The Unknown Christmas Gospel

The familiar Christmas story incorporates important details which in fact derive from a set of later ancient texts, as well as the New Testament.

A festive concert at The University Church of St Mary The Virgin

by Professor Markus Bockmuehl

Christmas is a global cultural icon of astonishing reach and resilience. Beyond extravagantly festooned trees and banquets, or commercialized kitsch mythology about Saint-Nicholas-turned-Santa, there remains a Christmas narrative of Mary and Joseph trudging with their donkey to birth in a stable at Bethlehem, attended by shepherds and mysterious gift-bearing wizard kings purring over the baby Jesus. Here is a fabric of timeless yet compelling, ever-contemporary symbolism, as from dark unpromising circumstances spring redemptive birth and transformation: out of excruciating miseries of teenage pregnancy, bureaucratic harassment by occupying forces and refugees fleeing state-sponsored terrorism is born a surprise of joy, light and hope for the world. That enthralling ancient narrative is unchanged even in its twenty first century.
The familiar Christmas story incorporates important details which in fact derive from later ancient texts.

Or is it? The last two or three decades have witnessed an exciting renewal of interest in early Christian sources outside the mainstream New Testament Gospels. At times this tended to favour far-fetched and sensationalist theories of alternative Christian origins. More recent discussion, however, has rediscovered in these sources surprisingly fertile documentation of the rich diversity of early Christian beliefs in late antiquity and beyond.

The most influential by far of these ancient apocryphal texts is the so-called Infancy Gospel of James, a second-century text from Syria that exists in over 150 Greek manuscripts and was translated into at least eight other ancient languages including Arabic. This text has profoundly shaped how Christians (and indeed Muslims) through the ages understood and imagined the birth of Jesus and the life of his mother. And its influence persists even today, even among those who have never heard of it.
The New Testament’s evocative but incomplete birth and childhood narratives soon generated a devout curiosity about issues and themes that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke sketch only minimally. How human was this man? Who were his family? And in what sense could he be a royal Son of David, eternal Son of God, and yet also born of a Virgin?

The Infancy ‘gospel before the gospel’ (Protevangelium) of James takes a keen interest especially in the background to the birth of Jesus and the events immediately following it. The focus is squarely on his young mother Mary as that story’s central character: her birth and childhood growing up around the Jerusalem Temple, her eventual engagement to an older man called Joseph with children from a previous marriage, her giving birth to Jesus amidst astonishing portents of nature, and the family’s subsequent flight to Egypt to escape a murderous massacre perpetrated by an evil tyrant. The point of the text is of course the incarnation and identity of Jesus: but it gets to this through an explicit focus very much on that nativity as the gift of a pure, obedient and miraculously graced mother.
This popular second-century text is often quite moving and enthusiastic in its affection for the family of Jesus, whose setting it interprets (somewhat unusually for the second century) in terms that are relatively sympathetic to Jewish faith and practice. Its influence on later Christian popular faith, theology and artistic expression was so pervasive that it has become difficult to envisage especially the Christmas story without certain aspects of it. All of the following ten bullet points are already attested here, and many of them later came to be almost ubiquitously reflected in classic religious art like the Icon of the Nativity:

- Mary’s parents were called Joachim and Anna. They are commemorated by Catholics and Anglicans on July 26, and by the Eastern churches on September 9. (Other feast days with roots in the Infancy Gospel include Mary’s Immaculate Conception on December 8, her birth on September 8, and her presentation in the Temple on November 21.) Giotto’s (1267-1337) famous frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel at Padua include a number of scenes from the lives of her parents.
- By affirming that not only Joseph but Mary was of the ‘tribe of David’, the Infancy Gospel (followed by many other early Christian sources) solves the problem of how Jesus was believed to be the messianic Descendant of David despite having no biological father.
- The Annunciation of Mary’s pregnancy occurred by a well. That well is attested in many icons and narrative accounts, and has been pointed out to pilgrims through the centuries at the Orthodox Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth.
- Most notably, Mary rides to Bethlehem on a donkey – a theme without which Christmas church and school pageants, or even Hollywood representations like the
2006 film The Nativity Story, would be unthinkable. Popular imagination firmly assumes that donkey to be integral to the biblical story; but it first appears in the Infancy Gospel, where it is driven along by James, one of several older sons of Joseph from a previous marriage.

- The star of Bethlehem is the brightest in the sky and dimmed all other stars. This is understandably taken for granted in later art and narrative – but nowhere stated in the New Testament.
- Jesus is born in a cave. This tradition was accepted by early Christian writers beginning in the second century (e.g. Justin, Jerome), and it became a standard feature of orthodox iconography. (The emergence of wooden 'stable' structures is a much later feature of Western renaissance art.)
- Joseph is absent from the birth, as is also evident in icons of the Nativity.
- There are two midwives, again often depicted in Greek icons as washing the baby to stress the physicality of his birth.
- A bright light appears in the cave – an artistic staple of innumerable adorations of the shepherds or the Magi, whether in Eastern or in Western Art.
- Mary remains a virgin even after the birth – a theme that vitally signified the identity of Jesus for the ancient Christian writers, the Creeds and for Catholic and orthodox churches through the centuries.

The New Testament grants only glimpses of Jesus’ origins, his family background, birth and infancy. Luke’s Gospel in particular suggests there was a great deal more to think about – and that much of that thinking was done by Mary, whose story matters even before Jesus is born and whose prayers synthesize the theological significance of the Annunciation and birth of her son.
Gifts for orphans and pensioners being shared in the Covered Market by Father Christmas

The Infancy Gospel of James presupposes and speaks alongside the New Testament gospels, and in no way seeks to replace them. Like them it attests something of the abiding wonder, joy and hope of the messianic Christmas Gift despite its fragility and vulnerability to terror and violence. We owe this text much that has become integral to the world’s imagination of Christmas.

Read more on Oxford Today:

A short literary history of the vampire
Sleep off the trauma? That could be a mistake