

January: The Infancy of Jesus



The earliest Gospel, Mark, begins with the Baptism of Jesus, where the Voice from heaven acts as a sort of starting-gun for his ministry. The authoritative Voice declares that Jesus is the Beloved Son, after which we see Jesus fulfilling this role in bringing the Kingdom of God. Both Matthew and Luke feel the need to go behind this event and show from his earlier history who this Jesus must be. Much of Matthew's story circles round Moses, for it was with Moses that the Hebrews became the Chosen People with their own Law, just as it was around Jesus that the New Israel of the Church was formed – with its own Law, the Sermon on the Mount. Writing to a community of Christians sprung from Judaism, it was important for Matthew to show this parallel; for him Jesus is the Second Moses. In this view, the lynch-pin is King Herod, who plays the part of Pharaoh.

When Moses was born, the King of Egypt perceived that a dangerous leader had arisen for the Hebrews, and set about killing him and (just to make sure) all the new-born Hebrew boys. Saved by his mother's stratagem of the basket in the Nile, Moses grew to manhood, but then had to flee into exile from his homeland till the message of an angel told him it was safe to return. The same with Jesus, except that the flight into exile occurs in his earliest childhood, and Jesus flees to Egypt while Moses fled from Egypt. Even the words of the angel telling Joseph that it is safe to return are the same as those of the angel to Moses (Exodus 4.19). There is nothing improbable in the story, for King Herod's disregard for human life and his jealous safeguarding of his position were notorious; he killed several of his sons and even his favourite wife on suspicion of their trying to supplant him. When he was dying he summoned all the leaders of the land to Jericho and ordered them to be slaughtered at his death – just to ensure that there was a proper amount of mourning. How many baby boys would there have been in the tiny hill-village of Bethlehem?

All this is strengthened by quotations of scripture at every stage, which leave no doubt that Jesus is the Second Moses, fulfilling the scriptures. Less obvious are the star and the Wise Men from the East (they are not kings and they are not necessarily three, though they do have three gifts, gold frankincense and myrrh). These all represent the homage of the ancient wisdom of the East. The star is more directly drawn from the prophecy of Balaam, who foretells a star who will arise and rule over the nations (Numbers 24.17); in the ancient world a star – as in a football team today – is often the sign of the birth of a great ruler, Caesar, Augustus, Nimrod and other legendary kings. And the East is the traditional abode of wisdom, as in the case of the wise men who come to comfort Job in his trials.

These stories tell us more about the qualities and reality of Jesus and his position in the world than about the concrete history of the child of Bethlehem. In the Gospel of Matthew there is additional significance in the failure of the Jew, who should welcome the Messiah, to acknowledge Jesus as king, when he is given royal gifts by the gentile Wise Men. This will be balanced at the end, when the High Priest and his council reject Jesus once more, while the gentile Pilate that he can find no cause against him.