

## CHRISTMAS STORY: BORN OF A WOMAN AND BORN UNDER THE LAW

Anyone who has ever read a comic book or watched some recent movies – especially those based on DC or Marvel comics – knows that every heroic figure has an origin story. Human heroes like *Batman*, *Wonder Woman*, *Spiderman*, or *The Hulk* all have a formative story that establishes the character that triggers their heroic actions. One hero, whose extraordinary abilities exceeded those of ordinary folks, was “a strange visitor from another planet who came to Earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal humans”. That god-like hero, named Superman, was following in the footsteps of ancient tradition – like each of the traditional Olympian Graeco-Roman gods of the ancient world. Thus, closely tied to all the origin stories was the notion of character formation into an identity.

Origin and character formed identity – beginning and naming -- seem to be linked ideas in human mental hard wiring.

Both scripture readings this morning are examples of that hard wiring. In the Christian New Testament, there are four origin stories for Jesus of Nazareth, the itinerant healer and teacher in whom the “the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” as expressed *Colossians* 1:19. As the human who incarnates (enfleshes) God almighty, his origin and identity are important issues.

The oldest existing “Christmas” statement is found in today’s Epistle passage from Paul’s *Letter to the Galatians*. That letter was likely written between 55 and 57 C.E. – a quarter century after Jesus was crucified and over half a century after his birth. Paul’s letter was addressed to Jewish Christians in the new church in Galatia, a Roman province located centrally in what is now modern Turkey. Within this letter, Paul’s concern is the observance of Jewish Law of Moses in infant Jewish-Christian churches. Today’s epistle is a small piece of that larger question.

Paul simply asserts that Jesus was “born of a woman” – a nameless anonymous woman. And that Jesus was “born under the Law”— he was an observant Jew. Nothing more. Isn’t it striking that, in all Christian scripture, the oldest mention of the birth of Jesus is less than a one-liner? And that one-liner simply asserts, “Jesus is one of us. He arrived here just like you and me. He was Jewish.”

Now Paul was a well-educated Pharisee, likely a student of renowned Rabbi Gamaliel. He knew enough about Jesus and the disciples to have the authority to persecute them – before his own later Damascus Road experience. That begs a question. Why does the apostle Paul say nothing about what has become the most famous story in human history? In convincing these new Jewish Christians in adjusting to faith in Jesus, why does Paul not mention any details of a story that would demonstrate the divine origin of Jesus?

In my mind, here are only two possible answers to those questions:

1. Either Paul knew nothing about Joseph, Mary, Bethlehem, a stable, a guiding star, an angel choir, Eastern magi, shepherds, or the slaughter of innocents.
2. Or Paul did not think that those Nativity story details were important.

Regardless of your own thoughts on these matters, one thing is still interesting: Paul still felt the need to assert that Jesus was "a human-born Jew". Did the new Galatian church wonder where Jesus came from or what he was? Did they think that Jesus was another Graeco-Roman Olympian? Did they imagine Jesus was an angelic being in a "meat suit" – veiled in human flesh?

It is probably worth saying that the earliest gospel of *Mark*, likely shaped around 70 C.E. has no "Christmas" statement or Nativity story.

It is also probably also worth noting that the latest and most theological gospel, *John*, likely written sometime after 90 C.E., has this brief mention on the origin of Jesus, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us." This second and last mention says even less than Paul does in *Galatians*.

That means the final two Nativity stories occur in the gospels of *Matthew* and *Luke*. Both gospels were likely written in the years between 80 and 90 C.E. Both accounts name Joseph and Mary as parents. Both gospels agree that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

In *Matthew*, the birth of Jesus happens off-stage. It is sandwiched between two related stories. The initial story-slice concerns Joseph who has a dream (like another earlier "technicolor" Joseph who interprets dreams). The actual birth of Jesus is reported by saying that Joseph "had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus." Then the other slice in this sandwich is the story of star-led magi visiting the holy family in a house to warn them of a danger that prompts their subsequent flight to Egypt – exactly where that earlier Joseph was also forced to go. The Nativity in *Matthew* clearly offers little more about the birth than Paul does in *Galatians*.

It is the Nativity story in *Luke*, the one we heard this morning, that is most familiar to us. It lacks the visit of three magi and the guiding star that directed them. All the familiar story elements we love are present: Mary, an angelic annunciation, a prior miraculous birth, a cousin's circumcision, Joseph, a crowded inn, a Bethlehem stable, a manger crib, an angel choir, visiting shepherds, and another circumcision. With a great deal more detail, this account only underlines what Paul first wrote: Jesus was "born of a woman" and "born under the law".

The phrase "born of a woman" essentially celebrates God's incarnation (turned into meat) as "one of us". That is the core "Christmas" idea. That God the Creator was born of a woman as human Jesus, is the foundational truth of Christian faith. That God became "one of us" is an expression of solidarity with each of us and the mortal lives with which each of us was gifted at birth. No other faith tradition makes

that extravagant claim. The Incarnation is the beating heart of the Body of Christ, of which each of us became a member in our Baptisms.

During the first four centuries of its existence, the early church wrestled with the mysterious idea of “Incarnation”. How could limitless almighty and eternal God, God become a limited, weak, and time-bound mortal? Various answers and opinions on the subject occasioned some of the first and most vicious “church fights” in history. Was Jesus only God with a human body? If Jesus was fully both God and human, did he have two minds or two natures – one divine and one human? The idea that one being could be both human and God was as perplexing to them as it is mystifying to us. – if we even think about it. The Nicene Creed that we recite at every Eucharist began as an attempt to clarify, understand, and settle this issue. Yet, the mystery of the Incarnation is still perplexing -- but actually no more mystifying than how we describe our own experience of anticipating God’s presence this morning when we pray together:

**Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, So to eat the Flesh of thy dear Son Jesus  
Christ, And to drink his Blood, That our sinful bodies May be made clean by his  
Body, And our souls washed through his most precious Blood, And that we may  
evermore dwell in him, And he in us.**

Paul’s other phrase “born under the Law” establishes the observant Jewish identity of Jesus. *Luke’s* mention of circumcision of Jesus makes the same assertion. It is an important idea. In Jewish practice, names are given to a male infant at circumcision. The rite is a visible sign of obedience to the covenant contract that God made with Abraham’s community. It not only grafted Jesus into the covenant community, but also gave him a unique identity through naming.

In our Christian tradition, Baptism is a similar visible sign of membership in the covenant community of the Body of Christ – the Church. As in the Jewish naming ceremony, the candidate is formally given names in Baptism. In both traditions, naming is an essential first step in the life of faith. After all, a covenant is a contract to which names are subscribed.

That God’s Word became flesh “born of a woman” and lived among us is the essential and important origin of a redemptive divine action that is completed by the Paschal mystery of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus.

Being “born under the Law” completes the Christmas story by asserting our individual names include each of us in a covenant community. That community is “the blessed company of all faithful who are heirs through hope” of the benefits from the redemptive divine action completed by the Paschal

mystery of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus, That is the covenant gift to each of us that makes Christmas so special.