

# CHRISTMAS AND THE CONFRONTATION OF EMPIRE

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ANY LIVING SPIRITUALITY will be nourished by what is stirring in the depths of the self's encounter with the new, the unforeseeable, the uncontrollable. The interior quest is like a devastating whirlwind; new insights and the freedom of love leave nothing untouched. A living spirituality will also be expressed in terms of its surrounding culture—a culture which never stays still. It should surprise no-one that the God of the Bible is always announcing the destruction of what has been created or laid down.

The healthy interpretation of the Bible is integral to this ferment of new life and permanent flux. If it makes any sense to talk of the Word of God, this Word exists only in the now. No sooner has it been understood than it is saying something else; no sooner has it been written than it needs to be read anew in the light of what has just happened. You cannot know what it has to say before it has spoken.

Interpretation is thus a delicate art. Interpreters need to be in touch with what is happening in their own depths, and they need to know that the Word is constantly changing—a point which remains true even when many claim that it has long been silent, that it has said all that needed to be said, that its expressions are immutable.

The generations that came before ours read the biblical texts about Jesus' birth in good faith, through the filters that their culture gave them. Like us, they varied in their awareness of these filters. And they drew great things from their readings that nourished their spirituality over centuries. We today have new questions that require new answers. The interpretations of the past are not there simply to be repeated; rather they invite us to undertake the same adventure of interpretation. We will never quite know whether what we discover is in fact reliable and trustworthy. But we have no choice but to take the risk.

What, then, might we today find in the New Testament about how Jesus was conceived, and about the world into which he was born?<sup>1</sup>

### **Overcoming Humiliation**

At the start of the first chapter of his Gospel, Matthew looks at Jesus' ancestors. And the way he does it is disconcerting, to say the least. He begins by setting out the genealogy of the man from Nazareth, and has the temerity to mention five women (Matthew 1:3,5,6,16). You might have expected to hear the names of some outstanding Israelite women who had had an impact on their people's history. The reality is quite different. The first of these women is Tamar, who was probably a Canaanite. Her father-in-law, Judah, had refused to acknowledge her position as his son's widow, and denied her the hand of his third son, Shelah. Eventually, she had conceived twins by Judah himself, having disguised herself as a prostitute and seduced him (Genesis 38). Rahab, the second woman, was also a Canaanite, from Jericho. She saved the lives of the two spies that Joshua had sent on a reconnaissance trip (Joshua 2). The next one is Ruth, a Moabite woman, who, in spite of the loss of her husband, was led by loyalty to accompany her mother-in-law to the land of Israel. Then, to ensure her livelihood, she provided herself with a husband by approaching Boaz secretly, at night (Ruth 3). Matthew does not directly name the fourth woman, who must also have been a foreigner: Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, who fell prey to King David's lust and was violated by him. In this genealogy of Jesus, the evangelist has thus introduced the names of four foreigners, four women who for different reasons had exercised their sexuality in ways that diverged from accepted social norms.

So what did the first four women have in common with the fifth, the one of whom Jesus was born (1:16)? Matthew explains this in the story that follows the genealogy (1:18-25). We need to understand a few facts about Matthew's culture if we are to understand his intent.

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<sup>1</sup> For further reading, see the classic work of Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1993 [1977]); the sociological work of Richard A. Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context* (New York: Crossroad, 1989); and Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987).

At that time, it was the parents who were responsible for arranging the marriage of their children. At the conclusion of negotiations, the marriage contract would be signed, and the two young people, usually between eleven and thirteen years old, would officially be declared husband and wife. But immediately following this, they would have to live apart from each other for several months—a time for putting together the dowry, for mating the farm animals, for fitting out or constructing a suitable dwelling, for preparing for the wedding celebration, and so on. At the end of six months or a year, the young wife was solemnly led to the house of her husband, so they could start their new life together. During the period of separation, the young couple did not see each other unless they were closely chaperoned, because it was important that the wife be a virgin at the moment when they first came together. It is notable that Mary is only described as a *parthenos* (young maiden or virgin) three times in the New Testament—and all three references are linked to this period that preceded her marital life.<sup>2</sup>

Matthew is explicit about the time when Jesus was conceived: ‘before they lived together, she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit’ (Matthew 1:18). With this statement, the evangelist is doing two things: he is situating the event in its context of scandal, and then diminishing the scandal by declaring that the Spirit of God was at work in the origin of this human life.

