

Chapter 19

An Alternative Thread

Tradition

When the gossellers were writing, details of Jesus' birth were lost in the mists of time, but the events of Jesus' ministry and passion would still be vivid in many people's memory. Luke turns to Isaiah to construct what one can only described as a wholly fictional account of the birth and the events leading up to it. He was not trying to write history but rather to explain how marvellous the birth of Jesus was, but in retrospect, knowing how Jesus developed.

This gave particular status to Bethlehem and Nazareth which those two towns saw as important commercial opportunities, particularly after the visit of Helena. It would not be long before the places Helena identified would surround themselves with myths and traditions which would all be good for business. A second Bethlehem, this time in Galilee, has attempted to lay claims to being the birthplace and there is some archaeological evidence to support this view but the Judean city has established the pre-eminence. It also could be that the name 'Bethlehem' really meant 'Bethany' (see section 708)

Equally the diaspora which saw the Jews expelled from Palestine and the pre-eminence of Rome as the leading city of the Empire, and the later occupation of the eastern and southern Mediterranean countries by Islam ensured that traditions based upon Rome would prevail and anything that detracted from this would be seen as subversive and to be suppressed as when the Cathars and other French sects which had maintained the traditions of St Mary Magdalene were suppressed in the 13th and 14th centuries.

We need also to look at the motives of Constantine as he was using Christianity as a way of unifying and consolidating his empire. It was important to him to downgrade non-Roman traditions and when it came to select the canon of the New Testament he would be content to see other sources destroyed and liberties taken with the sequence of events.

Finally we must look also at the events in Palestine between 33 AD when we suppose the Crucifixion took place and 70 AD when the Temple was destroyed. For much of this period Christians were regarded as a subversive threat to Jewish Society and persecuted by Herod and his family. This alone would have caused early writers and preachers to use code to disguise the real facts for security reasons. But when the gossellers and Epistle writers came to write things down they would have had great difficulty in differentiating between coded imagery and historic fact, and as the coded imagery better elucidated what was seen as the Good News this would have been given preference anyway.

We have then a situation in which there were many powerful vested interests with a stake in suppressing and disguising the real facts. As in the stories to be found in the Old Testament where folk memory of ancient events and myths along the lines of the 'Just So' stories were woven together using different contexts to construct a claim for the Jews to the land of Israel, so with the New Testament were events taken out of sequence and context and woven with imagery to form a story which conveyed an essential message but lacking consistency and historical accuracy.

In this section we suggest a different sequence to events and sometimes different players; but generating a story with much more consistency and probability of being close to the truth than the stories told by the four gospels.

Birth

We start with Jesus' birth and pick up the story of Mary as described in the Koran. (section 101) From this we learn of an orphan left in charge of a priest named Zachariah and his wife and living in Jerusalem. There appears to be a distant relative known as Joseph of Arimathea who also takes some responsibility for her.

She gets pregnant without being married and this puts the priest and his wife in a very awkward situation. They appeal to this distant relative who is a merchant trading all around the Mediterranean. He arranges to move Mary to the Jewish colony in Alexandria. When Mary is told of the arrangement we get the Magnificat as an expression of both thankfulness and obedience for the way out of her problems. She and Joseph then go to Alexandria where she gives birth.

She later takes Jesus back to Jerusalem to show him to her friends among the priests, one of whom, Simeon, thanks God that he has seen the end result of the affair resulting in the *Nunc Dimittis*.

Upbringing

There can be little doubt that Jesus had a very good education which he would not have got as the son of a carpenter in Nazareth. We have to go back to the Essenes and to their two lay communities based in Alexandria and Gallilee. At the time of Jesus' childhood Alexandria was perhaps the greatest centre of learning in the Roman world, with its great library still intact.

Joseph would have had sufficient influence to ensure that Jesus received the education to which he was eminently suited. His later preachings demonstrated an ability to read and thoroughly understand the writings in the Torah and also reflected many of the philosophical concepts of ancient Egyptian thought.

When as a child Joseph took him and Mary on a trip to Jerusalem and he was able to encounter some of the learned scholars in the Temple and display this knowledge it was little wonder that they marvelled at his learning.

With Joseph as his patron he was able to travel far and wide and in this context the stories and legends of Glastonbury become much more credible.

Marriage

In section 104 we have discussed the question of Jesus' marriage and suggested his wife was Mary of Magdala. In first century Judaism marriage was not a matter of love and romance, it was more to do with family alliances. Every father would be anxious to see his sons and daughters married and often negotiations to this effect would begin when a child was quite young. In the absence of a husband Mary would have looked to Joseph to make the arrangements.

In Alexandria he would have had some difficulties in finding a bride for Jesus as the family circumstances would be well known in the community. So what more logical than he turns to

the other great Essene community in Galilee and makes an alliance with a fellow merchant from Magdala. After the marriage the couple move to Nazareth where Jesus earns a living as a carpenter while he continues his studies and preaches in local synagogues.

