notch above criminals, are apt symbols for those who were to become Christ's followers. It is they who know their "master's crib" (manger). Further, Jesus does not dwell in a place of lodging in Luke's Gospel, but comes as spiritual food for his people housed in a manger—a feeding trough.

Wrapping "in bands of cloth," in "swaddling," seems an odd note. But it, too, has Old Testament references. Failure to swathe a newborn would be understood as a sign of neglect (Ezekiel 16:4). In the book of Wisdom, King Solomon says: "I was nursed with care in swaddling cloths" (7:4-5).

For Luke, Mary's care for Jesus at his birth foreshadows the care shown for Jesus at his death. As Mary wrapped Jesus in bands of cloth and laid him in the hollow rock of the manger (in biblical times mangers were made out of stone), Joseph of Arimathea wrapped the body of Jesus in a linen cloth and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb



(Luke 23:53). The angels proclaimed to the shepherds that the wrapped infant was a sign of the good news (Luke 2:12).

In Luke's infancy story, Mary is presented as the ideal disciple. She is the first to respond to God's activity in her life, even though she does not completely understand it (Luke 1:38). Mary did not understand what Jesus said about directing his life to the Father (Luke 2:50). Though she was unable to fully understand the implications of Jesus' identity and ministry, she accepted them. Her actions are those of a faithful disciple open to the activity of God in her life, regardless of her ability to comprehend it.

Matthew's Version of Jesus' Birth

In a meticulously crafted genealogy, Matthew traces the ancestry of Jesus — “the Messiah, the son of David” — by beginning with the father of the Jewish people, Abraham. The purpose of Matthew's genealogy is to authenticate Jesus' Davidic roots and thus the fulfillment of the Jewish hopes for a messiah. Further, there are characters and events that appear only in Matthew's account: five women in Jesus' genealogy, the Magi, the star, King Herod, chief priests and scribes, the “Holy Innocents,” and the flight into Egypt.

Whereas Mary was the focus of Luke's infancy story, Joseph dominates the Matthean version. It is he who was told in a dream about the conception of Jesus (Matt 1:20). Matthew makes extensive use of dreams throughout his infancy narrative. Joseph has dreams and the Magi have a dream. Matthew not only has God reveal through dreams but shows Joseph as the model of an obedient disciple.

We are informed that Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea (Matthew 2:1). According to Matthew, Joseph and his family were inhabitants of this city of King David's origin. In Matthew, there are Magi traveling west. They are Gentiles (non Jews) from the East who were guided to Jesus by a star. Matthew's community included non-Jewish (Gentile) members. The



Magi mirror these people. The star guides the Magi to Jerusalem where they learn that the child is to be born in Bethlehem. Matthew is quick to convey that God reveals through dreams, nature (the star), and sacred scripture. Ingeniously, the Gentile Magi discover the birth through astrology and the Jewish leaders who told them what the prophet Micah had to say about Bethlehem.

On the road to Bethlehem the star reappears. “When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh” (Matthew 2:9-11). The gifts of frankincense and gold imply that the Magi understood the newborn baby to be a king or god; myrrh was a kind of ointment often used in preparing a body for burial, Matthew's way of preparing us for the fact that there will be no time to anoint the body of Jesus prior to his burial.

Brought Together in the Crèche

Each of these gospels tells the story of Jesus' birth from a different perspective. Luke's version wants the reader to know that Jesus is the universal savior of humankind, whereas Matthew's version wants the reader to know that Jesus is the long awaited and promised Messiah of ancient Israel. Put together, we get the traditional scene of Christmas crèches down through the ages.

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