THE METAPHOR AND MYSTERY OF CHRISTMAS

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SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE intuited two centuries ago that, as part of the poetic process, every metaphor plays the creative role of constituting a convincing (and revelatory) faith. He explained this faith-creation as due to the resemblance of the metaphor to reality, which enabled the reader willingly to suspend disbelief.[1] But he did not consider the social consequences of poetic faith, which is what I am attempting to do here. For behind every belief or faith there stands a community of believers which is constituted by that faith.

A part of the poetic beauty of metaphor consists in concealing the really intended subject of its discourse in its apparent subject. There is a popular film lyric in my mother-tongue, Tamil, which says that the beauty of poetry lies in the art of its concealment: 'To the poem, beauty is the lie'.[2] With this point of departure, I would like to make two propositions. 1. The wonder and beauty of Christmas lie in metaphorically concealing the Easter faith, which constitutes the Christian identity, within the story of Jesus' conception and birth. 2. By thus concealing the resurrection faith within the birth story, the Christmas metaphor extends to all who suspend their disbelief a share in the same mystery of incarnation that it affirms about Jesus.

There are two levels of discourse or communication in this Christmas metaphor: one of revelation and another of concealment. But the concealment also belongs to and is integral to the revelation. One could therefore describe the Christmas metaphor as a

[1] Samuel T. Coleridge (1772–1834), British poet and literary critic, wrote in chapter 14 of his autobiography, *Biographia Literaria*: 'In … the *Lyrical Ballads* … it was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic … so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that *willing suspension of disbelief* for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith' (*Biographia Literaria*, in *Collected Works*, volume 7 [Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002], 6).

[2] Vairamuthu, 'Kannukku mai azhagu', from the film *Puthia mugam* ('New Face') (1993).

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combination of explicit revelation and implicit or concealed revelation. The explicitly real subject revealed and narrated is the literal story of the conception and birth of Jesus. The implicitly revealed but explicitly concealed subject is you, me and every other human being: our own conception, birth and life as a whole. It is because his life is metaphorically typical of and analogical to our own life that it is poetically able to win and retain our faith and interest.

What the Christmas story narrates about Jesus is really a revelation about us all. The story of the conception and birth of Jesus is a Christian metaphorical statement about the conception and birth of all humans as God's sons and daughters.[3] This revelation includes all the men and women who preceded Jesus, right up to the last individual of the human species who will come after him. Its all-embracing human universalism contrasts with those tendencies in Christianity and other religions that misappropriate the title of God's children to members of a single group, leaving out people of all other persuasions. When Christians exclude people with beliefs different from their own, they not only deny or overlook the poetic character of the Christmas metaphor, but also reduce it to an idol which claims the power and demands the worship that belong to God alone. To *idolize a metaphor* is to engage in contradiction and paradox: in excluding others from its narrow circle it tends to exclude even its own believers from the heart of the mystery. But this happens whenever a faith community denies the comparative parallelism of its structure to that of other communities.

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The heart of the Christian mystery and metaphor is not solely that God became man in Jesus. If this were so it would turn Christianity into an exclusive idolatry of Jesus. Such an idolatry would deny the analogy of faith and the meaning and purpose of the Christmas mystery of the incarnation, which make of Jesus the primary analogue or instance of incarnation—not a negation of other instances, even though they may be relatively imperfect.

[3] It is interesting to cite what Pope Leo the Great says in one of his sermons on the nativity: '… as we adore the birth of the saviour we find that we are celebrating our own beginnings. For, the birth of Christ is the origin of the people of Christ, and the birthday of the head is the birthday of the body …. just as all the faithful together, born of the waters of baptism, are crucified with Christ in his passion, raised with him in his resurrection, and given a place with him at the Father's right hand in his ascension, so too, with him they are born in this his birth.' Sermon 6 on the Nativity in *The Divine Office*, I, Office of Reading for 31 December.

It is worth noting that *metaphor* and *myste*ry are interchangeable here, because every metaphor carries within it an element of mystification. This aura of mystery and mystification can serve to divide believers into two unequal groups: the clerical elite and the less-informed masses. Such mystification can work through religious metaphors because religion itself has very much to do with the invisible, unknown realm.

