

Nativity of Jesus: III. Christianity, C. Modern Europe and America

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C. Modern Europe and America

In modern times, the biblical narratives concerning the birth of Jesus remain important in the practice of piety. Beginning with church nativity scenes from the time of the Counter-Reformation, Christmas nativity scenes designed with figures became the expression of a lively, popular piety and devotion (Hartinger: 202–3, 209–10, 220). By focusing on the “crib,” the “feeding trough” from Luke 2:7 (φάτνη), the recorded events of salvation history took on a vivid and playful presentation. During the Enlightenment, nativity scenes were banned from churches, but from the 17th century onwards they began to make their way into private homes in the Catholic countries of Central Europe, and from about 1800 also in certain Protestant areas (Rüdiger). Of particular interest is the concept of “three holy kings,” which was the popular interpretation of the μάγοι of Matt 2:1. In the Western tradition, the practice of “star-singing” originates in the “Three Kings Games,” and is even maintained to this day (Luz: 178).

In the tradition of paraenetic interpretations of the three gifts of Matt 2:11, Hugo Grotius interpreted these as symbols for mercy, prayer, and purity; additionally, J. A. Bengel interpreted them as symbols for a believing heart, devoted prayer, and the death of the flesh (Luz: 167). The humanistic interpretation in modern times takes up the positive associations with Persian magi as wise men, which are known from antiquity (e.g., J. L. Wolzogen; J. J. Wettstein; cf. Luz: 164; Powell: 168–71). In modern times – and on the way to absolute monarchy – Christian rulers and kings identified themselves less and less with the royal roles of the magi tied to Christ (Trexler: 158–70, 185–86).

Towards the end of the 18th century, the radical Quest for the Historical Jesus dismantled traditional certainties relating to Jesus’s life and birth. The historical discussion concerning the date of birth and

birthplace of Jesus called into question both the accuracy of the Christian calendar and the tradition of Bethlehem as the place of birth. The descriptions of the circumstances of the birth of Jesus in Matt 2 and Luke 2 were deemed legendary and thus excluded from the historical reconstruction – not least in view of the fundamental differences in the story and plot of the respective narratives (Brown: 25–41; Meier: 208–19). The history of religions school explained the presentation of the birth narratives against the background of the numerous ancient parallels for the birth of rulers, such as Moses, Romulus, and Augustus (Norden). In evangelical circles, historicizing attempts oppose these findings to this day (e.g., Keener: 98).

At the beginning of the 20th century, literary exploration of the birth narratives began with the rise of literary and form criticism. Up to the present day, answers to the questions of written sources and traditions have remained markedly different. For Matt 2:1–23, for example, R. E. Brown reconstructs two originally independent narratives (109, 192), while U. Luz emphasizes the editorial work of Matthew (159–60). As for the source texts of Luke 1–2, H. Greßmann, R. Bultmann, and M. Dibelius postulate separate traditions, while H. Schürmann and W. Radl recognize a Greek written source as a template (see the overview in Radl: 11–23). Following in the footsteps of A. Harnack, R. E. Brown (497–98) and M. Wolter (85–86) emphasize the authorial work of Luke.

The classification of the birth narratives within the theological program of the evangelists is the focus of exegetical attention today. One problem is the Christian claim to the scriptures of Israel, articulated via the so-called fulfillment quotations in Matt 2:15, 17–18, 23, which have had a disastrous *Wirkungsgeschichte* (reception history) in later anti-Jewish polemic (Luz: 198–99). At the same time, the quotations demonstrate the grounding of Christology in the scriptures of Israel and thus a lasting bond with Israel.

The political dimension of the birth narratives is usually perceived by modern research to be a marginal phenomenon: the Emperor Augustus is only mentioned in Luke 2:1 to indicate the global historical relevance of the birth of Jesus (Radl: 194–96; Wolter: 119, 121). If, however, one reads the text against the background of the prominent conception of the Golden Age inaugurated by Augustus, an age which itself was embodied in the Roman emperor, Luke 2:1–20 gains explosive political force (Schreiber; broadly, Horsley). In imperial literature, shepherds function as recipients of divine revelation (Wolter: 127), which permits a fresh answer to an old question: “Why was Jesus’s birth proclaimed directly to shepherds?” Hitherto, people had mostly thought of the David tradition (1 Sam 16: David herded sheep near Bethlehem). The star of Bethle-

hem from Matt 2:2–10 also has a political connotation: in hellenistic iconography, the star was a common symbol for the king (Küchler). These readings stand over against the usual interpretations based upon stellar phenomena (e.g., a *conjunctio magna* of Jupiter and Saturn; see further in Luz: 161–62).

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