First, a word about the scandal. In the following verse, Matthew says that Joseph was ‘a righteous man’; not wanting to ‘expose her to public disgrace’, he planned ‘to dismiss her quietly’, without making a fuss (1:19). This statement says something wonderful about Joseph’s character, no doubt, but it also raises a troubling question. If Joseph had nothing to do with Jesus’ conception, what was really going on here? We have to say at the outset that we will never know the answer for sure, and perhaps Mary never revealed the truth to anyone. All that was known at the time of the evangelists is perhaps contained in what was said about the adult Jesus of Nazareth: this is *the son of Mary* (Mark 6:3). ‘Father unknown’, as the traditional formula puts it. The texts do not permit us to go any further. We have a young man who decided to

***Jesus was  
conceived  
in scandal***

<sup>2</sup>Matthew 1:23; Luke 1:27 twice.

keep a young girl as his wife, even when he had the right to send her away. We have the young girl, one of life's victims. And we have a conviction: a conviction that the scandal of the situation did not prevent the Lord God from putting God's Spirit into Mary in order to bring life into being, and then from acknowledging the most radical divine presence in this man. Perhaps, indeed, this divine event was in some way actually dependent on the scandal. The five women of Matthew's genealogy form a tradition which already reveals a God who operates beyond conventions.

***Jesus faced  
life's hardships  
from conception  
onwards***

How might we develop a spirituality of Christmas for our times from the New Testament? The man from Nazareth must have faced the hardships of life from the very moment of his conception. He could not but have been scarred by them. The gospels, which are normally very discreet on his family relationships, do hint that his relationship with his mother was occasionally strained. He did not like her telling him what to do at Cana (John 2:4), and he reacted harshly on one occasion when she set out with his brothers and sisters to try to bring him back home, claiming he was out of his mind. You had to do the will of God to lay claim to being his mother (Mark 3:21, 31-35). By contrast, Joseph must have been a very good father for Jesus, because 'father' was the name with which Jesus affectionately addressed God.

Certainly Jesus was forever marked by his origins, deeply humiliated, diminished and marginalised. But he had seen how suffering had changed and matured his parents. He decided to take the same path. One day, he took the daring step of leaving everything to go and listen to the Baptist. And he let himself be challenged by the people's misery that was revealed to him there. His own suffering enabled him to understand that of others, and to hope with them for the Kingdom of God. Perhaps we cannot be sensitive to the pain of others before we let ourselves be touched by the suffering and emptiness in our own life. We can only be interiorly rich if we work through the human condition with all its limitations arising from external circumstance.

It is up to the reader to decide whether or not this interpretation is offensive to God. We might say that it denies God's intervention in history, scandalously besmirches Mary's memory, tarnishes Jesus' dignity and contradicts the traditional teaching about his origins. But we could just as well say that it takes account of God's preference for

the oppressed, of God's respect for human beings, of the dignity of a violated woman; it speaks of the majesty of a man who learnt self-respect in spite of the depth of his humiliation. It also acknowledges that the expressions of faith change as cultures change. The Johannine Christ saw very well the role of the Spirit of truth in speaking 'whatever he hears' and declaring 'the things that are to come' (John 16:13). Nothing has ever been said once and for all.

### **Conquering Oppression**

The infancy narratives are usually read just piously, whereas they should be empowering their readers to live with hope in a world of extreme hardship. Let us start with Matthew. At 1:21, the meaning of Jesus' life is expressed in a few words: 'he will liberate his lost people' (generally translated as 'he will save his people from their sins'). For the evangelist, the people are trapped; the future is blocked. In the New Testament, 'sin' is above all a collective reality, and it is not to be limited simply to a 'religious' sphere. The people collectively needs liberation because the people collectively is oppressed. And sin is both the cause and the reality of this oppression. The next chapter in Matthew illustrates this situation.

Herod the Great was the king in office. He had been installed on the throne by the Romans; half-pagan in origin, he was a total stranger to the line of David. He was a complete megalomaniac, bleeding the people dry in order to pay the costs of the enormous constructions with which he hoped to impress his Roman masters. His paranoia was such that he would, on the slightest suspicion, get rid of those he believed were trying to dislodge him from power, even of his own children. Historically, Matthew's account is substantially true, even if it is influenced by subsequent faith in Jesus' lordship. If such a sinister figure heard tell of a baby that would one day be raised to kingship, he would certainly take all possible measures to eliminate that child.

In Matthew's narrative (2:4), we see besides Herod the chief priests and scribes. These are the leading Jewish functionaries, who are completely dependent on Herod's power. For Matthew, the Roman Empire was squeezing a small people like a vice, as it crushed them with taxes; it installed a bloodthirsty kinglet in power, one who made the population pay dearly for his dreams of grandeur (and his son Archelaus, mentioned in 2:22, was to be no better). And these two

holders of power used the political, religious and intellectual leaders for their own ends, manipulating them at whim.