Jesus' Calling

Typically he would have been between 16 and 19 when he got married and so had another six or so years to go before he recognised his gifts and his calling. He would have been about 25 when he joined the associate community at Qumran and began his two to three years of preparations in the desert. It would have been normal for his wife to have been with him while living in the community. (see section 105)

Jesus' education at Alexandria would have set him apart from most of his contemporaries, especially as regards philosophy as he would have been schooled in ancient Egyptian thought which had a markedly different approach to the question of dying and the afterlife. The more typical Jewish view was that survival was of the race rather than of the individual and the concept of the soul was either dismissed or quietly ignored. The Egyptian view was that death was merely a transition to another, better world and furthermore by the cultivation of one's soul one could prepare oneself for this afterlife.

To the Essenes at Qumran this would have been a revolutionary thought which was more likely to appeal than not. One could suppose that John the Baptist had absorbed much of this philosophy while with Jesus at Qumran and left to preach it to the rest of the Jewish nation. Matthew records him saying "repent for the kingdom of heaven is near" - quite a different message from that normally understood from Isaiah where they were looking for a Messiah who would set up his kingdom on earth and, in contemporary terms, oust the Romans from Palestine.

Jesus' Ministry

When Jesus does begin his ministry he needs a base. We suppose that this is at the house of Simon in Bethany. It is not clear exactly who Simon is but one might assume he was either Lazarus' or Marthas's father in law. It could have been that Simon was Lazarus' father and Martha Lazarus' wife. Thus while Jesus was on his travels, Mary could lodge with her sister and be joined by Jesus when he was in the Jerusalem area.

It is evident that Jesus' entourage often included a band of women and so Mary would have been with him for some of his travels.

What of his mother, Mary. She does not figure in most of his ministry so we may suppose she continued to live with Joseph of Arimathea in Jerusalem.

The Burial

Mother Mary reappears at the time of the Passion and is present at the crucifixion (see section 505) along with Mary of Magdala. After Jesus' death Joseph re-appears and claims the body which is buried in Joseph's own tomb.

Assuming Mary was around 16 when she gave birth to Jesus in around 6 BC she would have been around 56 at the time of the crucifixion. After this she disappears from the scene and one may assume she dies soon afterwards.

Christianity takes off

After the events of Pentecost and the injunction to the Apostles to go out and spread the word the Christians suddenly become a major force with growing numbers of adherents. The word is spreading well beyond the borders of Palestine and a number of scholars from the east get to hear about this new phenomenon and want to know more.

Meanwhile Mary of Magdala gives birth to John Mark, Jesus' son. This is kept fairly quiet but word does get out and reaches the ears of some of the scholars who decide to pay a visit.

At this point in time Herod Antipas was on the Jewish throne as a Roman puppet king. He was the son of Herod the Great who was around at the time of Jesus' birth. It was this same Herod who had interviewed Jesus prior to his trial before the Council (see section 503) and he was now dealing with the new sect with considerable brutality. (see section 704) If we take AD 33 as the date of the crucifixion we may assume John Mark to have been born in AD 34.

When the scholars arrive at his court and let slip the secret of the new baby this is the last straw for Herod. Previously he had seen the Christians as just a nuisance, but with the emergence of a son of the man who had claimed to be the 'King of the Jews' he saw his whole position threatened and so began the slaughter of the Innocents

The story is told only by St Matthew:-

Matthew 2.7 to 2.15

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Thus the episode of the three wise men can be interpreted quite differently and one can see how the early gospel writers distorted the story for security reasons.

The Flight to Egypt

We now have a situation of great danger. Not only are the Christians being persecuted but Herod is intent on killing all the young children in a futile attempt to rid himself of a potential rival Joseph now takes Mary of Magdala back to Alexandria

Matthew continues:-

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod.

The Herods

We need now to look at some of the murky history which surrounded the House of Herod. There were several rulers who bore the name Herod and it is often difficult to differentiate them.

Herod the Great had become Tetrarch of Galilee in 42 BC and was made king of Judea in 37 BC. It was this Herod who rebuilt Jerusalem after an earthquake including the Temple which existed

in Jesus' time. He was despotic and cruel and was popularly blamed for the fire at Qumran in 8BC which destroyed the monastery there. He died in 4 BC after the birth of Jesus.

His kingdom was divided up between his three sons, Antipas got Galilee and Peraea, Philip got the Golan Heights and Archelaus got Samaria and Judea.. Archelaus was exiled to France in 6 AD after a thoroughly incompetent reign and his lands given to Antipas.

Philip died in 34 AD and Antipas expected that Philip's lands too would be added to his and this had been agreed with the Emperor Tiberius. But then Tiberius died in 37 and his successor Caligula instead appointed to rule over Philip's lands Agrippa was a close friend of Caligula and was even more antipathetic towards the Christians. than Antipas had been. Instead of the Title 'Tetrach' Agrippa was given the title 'king' He was the first to be called 'king' since his grandfather, Herod the Great, who had died almost forty years earlier.

