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The Infancy Narratives with special reference to Matt.1

and 2

J. Cosslett Quin

Prepare yourselves for something very old fashioned. After all, I will be eighty in a few months and am daily increasing in deafness, Obstinacy and forgetfulness.

All the same, I have lately read Schillebeecx's Jesus - very learned, shows quite an incredible power of using technical jargon - I'd have found it more convincing if I'd known what his convictions were. Kung's Eternal Life on the other hand, I found clear and convincing; he does at least try, and I think succeeds, in establishing a minimum, though for me that minimum is too minimal. I also read most of, but couldnt get through Mackey's latest - a lot of vague smoky rhetoric from a formerly clear and acute writer. Forgive me for being so negative.

But I keep repeating to myself what F.D. Maurice said in 1848, "I do not wish to see the Catholic creeds levelled with the superstitions of the 19th century", and believe it still applies to the superstitions of 1986. During the last fifteen or twenty years, I have learnt Spanish and especially Modern Greek which brings the NT to life but is embarrassing in other ways; one realizes that Archimedes probably said βρηκα (vreeka); Xenophon's thousand certainly cried θαλασσα (thaaalassa, not thalassa) and that the Erasmian pronunciation is an absurd sort of ghost language that has no right to exist.

Also during a long and misspent life of trying to do three or more things at once, I have seen come and go a very large number of fashions of thought, and have realized that theological works are more ephemeral than novels, and that the more up-to-date you are today, the more certain you are to be out-of-date tomorrow!

When most modern theologians just dismiss the infancy narratives as myth or legend, one does not ask for reasons, one looks rather for motives. And these are mainly a priori, they come from a climate of thought which excludes anything supernatural or miraculous. Yet even Bultmann would allow that myths should not be eliminated but first illuminated by being translated into more scientific terms

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- which for him seems to mean commonplaces and concepts acceptable to the not very high intelligence of the modern urban bourgeoisie, which is a rather extreme way of delimiting what God is allowed to say or do! Source, Form and Redaction critics and all that Fauna seem, in general, to behave as if they were dealing with files and cuttings from old newspapers. They do not seem to have any direct acquaintance with what happens with folklore and unwritten history in oral societies, such as one finds in Greece and Eastern Europe or among Gaelic speakers in Ireland or Scotland. As a result, they deal with decades as if they were dealing with centuries. Let me give you a few examples:

About forty years ago I wrote down in Irish in Tory Island a story of a smuggler pressganged into the English Navy during the Napoleonic wars. There was a touch or two of the uncanny but the details of clothing, rigging, etc. were absolutely accurate without a single anachronism. Even in English Professor Delargy in 1929 recorded from a Mrs O'Toole forty pages or so of very accurate and detailed reminiscences of her great or great-great grandfathers, that Billy Byrne of Ballymanas who was out in 1798 and whose statue stands, pike in hand, in Wicklow town. Now that gives periods twice as long as the interval between the birth of Christ (8BC or whatever it was) and the usual date estimated for the composition of Matthew or Luke! Further, people who cannot read or write have tremendously accurate and compendious memories - I have taken down fifty or sixty songs or stories from old people, with material going back to the 18th or even 17th century and have known seanachies with still more inexhaustible stories of local history and legend. I also recall Sean O'Faolain's life of the Countess Markievitz or Eamon de Valera, in the preface of which he said that most of his sources were oral!

Now it is worth observing that in Mt dreams convey divine messages whereas in Lk, those messages are brought by messengers of God (a word for us technicalized into 'angels') and that that again recalls two different strands in the Pentateuch sources. A day before he died, a very earthy old Cavan farmer said "I seen the beautifulest young person, I don't know was it a man or a woman, standing in that window beside the curtain, and then after that he spread a pair of wings". I've also known three people who've seen visions and all of them were very unimaginative

matter of fact, prosaic people. Imaginative people are much less apt to externalize or materialize their experiences... that is if we have the right to say they are entirely subjective.

Matt. 1 and 2, especially 2, have always struck me as a marvellous piece of symbolism, parable, midrash, Platonic myth, Heilsgeschichte, or whatever you like to call it, and full of theological and soteriological significance. I do not think that half enough study or attention has been devoted to the way in which the Biblical writers use narrative to convey religious truth in a way intelligible to learned and unlearned alike. Indeed only too often it is the overlearned and the gnostics who feel they know it all already who fail to understand what is grasped by babes.