These were the sins from which the people needed to be liberated. It was the whole system that needed changing, so that people could breathe a little. In the gospels, this change has a name: the Kingdom of God. Jesus hoped for it throughout his life:

Father .... Your kingdom come. ... Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts .... And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. (Matthew 6:9-13)

***The Lord's  
prayer is the  
prayer of  
Christmas***

This is *the* prayer of Christmas. The prayer of little ones, the prayer of the humiliated and oppressed. May the system be destroyed; may we have something to eat; may our debts be abolished; may there be an end to this continual misery, this evil which is so great that we cannot bear it. Sadly, this is a prayer relevant for all times. This prayer sets teeth so much on edge that it has to be blunted to make it acceptable to the systems in power: the Kingdom has to be transposed into the other-worldly; bread is interpreted as the Eucharist; debts are changed to personal sins; trial is transformed into temptation; evil is detached from its social, political and economic base. The traditional way of thinking about Christmas is along the same lines: a sugary and nostalgic festival pandering to our demand for cosy feelings, rather than stimulating engagement in the construction of a new society. And the need for radical change should touch us personally as well. To the extent that I benefit from the present structuring of society and am thereby a 'winner', I will not be able to accept the radically subversive aspect of Christmas.

On this matter, Luke is just as clear as Matthew. He also situates Jesus' origins in the time of Herod, king of Judea (1:5). He does not even hesitate to name the emperor of the time: 'In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered' (2:1). A census is not an innocuous event. It is all about taxes: rulers who have an accurate record of the number of their subjects know how much they can get out of them. David had learnt to his cost in earlier times that *YHWH* hated censuses.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 21.

Every empire claims to be the last word in civilisation and culture. An empire has no difficulty in convincing itself that when it invades another country, it is performing a great service to the people there, and bringing the gifts of peace, freedom, communication and culture. Rome obviously was not free of this ideology and saw its empire as 'good news' for the peoples who had finally been brought salvation.

It is against this background that we must understand Luke, whose heavenly messenger presents a quite different sort of saviour from Caesar:

But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Liberator, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' (Luke 2: 10-12)

This child is the anti-Caesar. The language of the 'angel' is political, retorting to the official propaganda: *announce, joy, city of David, liberator, Christ, Lord* are political terms. What is being proclaimed is not a new religion, but the birth of a child who will later radically oppose the designs of the Empire and of its puppets installed in power in Jerusalem. The people will be liberated from Rome and from Herod under the guidance of a descendant of David, and this is a cause of great joy. As a modern US American interpreter, a citizen of our contemporary Empire, has put the matter:

Whereas the emperor cult celebrated the birth of the god Augustus as 'good news for the whole world' (i.e. the gospel of *world order* maintained by Roman military might), in Luke's story God's messenger announces the birth of Jesus as 'good news for the whole people' (i.e. the gospel of *liberation* for a people subjected to that world order).<sup>4</sup>

It is worth noting who is chosen to receive God's message: shepherds, a marginal group if ever there was one. Matthew made it clear that the ruling classes did not want to know anything about a new king (2:4). They did know his predicted birthplace, but there was

<sup>4</sup> Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas*, 33—emphases original.



*Refugee children in contemporary Afghanistan*

no question of making an effort to go and see him. Luke, on the other hand, speaks of those who are interested in the news: despised shepherds (2:1-20); Simeon, a just man who rejoiced in the liberation of Israel, even as he foresaw the opposition it would arouse (2:22-35); Anna, a widow, a typical representative of the impoverished masses, who spoke of the child to those who had this liberation at heart (2:36-38).

Such people are often referred to as 'the poor of YHWH'. We often think of them in terms of their thirst for spiritual consolations, with no mention of their connection to their world and their hope for a new society. But read, for example, Psalms 9 and 10. It may be surprising to encounter their anger and thirst for justice, their pleas for a radical change in their situation. And it is not only in the supposedly violent Old Testament that these cries can be heard. Try reading Luke 1 and 2 again. There we see the joy of the 'gentle' Mary, who rejoices in her God: finally, this God has paid attention to the *humiliation of his servant*



(1:48). The focus is no longer on Mary's humiliation, but it is nevertheless significant that Luke speaks of it, because it is the starting-point of what Mary then says:

He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:51-53)

If words have any meaning at all, there is nothing mealy-mouthed in this text. It is not limited to spiritual or religious connotations. Caesar and Herod are attacked head-on, along with all of the rich. (Perhaps I may mention here two questions that always puzzle me. How can the Church allow such texts to be officially read in its liturgy? And who reads them and understands them?) Zechariah is equally clear as he blesses the Lord God for having 'raised up for us a horn of deliverance ... deliverance from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us' (1:69,71). Finally, Simeon declares he is ready to die, now that he has seen this long-awaited 'deliverance' (2:30).

These 'infancy narratives' are far from speaking only of 'religion'. They express the thirst for liberation of people who are oppressed and suffocated by a system put in place by the Empire of the day, with the help of the political, social, economic, intellectual and religious authorities of the country. And they present as liberator a man of lowly origin, whose mother had become pregnant in dubious circumstances, and whose father had taken her into his home in defiance of the conventions of the time. On the one hand, a vast Empire with a gigantic military force, pillaging the known world's resources to enhance its size. On the other, a man alone, but free, working for the liberation of his people. The contrast is striking.

