

Star of Bethlehem

How the Christmas star fits into Matthew's story

THE deepest truths are like butterflies, says Anglican Bishop John Robinson. If you try to pin them down, you kill them. It is a cautionary note that sits well with the Christmas stories as told in the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Take, for example, the star of Bethlehem, so prominent in Christmas cards and carols. Though people who take the Bible literally will insist it appeared precisely as described, a large body of scholars today see it rather as part of the story's imaginative packaging. It is "myth" in the best sense of the word: a story that conveys truth about life, even though the events did not unfold quite as related.

Only Matthew tells of the star and the wise men – and he did so not to chronicle an astronomical oddity that happened about 90 years before he was writing, but to signal that the birth of this Jesus was an event of extraordinary significance. It was part of the lore of his time that any major event, and especially the birth of a king or great man, would be signalled by a divine sign in the sky. A special star was simply part of the repertoire available to any creative writer wanting to convey the ideas of royalty and divinity.

Matthew used the symbol to emphasise two things of central importance to him: that Jesus was descended from the royal House of David, and that his life, death and continuing presence reflected the very nature of God. Having the star guide the wise men, then stop in its tracks to shine on a particular house in a particular street in a particular town, is embroidery to drive the point home.

Jesus was born during the reign of Herod, who died in 4BC, and astronomers have tracked a special brightness appearing in the sky around that time. In 7BC there was a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation of Pisces. In 5BC a nova – a star that flares brilliantly when a nuclear detonation occurs and then fades as the energy is liberated – appeared in the constellation of Capricorn.

Either of these would have been so unusual as to excite the astrologers of the day. Matthew obviously knew of this, but he wrote the star into his story to serve his theological purpose, not display his knowledge of astronomy.

That is also evident in the way he located Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. Matthew is interested above all in showing how Jesus fulfils the Jewish scripture and tradition, and the royal line of David is part of that. Bethlehem, the city of David, had the right kingly associations for the new messiah, and Matthew underscores the point by tracing Jesus' genealogy back to David, and beyond him to Abraham.

He also found a verse in the book of the prophet Micah which proved Bethlehem to be the birthplace: "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel."

Unfortunately, the ruler in question was one who would be "like a lion among the beasts of the forest, like a young lion among the flocks of sheep which, when it goes

through, treads down and tears in pieces, and there is none to deliver”. That doesn’t sound a bit like Jesus.

Matthew has Mary and Joseph living in Bethlehem, so there is no need for them to travel there – nor, since it was home, to look for an inn. Luke has them living in Nazareth far to the north, so needs a reason to get them to Bethlehem. He finds it in a census ordered by Quirinius, governor of Syria – except that that took place in 6 AD, at least 10 years after Jesus was born.

Today, many scholars who have sifted through the minutiae think there was no star standing still over Bethlehem at the time of Jesus’ birth, and that he was probably born in his home town of Nazareth.

If details such as these are found to be doubtful or untrue, have the scholars succeeded only in killing the butterflies?

Only if the details are literalised in a manner the authors never intended – but certainly not if one is careful to see them as their creators saw them: symbols and myths which point poetically to the Godness they found in this Jesus, who became the Christ. Approach the story in that way and the butterflies still fly free.

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