When you try to extract dogmas from narratives, what was dynamic and concrete becomes static and abstract. Time, which gave life and movement is stopped and statement becomes dated and soon outdated. Such definitions nevertheless have a certain value when contemporary terminology is honestly used. Then comparison with scripture is possible. Whereas to use scriptural words is really a form of cheating since it fixes, probably wrongly, on only one of possible interpretations. Also, only too often, people forget, or ignore, St Thomas Aquinas' very sound principle, that theological arguments may be drawn only from the literal sense.

There is also the distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics. "He is not here, he is risen", spoken by the angel beside the tomb means the opposite hermeneutically! However, exegesis and hermeneutics pretty well coincide in the chapters we are considering.

(Forgive all these lengthy prolegomena.)

In Matthew 1 we have the curious paradox of one Virgin-born being provided with a genealogy, that of his legal father - or if Joseph and Mary were cousins, of his mother also. Still queerer are the four women who are singled out and named, two gentiles, one a temporary, the other a more permanent sacred whore, yet another an adulteress, the most respectable a dangerous young widow who traps the wealthy and worthy Boaz into marriage on the advice of her mother-in-law! He who is to come is to be accused and to plead guilty of the crime of which Mr. Stalker

was accused...and the accusation is damning to those who bring it!

In Mt the pregnancy and birth are a sort of official secret. After all, a person's legitimacy is taken for granted and not publicly discussed unless some doubt arises, and, since we are dealing with decades, not centuries, why should the story not have originated with Joseph? In Lk, on the other hand, the annunciation is more public as it were, and less compromising than the pregnancy. Earth and heaven wait in silence for one tense moment to hear Mary's decision, her fiat. Even God almighty has to get a woman on his side! Only after that can the Incarnation take place.

It has been suggested that these and other incidents are mere fiction, fabricated in order to "fulfil" the "prophecies" quoted here. That has led to the game of finding other such fulfilments like the young man fleeing naked in Mk which has been coupled with a phrase in Amos: like the other game of discovering quotations from early Christian liturgies. But the word "prophecy" frequently needs to be put within inverted commas. We forget that in those days there was no scripture except the OT, and no other source of scriptural proofs or of texts for sermons.

Now, of course, in general and in principle, the OT and the chosen People to whom it bears witness, at once prepare the way for, and are fulfilled, completed and corrected by Christ. But the alleged fulfilments are all very fragmentary and we have to deal with the details, each on its merits. And I must confess that all those quoted by Mt seem to me exceedingly farfetched.

Isaiah speaks of a young woman (almah ; ῥᾱνις) who will have child which in three or four years will know what is eatable from what is uneatable and by that time the kings of Syria and Israel will be overthrown. The Septuagint uses the word παρθενος: bethulah virgin and Mt takes it as an announcement of the birth of Jesus seven years later! The quote in Jeremiah referring to the captivity in his own day is stuck on to the Slaughter of the Innocents. Hosea, referring to the Exodus, pictures Yahweh as saying "I called my Son out of Egypt" (ie Israel), a statement of a long past event and Mt attaches it to the return from the light into Egypt.

Now I put it to you that none of those phrases suggests

distant future events. They have been dragged in by the hair of the head and attached to actual events for the purpose of justifying these events in Jewish eyes. Now the odd thing is that Mt does not quote any of the traditionally accepted prophecies which fit the events so much better. Take the Protevangelium in Gen 3.15, especially now that the absurd "ipsa conteret" of the Vulgate has been dropped by Roman Catholic theologians. The "seed of the woman" does suggest a single physical parent and leads on to Dante's "La faccia che a Cristo piu si somiglia" (Par. 32.36). "The face that most resembles that of Christ", which is justifiably topsyturvy as sons are usually said to resemble mothers. (Has any painter taken up that point?)

One can also find in Malachi 1.11 a reference to future or present worship among the Gentiles and a whole lot of passages in the later chapters of Isaiah which express approval of one Zoroastrian, Cyrus, and of Zoroastrianism in general (after all it was the nearest thing to Hebrew prophetic religion in morality as well as monotheism or dualism) - and references to visitors and pilgrims from Eastern regions.

