

The Child in the Manger is a Jewish Child

A Christmas Reflection

*'Whoever meets Jesus Christ, meets Judaism.'*¹

Indeed, Christian remembrance of the nativity of Jesus is always an encounter with Judaism - historically, biblically, theologically.

That may not be apparent at first glance, given the significant credal differences that distinguish Judaism from the Christian proclamation that the child born in Bethlehem is the promised messiah, the saviour of the world. These disparities in belief must be respected, of course.

Still, the child in the manger is a Jewish child. And the season of Christmas is filled with opportunities for Christians to grow in appreciation of the Jewish identity of Jesus and the Jewish roots of the Church, and to reflect on the vitality of Jewish covenantal life in the world, both then (at the time of Jesus' birth) and now.

Four reflections come to mind:

First, salvation is relational.

The birth of Jesus is a family affair. Jesus is born to a daughter of Israel, raised in a Jewish family faithful to ancestral traditions. He is 'born under the law' (Gal 4:4), that is, the Mosaic law, and circumcised on the eighth day (Lk 2:21). While unique in his divine sonship, Jesus is presented in Scripture as deeply 'familied' as a descendant of Abraham, a son of Israel, a son of David, son of Mary, Son of God.

Second, 'salvation is from the Jews' (Jn 4:22).

The story of Jesus's birth has a powerful 'back story'. Jesus did not appear out of the blue 'like a meteor that falls by chance to the earth and is devoid of any connection with human history'.² Rather, his coming is framed by the long history of the people of Israel; the Christmas story engages the story of salvation in its entirety, the Hebrew Scriptures as much as the New Testament. Thus did Jesus become '*an authentic son of Israel*'.³ This point is beautifully captured in Matthew's Gospel with the genealogy of Jesus preceding the nativity story.

Third, salvation is enfleshed.

The mystery of the Incarnation resists any attempt to reduce the message of Christmas to an idea, a principle, a value, an ethic, a philosophy, when at heart it is about *a person*. 'The Word became flesh and lived among us' (Jn 1:14) not as an abstract genre ('humankind') or as a 'neutral' human being; rather, the Word 'became Jewish flesh, a Jew, the son of a Jewish mother, and as *such* a concrete human being. Becoming human happened in becoming a Jew.⁴ And to be a Jew is to belong to the Jewish people. When Christians liturgically *remember* the birth of Christ at Christmas, then, they encounter God's love for and presence among the Jewish people. It is from *this* people, in *this* place and time in history, that the message of salvation goes out to the whole world and to all peoples.

¹ John Paul II, Address to the West German Jewish Community, Mainz, 17 November 1980.

² John Paul II, Address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission, 11 April 1997.

³ John Paul II, Address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission, 11 April 1997.

⁴ Hans Herman Henrix, 'The Son of God Became Human as a Jew. Implications of the Jewishness of Jesus for Christology' in *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today. New Explorations of Theological Interrelationships*, ed. Philip A. Cunningham et al (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 114-143, at 119.

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Fourth, salvation continues to unfold.

Jesus is born, Christ has come. *Halleluyah!* And Jesus continues to be ‘born’ into our hearts and lives as his saving work gradually unfurls in history. We Christians commit ourselves to living the Christmas message of peace of earth, even as we look expectantly towards that future Day when Christ will come again, bringing all things to completion. We also know that God continues to covenant with the Jewish people, who offer a distinctive Jewish witness to the word of God as the reign of God unfolds on earth. In this way, Jews and Christians together participate in God’s saving activity in the present, and they share messianic hope, albeit understood in different ways.

Christmas: a time to ‘search into’ the mystery

Speaking of the Church’s permanent link to Judaism, Pope John Paul II had this to say during his historic visit to the Synagogue of Rome in 1986:

The Church of Christ discovers her ‘bond’ with Judaism by ‘searching into her own mystery.’ The Jewish religion is not ‘extrinsic’ to us, but in a certain way is ‘intrinsic’ to our own religion. With Judaism, therefore, we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion.

The Christmas season is a time for Christians to ponder and ‘search into’ this mystery and to discover their unique ‘bond’ with Judaism. To find God in a Jewish infant, born into a Jewish community that knew (and knows) itself to be irrevocably loved and called by the God of Israel, is not an incidental curiosity to the Christmas story. It is its beating heart. •

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