If religious metaphor can lead to mystification and idolatry, however, through the faith that it is able to inspire it also has a democratizing capacity to destroy idols. In his prophetic and poetic creativity Jesus himself metaphorically broke many literalised idols created by the Jewish priestly and ruling classes of his time. His poetic words still have the power to break down the narrow denominational walls that Christians have sometimes built up in his name to secure their own power and to separate themselves both from other Christians and from other faiths.

The problem of metaphor comes from the writing, preservation and interpretation of scripture, since these tasks are often taken over by a priesthood. Scriptures may start as the record of a founding individual's words and life, which may have destroyed or set aside many of the norms of a pre-existing faith community. But those who copy, record or teach those scriptures later merge their own contemporary group-interests with the older material. Processed in this way, the scriptures may become prophetic legitimations of latter-day priestly interests. The Jewish, Christian and Islamic scriptures all show evidence of this sociohistorical process.

I shall take the metaphorical significance of the Christmas story here as illustrating the conflict in which every new faith identity is born out of an old one, drawing attention to the polemics concealed within the metaphors that we find at the very openings of the Christian Gospels and of the Jewish Bible.

The Polemical Origin of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures

Mark's Gospel, which was the first to be written, opens by declaring Jesus to be the Son of God. This presentation of Jesus contrasts sharply with that of Adam in Genesis, created 'from the dust of the ground', with whose fall into sin the Bible opened its history of humanity and of Israel. Luke alludes to this contrast by opposing the conception of Jesus to the

sin of Eve and Adam. For Luke both Adam and Jesus were sons of God (3:22, 38). But Adam had failed to prove himself as a son because of his disobedience to the covenant with God, whereas Jesus was true to it unto death and resurrection. Matthew does not connect Jesus and Adam the way that Luke does. Instead, he draws a parallel between Adam and Joseph; and it is through Joseph that he links Jesus' genealogy to the biblical patriarchs. However, the genealogies in both evangelists are traceable to Paul's explicit treatment of Jesus as the Second Adam—in 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5:14. John's Gospel echoes this contrast more subtly by referring to Jesus as God's word made flesh (1:14), in implicit opposition to the failure of flesh in Adam and Eve.

To the canonical gospel authors, including Paul, Adam was not only the first specimen of the human race, but also a metaphorical summing up of the Israelite people, with its kings and priests. To the Yahwist–Priestly authors of Genesis, however, Adam and his generations were a metaphor representing the gentile nations from which Israel sought to separate and differentiate itself, starting with the generation of Abraham. The gentiles for them mostly meant an idolatrously sinful people who, not knowing God, were the children of wrath—contrasted with the Israelite people prophetically designated as God's beloved son ('Israel is my firstborn son', Exodus 4:22). Thus, in opposing Jesus to Adam, the newborn Christian Church dismissed its religious parent in the same terms that the Israelite people had used of their pagan ancestors. The parallelism and contrast between the openings of the Old and New Testament scriptures reveal how one faith develops out of and separates from another, the new repeatedly defining itself against and excluding the old in a familiar dualistic pattern.

The Christmas Story

The Christmas story itself is found in Matthew 1 and 2 and Luke 1 and 2, and it is striking that these two different narratives have three key elements significantly in common. The first is the division of the narrative into pre-natal and post-natal sections. The second is the intriguing introduction of an angel into both of these sections. And the third is that both narratives place particular emphasis on the location of Jesus' birth at Bethlehem in Judah. Let us now briefly review the significance of these commonalities in the two distinct narrations of the story.

The Christmas Story in Luke

The account of the annunciation in Luke 1:26–38 is very dramatic: an angel named Gabriel announces to Mary that she will conceive and bear a son, whom God has destined to succeed to the long-lost throne of David. It introduces Mary as 'a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David', living at Nazareth in Galilee. Mary is presented as abashed at Gabriel's announcement, but he answers that she will conceive thanks to God's own power, so that her son will be known as the son of God. To persuade her to believe him, he tells her that her childless cousin Elizabeth has conceived in her old age and is in her sixth month. At this, Mary believes and the angel Gabriel departs.

This is the way in which Luke chose to open his Christmas story. But why did he create this dramatic scene in which the angel addresses Mary? What did the angel mean to him? Drama is an impersonal medium through which an author communicates with an audience, entering into dialogue with them through the characters that he or she has created. The author is conscious of this deliberate act of staging,

The Annunciation, *by Bicci Di Lorenzo*

but the audience is unconscious or only subliminally aware of being there on the same stage. This is advantageous for the author in influencing the audience.