Antipas tried to steal the lands and titles he considered rightly his but he failed. Peraea and Galilee were added to Agrippa's lands and Antipas was exiled to Lyon in southern France.

The relation between the Jewish king and the Roman emperor was excellent, which is remarkable, because many considered Caligula a madman, and he could be very cruel indeed. In July or August 38, Agrippa arrived in his kingdom. in 38 Caligula was murdered and Agrippa played a very important role during the accession of Claudius. The latter was grateful to Agrippa; Judaea and Samaria were added to Herod Agrippa's realm. He was now king of all the territories that had once been ruled by Herod the Great. Jerusalem was again the capital of Palestine as a whole and received new city walls. Agrippa's entry in the city of David and Herod was a triumph.

After these successes, a strange incident took place in 44 AD. related by Luke:

Acts 12 19-23

King Herod went down from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there. [...] And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne and delivered an oration unto them. And the people gave a shout, saying, 'It is the voice of a god, and not of a man!' And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory; and he was eaten by worms and gave up the ghost.

Flavius Josephus: tells the same story but in greater detail

Jewish Antiquities 19.343-350

Now when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city of Caesarea. There he exhibited shows in honour of the emperor. On the second day of the festival, Herod put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a truly wonderful contexture, and came into the theatre early in the morning; at which time the silver of his garment was illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays upon it. It shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon him. At that moment, his flatterers cried out that he was a god; and they added, 'Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature.'

Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery. But as he presently afterward looked up, he saw an owl sitting on a certain rope over his head, and immediately understood that this bird was the messenger of ill tidings, as it had once been the messenger of good tidings to him; and he fell into the deepest sorrow. A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner. He therefore looked upon his friends, and said, 'I, whom you call a god, am commanded presently to depart this life; while Providence thus reproves the lying words you just now said to me; and I, who was by you called immortal, am immediately to be hurried away by death. But I am bound to accept of what Providence allots, as it pleases God; for we have by no means lived ill, but in a splendid and happy manner.'

After he said this, his pain was become violent. Accordingly he was carried into the palace, and the rumour went abroad that he would certainly die in a little time. But the multitude presently sat

in sackcloth, with their wives and children, after the law of their country, and besought God for the king's recovery. All places were also full of mourning and lamentation. Now the king rested in a high chamber, and as he saw them below lying prostrate on the ground, he could not himself forbear weeping. And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life, being in the fifty-fourth year of his age, and in the seventh year of his reign.

The Flight of John Mark

The exile of Herod Antipus in AD 37 would have signalled to Mary and Joseph that it was now safe to return to Jerusalem.

But the persecutions under Herod Agrippa worsened James had been beheaded and many Christians imprisoned and executed

Just before the death of Herod, Peter had been in prison and was awaiting interrogation by Herod when he miraculously escaped from prison (see section 707) He had immediately gone to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, which would have been the house in Bethany which had been Jesus' base and was now seen as a gathering place for Christians.

Acts 12

Then Peter came to himself. 'Now I know it is true,' he said; 'the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.' When he realized how things stood, he made for the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where a large company was at prayer. He knocked at the outer door and a maid called Rhoda came to answer it. She recognized Peter's voice and was so overjoyed that instead of opening the door she ran in and announced that Peter was standing outside. 'You are crazy', they told her; but she insisted that it was so. Then they said, 'It must be his guardian angel.'

Meanwhile Peter went on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astounded. With a movement of the hand he signed to them to keep quiet, and told them how the Lord had brought him out of prison. 'Report this to James and the members of the church', he said. Then he left the house and went off elsewhere.

The strange death of Agrippa would have posed new dangers to the Christians who could easily have been blamed for his death and John Mark would have been singled out as a threat to the succession. Hence Barnabas and Paul felt it best to get him completely out of the country and took him with them as they left Jerusalem in 44 AD when John Mark would have been about ten years of age.

Acts 12: 10

Meanwhile the word of God continued to grow and spread. Barnabas and Saul, their task fulfilled, returned from Jerusalem, taking John Mark with them.

As a Roman citizen Paul could offer stronger protection than any other of the Christians. Alexandria was by now not regarded as a safe place as the Jewish community there would be unsympathetic to the Christians and the safest place would have been seen as the south of France where he could have been taken by his mother who escaped by a different route, thus giving rise to all the traditions based in that area.

Persecution

The next two hundred years saw the church that Paul led suffer extreme persecution but yet managing to spread throughout the Roman world to become the state religion of the Roman Empire. Building upon this position the church became the foundation of society in Europe which was generally known not as Europe but as Christendom until the Reformations of the 16th Century and thereafter becoming a major world religion as European trade and culture spread around the

globe.

The key question is 'Why the persecution?' The Roman Empire was remarkably tolerant towards religions of all kinds and the reasons generally offered that it was because Christians refused to worship the Emperor begin to look pretty thin when one notes that Jews had also refused without incurring the same fate.