***The 'infancy narratives' are not just about 'religion'***

### ***Becoming Marginalised***

Two thousand years later, these texts still have much to say to us. Obviously they cannot speak in quite the way they once did. When they were written, people were exploring a totally new faith in the lordship or kingship of the risen Jesus, while the reign of Caesar was already coming to an end. Salvation or liberation was within reach; the joy of the final age was at hand. Later on in the life of the Church, this

faith had to be expressed in a culture which had a more negative view of sexuality and a more positive understanding of political power. Jesus had been miraculously conceived; God had become incarnate in a child; and Christian regimes, even though imperfect, could be inspired by the values of the Gospel. The invitation was to spiritual poverty, to the adoration of the child-God, to the glorification of sexual asceticism, and to generosity towards the poor.

Our culture is more sensitised to violence towards women, to social humiliation, to structural injustices, and to the mechanisms for implementing and legitimating oppression. It is not only inevitable but desirable that the old texts should be read again in the light of these

***New sensitivities  
lead to new  
readings of the  
Scriptures***

new awarenesses. There is certainly a huge tension between the person glorified for being chosen as the mother of God and this humiliated woman who finds her dignity again thanks to a decent man, and who has to teach her son how to love and respect himself. But the tension is quite intrinsic to God's dealings with humanity.

For this humanity has a history with different periods, different cultures. No longer do we need to suppose that God's acknowledgment of the divine reality itself in another depends on some kind of change in the manner of human reproduction. These days, we speak of a God who is constantly living out a dialogue with humans at ground level, among the oppressed, always on their side. In God's fidelity and consistency, it was therefore 'necessary', as the Bible would say, that God's own self be spoken and recognised in the kind of drama that Mary lived through.

Every age wrestles with God and expresses only some aspects of God. It is at the end of the cumulative story of God's struggles with human beings that we will be able to judge the likeness of the portrait to the original. Our belief is not a matter of defining God, or of statements that encapsulate God. Rather, we recognise God's action obliquely, and in a range of different, not straightforwardly compatible ways, corresponding to the meanderings of history and the diversity of cultures, all as limited as each other.

It is important to encounter the one who 'speaks' deep within the self, because—despite what has just been said—nothing fundamental has changed between the time of the New Testament and any subsequent age, including our own. Empires follow one another, and they are all the same. The one prevailing in our own time resembles

Imperial Rome only too closely. The same concern to dominate, the same arrogance, the same certainty of representing the highest culture and civilisation, the same claim to be bringing peace, justice and liberty to the world, the same contempt for the Other, the same brutality. If there is any difference from previous empires, it lies in the effects. Never have we witnessed so much death, so much cultural destruction, so many assaults on the environment and the planet. The current face of the Beast of the Apocalypse will be cursed by generations to come, if indeed there is to be any future for humanity. And it is precisely because nothing has changed, that nothing will ever change (except at the end, but what will *that* be like?), that the encounter with God is important. For it allows us to battle on with patience, knowing that each generation inserts itself into a story and gives its own flavour to that story's hope.

It is in this context that celebrating Christmas becomes so significant. In spite of the Empire's apparent victory, in spite of its seemingly unbreakable power, Christmas lets us foresee its defeat. It is thus the most subversive of feasts. It speaks of the importance of the losers, the dignity of the oppressed, the innocence of 'sinners', the choice of God to be found with the humiliated ones, God's habit of living at the bottom of the ladder, with God's own. On the one hand, Christmas gives value to all that the Empire abhors. On the other, it radically devalues all that the Empire is proud of: power, control, sophisticated armaments, contempt, the claim to have God on its side and to be able to bring liberation, salvation and happiness to humanity. Christmas says that all that is so much hot air.

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But we need a good dose of the interior life to be able to sustain Christmas, because everything around us is opposed to it. The Empire has its bards and psalmists everywhere: journalists, chroniclers, academics, experts of all kinds, political and religious leaders. Few are those who dare to stand up against the Empire, for fear of losing their jobs, their influence, their friends, their reputations.

All this points to the importance of prayer, the fundamental function of which is to help us keep our eyes on the truth. Mary and Jesus, whether we talk of them in divine terms or in human ones, were more important than Caesar; the power of the Empire has already been cut off at its root because the power of Christ is at work against it, and it will collapse one day (soon?); the earth will last, beautiful and

abundant, and so on. If I believe in Christmas, and live out my hope by struggling to discover who I truly am, by struggling to fight against the Empire of death which throws out its tentacles all round me, I shall become a fulfilled human being, despite all the weaknesses of my nature and all the humiliations of my life:

Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours! (Luke 2:14)

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