In the Lukan annunciation drama the angel persuades Mary to accept everything he has told her. He can be seen to stand metaphorically for the author while Mary represents the Gospel's readers. By showing Mary believing and acting on the angel's words, Luke has indirectly secured our own belief in his words and their purposes and consequences. The miracle and mystery of faith is presented through the metaphor of the angel, which the author has created through his dramatic narrative. The drama that the audience consciously watches on the textual stage is simultaneously and subconsciously replayed in their minds and hearts. When we read or hear the story, we also spiritually (metaphorically and mystically) conceive and are led to give birth to a child of God in ourselves. God's power is already with us through the metaphorical story we have heard, enabling us to experience as possible what we may have previously thought impossible. Thus, once we have believed or taken up the story as our own, it becomes God's word to us, taking up our flesh and blood as its own. Our body becomes the incarnation of the word of God.

Luke plays the storyteller with us from his own time, but there had already been many narrators of older stories, told to audiences of earlier generations in different cultures, times and places. Luke must have known at least some of the Greek and Asiatic stories. He was surely familiar with many biblical ones. These must have influenced him consciously and subconsciously, making it inevitable for him to leave their echoes or imprints in the story he himself narrated. Consequently the angel Gabriel must have more meanings and sources than we have so far explored.

Since Paul and Luke have both typologically and genealogically connected Jesus to Adam, and metaphorically to the whole of humanity, the annunciation scene in Luke can be seen as a counterpoint to the temptation of Eve in Genesis 3. The temptation scene is itself a poetically sustained metaphor, which represents the recurrent temptation of Israel's rulers to take the cultic law into their own hands and break it. Prophet after prophet warned the rulers and people of the wrath of their God for violating his covenant with them. When these warnings went unheeded, and Assyria overthrew the

Israelite monarchy and the king of Babylon took the king of Judah captive, some priestly prophet poetically summed up the history of Israel to that point as the parable of Adam and Eve brought into and exiled from the Garden of Eden.

Luke marked the cancellation of the Deuteronomistic curses of Genesis 3:17–19 and the restoration of Elohist–Priestly blessings of creation in Genesis 1 when his angel announced Mary's son as a royal successor to the throne of David. He makes this clear by Elizabeth's repeated use of the word *blessed*:

> *Blessed* are you among women, and *blessed* is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And *blessed* is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord. (1:42–45)

This passage is particularly significant when we remember that Elizabeth herself is now pregnant, having until recently been considered sterile. There is an implicit allusion in the 'fruit of your womb' to the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge in the Adamic parable. But the focal point here is that the angel is the medium and messenger of all this good news of joy, by contrast with the serpent in Genesis 3, which brought about the curses of death and the hardships of exile through its deception.

A second allusion here connects Jesus with the intriguing biblical stories that deal with the succession of King David. Two texts in particular are relevant. The first is 1 Kings 1:9–14, which describes a conspiracy over the succession to David's throne. This conspiracy takes place at Zoheleth, whose name means *the Serpent's Stone.* This would suggest that the author of this text is alluding directly, and Luke is alluding indirectly, to the Adamic story.

The other text is 1 Chronicles 17:11–14, which the redactor of that book records as God's own words addressed to David through his court prophet Nathan:

> When your days are fulfilled to go to be with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall

> be a son to me. I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from him who was before you, but I will confirm him in my house and in my kingdom forever, and his throne shall be established forever.

Luke's annunciation narrative contains an explicit allusion to this text, which it paraphrases in places almost word for word:

> He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end. (Luke 1:32–33)

This suggests that Luke's annunciation angel metaphorically subsumes and represents the identity of the prophet Nathan. By thus transforming Nathan into an angel Luke has implicitly depicted Jesus as a new, and greater than Solomonic, successor to King David.

It also seems probable that Luke alluded to Isaiah 7:14 in his account of the annunciation. In this text the prophet tells the embattled King Ahaz, who has refused to ask for a sign of rescue from God, 'Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.' The angel Gabriel likewise gives the frightened Mary an unexpected and unasked-for sign—the pregnancy of her cousin Elizabeth. The purpose of the sign is to affirm that everything is possible to God, and that nothing is impossible to anyone who (poetically) believes in the power of God.