Considering that Tiridates sent some Magi on an embassy to Nero in Rome, there is no inherent improbability in our Magi making the much shorter land journey to Jerusalem. Their astronomical or astrological calculations connected a star they had seen in its rising ($\acute{\alpha}\nu\alpha\tau\omicron\lambda\eta$ can hardly mean in the East or towards sunrise, seeing that the star must have been to the West of them). The Magi thus got a right answer by means of wrong methodology - a thing very probable and unallowable in the eyes of pedantic schoolmasterish folk! But it is often the force rather than the content of faith which counts when people love God or are really seeking him - or, as I once heard C.S. Lewis say, "The Holy Ghost is very unscrupulous".

Natural religion, and their own specific one, could only give general indications. They were providentially led to where further information was available. "Salvation is of the Jews". They could go no further without guidance from holy scripture, of which the chosen People are the guardians and keepers (which alas too often can mean gaolers and cages!)

It seems a bit of overelaboration or unnecessary em-

broidery to say Herod gathered the Sanhedrin. But I suppose they could have been intimidated by one whom they regarded as a semi-pagan Edomite usurper. In any case, one scribe was enough and he gave them one verse from Micah and the Magi seized on the word Bethlehem, and acted upon it then and there and thus reached their goal!

It is not recorded that one scribe or priest ever even thought of walking, or riding his ass or mule, the seven or so short miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to see what, if anything, had happened. Not even the one who knew the OT by heart and was able to quote the relevant passage! He with the rest treated the Word of God as in the alleged Cambridge toast, "Here's to high mathematics, and may it do no one any good". The idea of the star going before them and then stopping seems to me as impossible as it was unnecessary. But anyway they found the child and worshipped him which signifies bodily prostration, not excluding but implying the associated inward feeling of reverence, and they presented their gifts, products of their own country, and departed, back to their own land of Persia or Iran, ignoring Herod's request or command to report back to him.

Herod (whom I always think of as resembling Henry VIII) was, like him, a bit of a theologian and, like him, took the Word of God more seriously than the religious leaders, so as to do something about it and not ignore it. The slaughter of the innocents was just what might be expected from a man who murdered his own wife and son and gave orders for the execution of hundreds on his death bed.

The flight into Egypt and subsequent return and settlement at Nazareth are credible enough, though the word *Nazōraïos* is a misapplication of another quotation in relation to Samson, that highly unedifying bullyboy. It seems far-fetched to interpret as a Nazar circlet or diadem. "Said by the prophets" is not justified by its appearance in Judges or Leviticus and its reference to past, not future history. One may however observe one common feature in the highly disparate narratives of Mt and Lk, namely the reference to the birth at Bethlehem and the residence at Nazareth which according to Lk was Mary's home beforehand. John also refers to Nazareth. "The continual and at times very unusual mention of the mother and the equally continuous non-mention of the father of Jesus in the course of

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the gospel narrative should also be noted as proving the early presence of particular attention having been given to the point". (Barth, Dogmatik 1/2 191)

Barth says the Church has put the doctrine of the Virgin birth like a sentry before the door to the mystery of Christmas and that preachers who do not believe it should at least respect it by silence. He also connects "natus e virgine" with the whole idea of revelation and grace, as against natural religion and the notion of Christ as a climax of human evolution.

The Magi, whose number is not specified, did not get any word from the Word Incarnate who had not yet spoken any word, nor are we told that they received any thanks or advice from Mary or Joseph. Yet they, like the Ethiopian Eunuch, went on their way rejoicing, and we hear nothing more of them after their exit from the stage. Any further addition would have been an anti-climax. They had met the climax, the central and determinative point and personality of their history and our history and all history: a thing as invisible and unverifiable as the immediate or remote result of an Infant Baptism. They accepted and were accepted. Herod attacked, the priests and scribes ignored and thus "forsook their own mercy" and determined their own destiny.

The Rev Cosslett Quin was formerly NT Professor at Trinity College, Dublin; he is an eminent Celtic Scholar and has translated works from German eg Eichrodt's Commentary on Ezekial. We bring him our warm good wishes on his eightieth birthday