

Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 193 - DECEMBER 2008

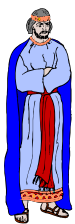
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The Bible's Christmas stories— the gospel in miniature

“How we understand the stories of Jesus's birth matters,” Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan insist in their book *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Birth* (HarperCollins, 2007). The stories have great emotional power, these scholars recognize. “They touch the deepest of human yearnings: for light in the darkness, for the fulfillment of our hope, for a different kind of world,” Borg and Crossan find. Also, the Christmas stories are associated with many Christians' earliest childhood memories. Thus these stories are often sentimentalized. But they are much more than sentimental, Borg and Crossan assure us.



Personal and political



“The stories of the first Christmas are both personal and political,” these authors feel sure. And because the political meaning of the stories is so often overlooked, this is the meaning that these two authors especially emphasize in their book.

Borg and Crossan also note that the Bible's nativity stories speak of personal and political transformation. That's another aspect we tend to overlook, because any kind of transformation tends to be uncomfortable even if it eventually brings improvement. Therefore, instead of hearing the call for transformation and political action that Matthew's and Luke's nativity stories present, we more often stick with only the sentimental aspects of Christmas.

Two different stories

Borg and Crossan start by reviewing what the Bible's accounts of Jesus's birth, found only in Matthew and Luke, actually say, and



Subversive testimony about Jesus

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan observe that Jesus's parables are subversive. “They subverted conventional ways of seeing life and God,” these two scholars find. “They undermined a ‘world,’ meaning a taken-for-granted way of seeing ‘the way things are.’” “Jesus's parables invited hearers into a different way of seeing how things were and how people might live.”





Borg and Crossan see many of the gospels' stories told by Jesus's followers, including Matthew's and Luke's birth stories, as subversive also. The stories are part of the followers' testimony about the significance that Jesus had come to have for them. The stories subvert the dominant consciousness of the world in which Jesus lived, as well as the dominant consciousness of our world.



Peace through justice, not victory

For the first-century Roman world, the birth stories made subversive statements about Jesus.

- Jesus, not Herod, was the real “king of the Jews.” Herod had this title, but unlike Jesus, he was a lord of bondage, oppression, violence, and brutality. 
- Jesus, not Caesar, was the son of God, savior of the world, and the one who brings peace on earth. In Roman imperial theology, Caesar had all these titles, but Luke's story says Jesus, not the emperor, embodied God's will for the earth.
- Jesus, rather than the emperor, who was said to be the son of Apollo, the god of light, was the real light of the world. 
- Fulfillment of God's dream for humanity is found not in the way things are now, or beyond death, but in following a very different way on this side of death.

“The Roman vision incarnated in the divine Augustus was peace through victory,” Borg and Crossan find. “The Christian vision incarnated in the divine Jesus was peace through justice.” This is the birth stories' message, for their time and ours.

how different they are from each other. We tend to overlook their differences, because we so often see the two stories merged, in Christmas pageants, creches, and carols.



The story in Matthew 1-2 is much shorter than the one in Luke 1-2, Borg and Crossan remind us. The Matthew story contains only thirty-one verses besides the genealogy of Jesus that starts it.

Also, the characters in Matthew's story are different from what we tend to expect. Throughout the story, Mary neither speaks nor gets any revelation. In the whole second chapter of Matthew, Herod is the main character, with a major supporting role played by the wise men. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are in the chapter, but what they do is in response to Herod's actions. Herod drives the plot.

A pageant based only on Matthew

If a Christmas pageant were based only on Matthew, Borg and Crossan point out, Joseph would be the main character in its first scene. Then the second scene would be in King Herod's court in Jerusalem. Alarmed at the prospect of a rival king, Herod tells the wise men to bring him word so he can pay homage to the newborn king, whom he really plans to kill.



In the third scene, the wise men (called magi from the East, not kings, who come from a much later tradition) follow the star to a house (not a stable). Then in a dream they're told not to return to Herod.

In the fourth scene, Joseph is again the main character, being told in a dream to escape to Egypt. But Herod's murderous intent still drives the plot. Jesus and his family live in Egypt until Herod's death.

The fifth scene is back in Herod's court. He orders the killing of male children younger than two, around Bethlehem, understandably causing great lamentation. The sixth and last

scene, in Egypt, is triggered by Herod's death. In another dream, an angel warns Joseph not to go back to Bethlehem, because of the deadly reputation of the new king, Herod's son Archelaus. The family therefore moves to Galilee instead, to the village of Nazareth.



Then Matthew jumps forward thirty years, to show John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness and the mature Jesus going to be with him.

A pageant based only on Luke

Luke's nativity story is four times as long as Matthew's, and it doesn't include a genealogy. Luke attaches that instead to the story of Jesus's baptism.

Much of a Luke-only Christmas pageant would be about the parents of John the Baptist, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who aren't even mentioned by Matthew. Women would play much more prominent roles, and Mary's role would be much greater, as she is the central character in much of Luke's story. Joseph would be almost invisible, in sharp contrast to the Matthew pageant.



Anna, an eighty-four-year-old prophet, would be in the Luke pageant. It would include lots of music, too—a chorus of angels, plus three hymns or canticles, each sung like an aria, by an individual. The Luke pageant would include the most familiar parts of the story: Caesar's decree, the journey to Bethlehem, the birth of Jesus in a stable, the manger, and angels proclaiming the birth to shepherds.