From these three meanings of the annunciation, a fourth underlying meaning or assumption emerges. This suggests that the life and mission of Jesus were the fulfilment rather than the abolition of the law and the prophets. The law, the prophets and biblical history anticipate what is further to be revealed, clarified and corrected by the messianic king and prophet of the future, whom Luke identifies with Jesus. The post-natal section of Luke's story confirms this interpretation.

Writing their Gospels decades after the events described, the evangelists imaginatively positioned themselves, in imitation of the biblical historians and prophets, before those events, so that they could project what they knew to be later happenings as prophecies made beforehand. All they needed to make this fictitious arrangement carry the conviction of historical truth was to create one more mask or *dramatis persona* to make up for their own absence as eyewitnesses of

the events narrated. Angels were one example of such imaginatively effective and successful characterization. And they may also have ventured to expand the list with new characters as they felt the need to make their narrations convincing as histories. It seems reasonable to interpret Simeon in Luke 2:25–35 and Anna in 2:36–38 as such imaginatively convincing examples of characterization.

The Presentation at the Temple, *by Rembrandt*

The creation of these two characters in Luke is strategic. They supply the need for independent and contemporary witnesses to confirm the claim that Jesus was the messiah promised to David. Their inclusion also enabled Luke to turn them into inter-Testamental prophets, reinforcing what the Old Testament prophets had said already and independently predicting on their own everything that Luke would show as an accomplished fact at the end of his Gospel and the beginning of Acts. Luke locates their prophecies at the presentation of thechild Jesus in the temple on the fortieth day after his birth. Simeon speaks of Jesus as 'a light for revelation to the gentiles and for glory to your people Israel' (2:32). But all this glory is to be the consequence of becoming 'a sign that will be opposed' (2:34). This post-natal proclamation confirms and adds to what the pre-natal annunciation had declared.

The Christmas Story in Matthew

Matthew presents his Christmas story with two perplexing complications. The first occurs well before the birth of Jesus; the second after his birth.

The pre-natal problem occurs when Joseph discovers Mary to have been pregnant even before they came to live together. In considerateness towards her, he contemplates divorcing her without any public exposure—which could have resulted, under the Law of Moses, in her being stoned to death together with the baby in her womb (Deuteronomy 22:21–22). It is at this point in the story that Matthew introduces an angel in a dream to clear Joseph's suspicion of Mary. The question which Matthew's narrative raises is what or whom the dream angel represented in the real life of Joseph. Given the risk to the life of the mother and her messianic child, Matthew had to find a discreetly effective way to avert the danger and save the mother's honour. To be both convincing and effective, it had to link itself to a fitting scriptural precedent.

I suggest that Matthew implicitly recognised such a precedent in the story of Nathan and Bathsheba (1 Kings 1:9–14). Verses 12 to 14 speak of danger to Bathsheba and her son Solomon, and Nathan sends Bathsheba to plead with King David, assuring her that he will join her in the king's presence:

> Now therefore come, let me give you advice, *so that you may save your own life and the life of your son Solomon*. Go in at once to King David, and say to him, 'Did you not, my lord the king, swear to your servant, saying: Your son Solomon shall succeed me as king, and he shall sit on my throne? Why then is Adonijah king?' Then while you are still there speaking with the king, I will come in after you and confirm your words.

What can we infer from this quotation? Matthew explicitly cites many other texts as scriptural precedents or prophecies of events in his own narrative, but does not quote this text anywhere. And there was a weighty reason to conceal it. For it safeguarded Mary's secret and Joseph's own concern to save her honour, because Joseph loved her as much as David loved Bathsheba and her son, Solomon. And Matthew had to save the honour of both Mary and Joseph, in order to save the honour of Jesus. So he imagined Nathan as the angel or God's messenger, who sent Bathsheba to King David, to plead her own cause and that of her son. The implication of that concealed biblical precedent for the situation of Joseph was that Mary met Joseph and pleaded her own cause and that of her promised messianic son. And, just as David yielded to Bathsheba's reminder of his promise, Joseph

yielded to Mary's persuasion concerning the source of her pregnancy. By depicting her as the angel of God in Joseph's dream in the state of his inner and outer tension, Matthew has achieved all that he needed.

