

STORIES OF JESUS' BIRTH NEED USCRABLING

They'll play those confounding Christmas carols at Target and K-mart and Walmart for a month or more before December 25. All the semi-religious razamataza, the tinsel decorations and the jolly Santas are enough to make even the most dedicated Christian a trifle weary of the holiday long before the big day finally arrives. And for those who don't really care to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the effect must be devastating.

To make matters worse, even many popular religious traditions have so scrambled the biblical data that the original stories are almost unrecognizable. Take your average crèche scene, for example. What you usually see is a stable populated by one donkey, one cow, a couple of sheep, and—if the artist was especially inventive—a chicken or two.

The baby Jesus lies in the feed trough while Joseph and Mary (who looks like anything but a postpartum patient) smile dotingly at their new son. You'll usually find a five-pointed star hanging over the stable. On one side kneels a pack of sheep herders. From the other side comes a three-camel caravan carrying the Magi.

You get the impression that this stereotype of Jesus' birth must be the most clearly laid out incident in the Christian scriptures. You assume this story is crucial. But, as they say, don't assume anything over a 4% mortgage.

The fact of the matter is that the story of Jesus' birth is not a major biblical theme. Obviously it is based on the gospels which head the list of books in the Christian scriptures. For openers, it's worth noting that only two of the four gospels have anything at all to say about how Jesus was born. Neither Mark nor John bothers to tell the story.

That leaves Matthew and Luke. Thumb through the first couple of chapters in each of them and you'll soon see that they don't agree.

Matthew's story is told from the perspective of Joseph. His fiancée is found to be pregnant, but in a dream an angel explains the divine nature of her conception. A few months later Jesus is born at Bethlehem; some eastern magicians follow a star to the Jewish capital; upon the advice of his scholars, the king sends them on their way; they find the child, leave their gifts, and head for home.

Meanwhile Joseph has another dream and migrates with his family to Egypt. After their escape, the king slaughters all the boys in Bethlehem under two years of age. Years later Joseph returns to his homeland and sets up shop in the village of Nazareth.

The first two chapters of Luke tell stories from a strikingly different angle. This time it's the viewpoint of Mary. In this case the account is mixed in with stories about Mary's cousins and the birth of their son John the Baptist.

At her hometown of Nazareth Mary is surprised by an angel who informs her that she will become a mother. Some months later her fiancée Joseph takes her south to Bethlehem. When her due date arrives she delivers in an out-of-the-way spot because the motels are full.

Meanwhile out in the country some sheep herders are surprised by an angel who announces the child's birth. They find the new family and spread the news. Later the baby is circumcised, officially named Joshua or Jesus, and presented as is customary at the temple in Jerusalem. The family then returns to Nazareth.

The two versions of Matthew and Luke are not at all close in their details. The one is full of angelic dreams, visitors from the east, and a wicked king. The other features face-to-face confrontations with angels, adoring shepherds, and religious ritual.

On the other hand, the two versions are not completely out of sync. They both agree that the baby's name is Jesus, that there is something miraculous about his birth to Mary, that his (step)father is Joseph, that he is born at Bethlehem, and that he grows up in Nazareth.

The point of this review is to sort out the real stories from the muddled blather which usually gets spread around at Christmas time. Whatever the merits of holiday festivities—and they are considerable—the fact remains that the biblical accounts of Jesus birth get lost in the shuffle.

And that's a shame. Because the stories still generate a special charm. But the trick is to read them, each on its own terms and not to scramble them up. That way we can recapture the fond devotion which Matthew and Luke were trying to convey through their stories of the birth of Jesus.