Unlike Matthew's story, Luke's story extends into Jesus's infancy and youth. It mentions his circumcision at eight days of age and presentation in the temple at about forty days, then tells of his amazing the temple teachers with his wisdom at age twelve.

Not part of the earliest tradition

Borg and Crossan remind us that the gospels of Matthew and Luke are not the earliest Christian writings. Both were written relatively late in the development of Christianity, in the 80s or 90s.

The genuine letters of Paul, written in the 50s, and the gospel of Mark, written about 70, were earlier, and these earliest writings mention nothing extraordinary about Jesus's birth. From this fact, Borg and Crossan infer that the birth stories were not of major importance to earliest Christianity. What Borg and Cross-



san see as the reason for this omission is that at the time of the earliest writings, the birth stories didn't yet exist or at least were still being formed.

The factuality question is recent

The question of whether the Bible's nativity stories are factual has arisen only recently, Borg and Crossan point out. It arose mainly because of what we call the Enlightenment, which began in the seventeenth century with the emergence of modern scientific methods. That change made many people start seeing truth and factuality as the same. It has led to seeing reality as only the space-time universe of matter and energy, operating in accord with natural laws of cause and effect.



This worldview makes us question religions' central claims about nonmaterial, spiritual reality. It engenders skepticism about stories of spectacular events such as those described in the Bible's nativity stories.



For the earliest Christians, however, Borg and Crossan assure us, factuality was not a concern. The truth of the nativity stories, as of the rest of the Bible, was simply part of "what everybody knew" in Christian areas of the world. In interpreting the Bible's stories, people focused only on their meaning.

Birth stories as parables

Borg and Crossan therefore see the nativity stories as neither fact nor fable but as parables, the same form of metaphorical language that was Jesus's most distinctive style of teaching. "To see these stories as parables," they explain, "means that their meaning and truth do not depend on their factuality. Indeed, being concerned with their factuality risks

missing their meaning and truth, just as arguing for a real good Samaritan would miss the point."

Overtures to the gospels



Borg and Crossan see the birth stories not only as parables but also as overtures to their respective gospels. An overture, the scholars explain, is "the opening part of a work that serves as summary, synthesis, metaphor, or symbol of the whole."

Matthew 1-2, in Borg and Crossan's view, is a miniature version of the rest of the book, Matthew 3-28. Both parts show a parallel between Jesus and Moses, "an interpretation of Jesus as the new—that is, renewed—Moses." From early documents and monuments, Borg and Crossan conclude that everyone in first century Israel would have immediately seen this parallel that Matthew was using.

Like Exodus 1-2, Matthew 1-2 shows an evil ruler plotting to kill all newborn Jewish boys, thus endangering the life of a predestined one who is saved only by divine intervention and protection. Later in his gospel, Matthew shows Jesus, the new Moses, giving a new law from a mountain. Matthew then applies the comparison to six moral cases. In each, Jesus says, "You have heard ...," and then, "but I say ..." And in each case, the law is fulfilled by being made harder, not easier.



Similarly, Borg and Crossan find, Luke 1-2 is an overture to Luke 3-24. The main body of the book emphasizes women, marginalized people, and the Holy Spirit, and the overture introduces these three main themes by presenting miniature versions of them.



This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 16 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

The gospel in miniature

In Borg and Crossan’s view, the combination of Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2 is therefore the entire Christian gospel in miniature. “Get it,” they find, “and you get everything; miss it, and you miss all.”



“Is the story factually true?” they ask. “No. But as parable is it true? For us as Christians, the answer is a robust affirmative. Is Jesus light shining in the darkness? Yes. Do the Herods of this world seek to extinguish it? Yes. Does Jesus still shine in the darkness? Yes.”

A challenge for American Christians

Empire, Borg and Crossan remind us, is not mainly about geographical expansion and territorial acquisition. “Rather,” they explain, “empire is about the use of superior power—military, political, and economic—to shape the world as the empire sees fit. In this sense, we are the new Rome.” Consequently, “the anti-imperial meanings of the biblical stories raise challenging questions for American Christians. Who are we in these stories?”

We need to be asking that question, in this Christmas season and afterwards.

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December 2008

An opportunity in Atlanta



In Atlanta on Saturday, Dec. 13, under the auspices of the D. L. Dykes, Jr. Foundation, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan will present in person some of what they present in *The First Christmas*, their book I write about here. A multimedia production inspired by the book will be presented on Friday and Saturday evenings. Cost of the Saturday seminar alone is \$35, and the seminar and an evening combined are \$50. To register or get more information, see www.faithandreason.org or phone 800-882-7424.

Because I’ve attended two previous seminars presented by the Dykes Foundation and featuring Borg and Crossan, I highly recommend this event, and I’m going to it. I’d love to meet you there.

Political Christmas stories???

Seeing Christmas stories called political, as Borg and Crossan call them, can be a jolt. But following Jesus requires being political. Giving top priority to what he apparently gave top priority to requires working toward changing some ways in which our governments, economic systems, and social customs function.

That’s uncomfortable to recognize and more so to act on, so we tend to emphasize piety and sweetness instead. Also, we assume that being a Christian pertains mainly to what will happen to us after we die, instead of what we need to be doing about conditions on earth before we die. So it’s not surprising that we overlook much of the Christmas stories’ message.