It was entirely possible for Matthew explicitly to cite one scriptural text in his narrative and also implicitly to allude to another. Since the scripture text he explicitly quotes in 1:22–25 is Isaiah 7:14, it seems reasonable to suggest that Matthew thought of Isaiah also as the angel which appeared to Joseph in his dream. But let me quote the entire text of Matthew in this context.

> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us'. When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

If Matthew's explicit reference here is Isaiah, however, I suggest that he is also implicitly alluding to Genesis 3:1–6. I shall quote it also in full:

> Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?' The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die".' But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil'.
>
> So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.

What is the relevance of this implicit allusion to Mary's virginal conception of her messianic child? Three similarities may be pointed out between the two situations. The first is that both Eve and Mary were virgins. Secondly, each entered into and continued a sequence of events begun by someone else (the serpent, the angel). And though these third parties were very different, they have one thing in

Satan Exulting over Eve, *by William Blake*

common: both overturn a previously established commandment or obligation. The third similarity is that both virgins believed in and consented to the propositions made to them, making their husbands acquiesce subsequently.

The major difference between the two narratives is in how the two third parties are named and qualified, despite their similar roles. The third party in Genesis narrative is called a *wild animal* and *crafty*, while the third party in Joseph's dream narrative is *an angel of the Lord*. This identification reveals a prejudice with which the narrators of Genesis and of Matthew's Gospel started their respective stories. The consent that the angel Gabriel obtained from the Virgin Mary is as opposed to accepted moral tradition as the suggestions and reasoning of the serpent. Only the way that Matthew explains what happened through the *Holy Spirit* makes the glaring departure from conventional ethical practice acceptable as a divinely accomplished miracle and mystery.

There was already an Old Testament tradition that identified the mythical serpent of Genesis 3 with Satan and equated it with the devil

or evil spirit. Revelation 12:9 and 20:2 echo this tradition. It made sense therefore that Matthew could speak of the Holy Spirit in opposition to the evil spirit. If the transformation of the serpent into Satan or the evil spirit was an imaginative act of personification, the creation of a new *dramatis persona*, the Holy Spirit, in opposition to the evil one, was an equally new personification or dramatic character creation. We should note two things particularly here: first, that this kind of imaginative personification was incidental to and indicative of the process of shaping a new religious identity; and secondly that, in this process, Matthew has implicitly revealed the linguistically and contextually relative nature of moral good and evil.

The second, post-natal, complication in Matthew's story begins with wise men from the East arriving at the palace of Herod the Great in Jerusalem. Matthew reports them as saying that they have seen the star of a new-born king of the Jews and have come to *worship him* (Matthew 2:1–2). What is the complication here? Matthew's narrative says that Herod was troubled by this news, and all Jerusalem was also in a state of commotion (Matthew 2:3).

Matthew does not immediately explain what the trouble or commotion was about. What he says next is is that Herod inquired of the Jewish religious experts where the Christ was to be born. When they quote from the scriptures that the Christ was to be born in Bethlehem, Herod sent the wise men there with instructions to come back to him with news of the child's exact whereabouts so that he too could go and worship. Matthew adds that the magi rejoiced greatly to see the star leading them to the right place.

> 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. (2:11–12)

It is at this point that Matthew returns to the trouble that the birth of Christ caused. His words are:

> When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what

> had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more'. (2:16–18)

In the meantime, Matthew also speaks of Joseph, having been warned by an angel in a dream, fleeing with Mary and her child to Egypt. The family only returned to Nazareth in Galilee after hearing the news, again from an angel, of Herod's death. I suspect that there must have been a pressing reason for Matthew to resort to supernatural mediation more than once to move the narrative onwards here. Once again the angel suggests a metaphor under which the narrator could conceal some secret human agency, because exposing it would have looked like an act of betrayal.

Behind the literal narration of the birth of Jesus, other related historical events are being metaphorically represented. Focusing on key words and ideas in the story—*Herod, wise men from the east, star, troubled, ordered, killed, death, angel* and *Galilee*—we can recognise at least three distinct meanings or purposes in the journey of the magi to Bethlehem, which Matthew alone reports. The first was to demonstrate that Jesus was indeed the Christ, because this story proved the fulfilment of what the exilic prophets had predicted about gentile kings coming to pay tribute to the king of the Jews (Psalm 72:10).

The second meaning makes the flight of the holy family into Egypt into a rehearsal of Israel's history. It enables Matthew to represent the life of Jesus as the new summing up and crowning fulfilment of everything that the prophets had foretold about a future united kingdom of Israel. In this sense, Christmas was a light of revelation to the gentiles for the greater glory of Israel. Both these meanings exist only in the realm of Christian desire or imaginative possibility, rather than history.

The third meaning, however, is the most directly historical, being a matter of documentarily verifiable fact, confirmed by chapter 12 of Luke's Acts of the Apostles. Like the author of Genesis 2–3, who mythologized the history of Israel as the story of Adam and Eve, Matthew narratively transformed historical events in the formative stages of the distinct Christian identity by anticipating them from the time of Jesus' birth. The first believers in Jesus found the courage publicly to declare Jesus to be Christ, the divinely anointed king of the Jews—the political charge on which he was sentenced to crucifixion—

only after his death. We hear Peter affirming this in Acts 2:36: 'Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified'. But Matthew moves this idea back to associate it with the Christmas narrative. This can be shown by pointing out the parallelisms between Matthew 2 and the events described in Acts 12.

Both of these texts speak of a King Herod who is an enemy of Christ and of Christians—though these are two different rulers with the same name. Matthew 2 refers to Herod the Great, but the one in Acts 12 is Herod Agrippa I.[4] Matthew's Christmas narrative describes Herod and all Jerusalem being troubled at the arrival of the wise men from the east, seeking the newborn king of the Jews. The wise men eventually find Mary with Jesus and worship him. This reference to *worship* looks forward to the divinizing cult of Jesus, begun already during the lifetime of his mother.

Like Herod the Great, in Acts 12:1–4 Herod Agrippa responded violently to the Christian cult, its leadership and the community it had created.

> About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the Church. He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword. After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. (This was during the festival of Unleavened Bread.) When he had seized him, he put him in prison and handed him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after the Passover.

Luke's narrative goes on to report that Peter escaped from Herod's prison and fled Jerusalem with the help of an angel (Acts 12:6–14), recalling the angels that intervene at crucial points in Matthew's Christmas story. So, it gradually emerges that an *angel* functions as a metaphorical code for a person or thing carrying out a secret errand or conveying an oracular message, supposedly from God. Thus we find Luke referring even to the disease that struck Herod Agrippa dead as an angel of God in Acts 12:23: 'And immediately, because he had not

[4] Agrippa I, also called the Great (10 BC – AD 44), King of the Jews, was the grandson of Herod the Great, and son of Aristobulus IV and Berenice. His original name was Marcus Julius Agrippa, and he is the king named Herod in the Acts of the Apostles. He was, according to Josephus, known in his time as 'Agrippa the Great'.

given the glory to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died'. After the death of Herod Agrippa I, Peter and the other apostles returned to Jerusalem (Acts 15), just as in Matthew Joseph returned to Israel when Herod the Great died—having been informed by an angel in a dream (2:19–22). Here again the angel seems likely to have been a confidential human informant. It must have been to protect the secrecy of such informants that the evangelists depicted them as angels or dream visions.

The Significance of Bethlehem for Luke and Matthew

So many of Jesus' hidden years were spent at Nazareth in Galilee that he has come to be known as Jesus of Nazareth. But both Luke and Matthew locate his birth at Bethlehem. Matthew 2:1 states: 'in the time of King Herod … Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea'. Luke, who opens the pre-natal section of his Christmas story at Nazareth, also has Jesus born at Bethlehem rather than Nazareth. He makes the connection to Bethlehem through a census decreed by the emperor Augustus throughout the Roman Empire. Luke 2:3–7 reads as follows:

> All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 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 clarifies the importance he attaches to Bethlehem when he narratively qualifies it, rather than Zion (Jerusalem), as 'the city of David'. Its importance, then, is to point to Jesus, through his father Joseph, as a descendant of King David, backing up the Christian claim on the messianic title for Jesus. The post-exilic prophets had, in their romantic nostalgia, envisaged a return to David's times and dynasty as a nationalistic ideal represented by the messiah. Luke nowhere, however, cites the Old Testament prophets explicitly in connection with the significance he attached to Bethlehem.

Matthew, who was more explicit in his use of the prophets for Christian apologetic purposes, attached a similar significance to

Bethlehem. He achieved a dramatic effect by taking the magi straight to the palace of Herod the Great in Jerusalem and having Herod summon the high priests to declare in his presence—with a citation from Micah 5:3—that Davidic Bethlehem, not Herod's Jerusalem, was where the messiah was to be born. Matthew invests the Jewish priests, Herod's dynasty and the city of Jerusalem with a great deal of dramatic irony as they unconsciously realise post-exilic prophecies about the messianic Jesus. Like Jesus on the cross, Peter tells his Jewish audience, 'And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers' (Acts 3:17). This is the good news of forgiveness proclaimed after the honest admission of ignorance. Ignorance thus serves as the reason for both judgment and salvation.

If Matthew made Bethlehem a metaphor to point to Jesus as a lineal son of David, it was to reinforce the same line of messianic descent that, even more than Luke, Matthew made a metaphor of the virginity of Mary, the mother of Jesus. This is reinforced when we recall that Matthew connects the virginity to the words of Isaiah 7:14, which were addressed as a divine metaphor or symbol to the whole dynasty of David.

Mary's Virginity as a Metaphor

I have already cited Nathan's messianic prophecy at 1 Chronicles 17:11–14. Nathan addressed his words to the dynastically insecure-feeling King David. But, just like the other biblical prophets, Nathan also created a formal effect by which his own words seemed to come from the metaphorical mouth of God. In Nathan's prophecy God claims the offspring of David as God's own son. But this claim neither denies that David fathered his son nor postulates virginal conception. Instead, it creates a form of dual fatherhood by which the son of a man could also be a son of God. Linguistically speaking, the human fatherhood was literal and God was the metaphorical father.

By contrast, we find Luke reversing this Old Testament model of dual fatherhood and sonship in his annunciation scene. The angel Gabriel explains Mary's virginal conception of Jesus through the Holy Spirit alone. By so doing, he introduces a miraculously supernatural model, which renders Joseph unnecessary to Jesus' conception. Virginal conception and the Holy Spirit together become Luke's mytho-metaphorical presentation of his truth that God is the only

father of Jesus. Matthew uses almost the same metaphorical mechanism—a dream angel and the Holy Spirit—to introduce the same miracle of the virginal conception of Jesus through a single divine father.

What are we to make of the contrast between the Old Testament affirmation of dual fatherhood and sonship and the gospel affirmation of the solely divine fatherhood of Jesus? The following suggests itself as a probable historical explanation. Like Paul in Acts 13:46, 18:6 and 28:28, the Christian evangelists were angry and disappointed with the Jews who had refused to accept Jesus as their prophetically promised Davidic messiah. So they turned away from the prophetic account of the dual filiation of Jesus, and of other humans. In other words, they turned from the dual metaphorical and literal meanings to a single literal meaning for incarnation and virginity, demanding a miraculous and supernatural explanation.

This was related in part to the willingness of the gentiles to accept Jesus as the messianic son and successor to David in his heavenly realm, which served as the metaphorical model for establishing a new this-worldly kingdom. There were numerous literalist myths about pagan gods siring king-like sons with human virgins. Presenting the historical Jesus as fathered by the Holy Spirit with the Virgin Mary could win many gentiles from their mythical heroes to a historical saviour, the Christian messiah. The prophetic metaphor emphasized the distance between Jewish theology and literalist pagan mythology and idolatry. But the evangelists' literalization of the metaphor brought them closer together, most obviously in John's Gospel. John's scripturally allusive declaration that Jesus is the only begotten son of God simultaneously proclaims that believers who have been reborn in baptism (3:3–6), are also begotten only by God (1:12–13). But in spite of his paradoxical wording, John does not intend to negate the human parentage either of Jesus or of baptized Christians.

If what is called the mystery of the divine incarnation in Jesus is a metaphor that conceals and reveals the power of God at work in the conception and birth of all embodied lives, the perpetual virginity attributed to Mary, the mother of Jesus, must likewise be a metaphor concealing and revealing the same power of God at work in the generation of all lives. But it is symptomatic of a tradition that reduced the metaphor of incarnation literally and exclusively to Jesus'

conception and birth, that it likewise reduced the poetic metaphor of Mary's virginity to a dogma about literally miraculous physiological events. The Reformers, who failed to notice this idolizing tendency within the New Testament itself, were unfair in accusing the Church of Rome alone of promoting it.

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