

The Infancy and Youth of the Messiah

By John Dominic Crossan

The question is often raised about the “lost years of Jesus.” Why are we given the infancy story and then nothing until he’s an adult? The question really is based on a misunderstanding of the infancy narratives. They are not the first chapter, chapter one of the life of Jesus, with, as it were, chapters two and three (Jesus grows up, Jesus goes to college) missing, and then the adult life of Jesus. The infancy narratives are overtures, not first acts but overtures. The function of an overture is to give you a musical medley, a thematic overview of what is to come. Usually overtures are written after the play has been completed. The infancy stories, therefore, must be taken as overtures, not first acts or first chapters.

Each Gospel has an overture. Two of them (Matthew and Luke) have infancy stories as overtures. There are no lost sections in those two Gospels. The first section is an overture, and then you go straight into the story.

When you read those two stories in *Matthew 1–2* and *Luke 1–2*, the first thing that should strike you is that they are totally different. Even if we can get them organized and get the Magi and the shepherds around the crib so we don’t notice the problem, they’re totally different. But of course they should be totally different if they are overtures to different Gospels.

The Surface Level: *Luke 1–2* And *Matthew 1–2*.

The first layer explains what Luke is doing and what Matthew is doing. Basically, Luke is comparing Jesus and John the Baptist in order to exalt Jesus over John the Baptist. But not just over John the Baptist. Just as Jesus is born of a virgin, or at least conceived virginally, so John the Baptist is born of aged, infertile parents. And that immediately subsumes the birth of Isaac, the great patriarch, and the birth of Samuel, the great prophet, also born of aged and/or infertile parents. So *Luke 1–2* is an exaltation of Jesus over the patriarchal and prophetic traditions of Israel.

To do this, Luke tells his story in five acts. Imagine the story as a drama. The first act is the Angelic Annunciations (*Luke 1:5–25* and *1:26–38*). There is one annunciation to

Zachary about John's conception and another annunciation to Mary about Jesus' conception. Each angel says, "Do not be afraid." Each recipient asks a question. Zachary says, "How will I know this is so? I am an old man, my wife is getting on in years." Mary says, "How can this be since I am a virgin?" The first act is parallel Angelic Annunciations.

The second act is the Publicized Birth of each child (*Luke 1:57–58* and *2:7–14*). That of John: "Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her." And then, of course, you get to the birth of Jesus in much more detail—the manger in the stable because the inn had no place for them and the shepherds in the fields terrified then reassured by the angelic hosts of heaven.

The third act is Circumcision and Naming (*Luke 1:59–63a* and *2:21*). So far, then, we've had Angelic Annunciations, Publicized Births and the Circumcision and Naming of each child. I'm not reading the full texts to you, but you can do that with your own Bible. What you notice is parallelism, but the score keeps coming up John: 0, Jesus: 1. In the circumcision and naming of John, "on the eighth day, they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zachary but were told he was to be called John." Jesus, "after eight days had passed and it was time to circumcise the child, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb."

The fourth act is the Public Presentation and Prophecy of Destiny for each child (*Luke 1:65–79* and *2:21–38*). Again, parallelism, but also the subtle or not-so-subtle exaltation of Jesus. John is born and "fear came over all their neighbors and these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. ... Zachary was filled with the Holy Spirit" and speaks in prophecy about John but mostly about Jesus. Unlike John, the public presentation of Jesus is in the Temple, not a house in the Judean hills, but in the Temple. And again, there is prophecy, this time two prophecies, Simon and Anna, male and female. Furthermore, both prophecies focus mostly on Jesus, whereas the prophecy about the destiny of John is mostly about Jesus. John is destined to speak of Jesus.

The fifth act is Description of the Child's Growth (*Luke 1:80* and *2:40–52*). Once again, John comes first, and, once again, Jesus wins. For example, first, "The child [John] grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel." Then, "The child [Jesus] grew and became strong, filled

with *wisdom*, and the *favor of God* was upon him.” But then, of course, comes the climax. The story about Jesus’ parents finding him in the Temple when he was 12, “sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions; and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ... and Jesus increased in *wisdom* and stature and *favor with God* and man.” Notice how the italicized phrases frame that scene, and the entire complex of 2:40–52. Jesus overpowers completely the single phrase in 1:80 for John.

Basically that is what Luke does. He constructs a five-act drama in which Jesus is parallel but superior to John the Baptist. John the Baptist is born, as was, for example, Isaac and Samuel, of aged and/or infertile parents. Jesus is born of a virginal conception. Jesus is overwhelmingly superior to the prophetic and the patriarchal traditions of his people.

Now turn to Matthew. In a way, Matthew accomplishes the same thing but in a totally different way. Matthew compares the infancy of Jesus with the infancy of Moses. But to complicate the matter, the infancy of Moses is not the same as in *Exodus 1–2*. At the time of Jesus, popular traditions expanded that rather terse account of the infancy of Moses, and those popular versions are important for the Matthew parallelism.

I will be talking here not just about the bare bones of the story in Exodus, but also about popular expansions in, say, the Targumim, or Aramaic paraphrase translations of the Bible, and the Midrashim, or commentaries expanding on the biblical text. We know that a long tradition of popular expansion was already present in the first century because we find it in summary both in Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jews* (4.254–59) and in a book called *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* (9.2–10), which was first wrongly attributed to Philo, so now it’s called pseudo-Philo.⁽¹⁾

Why were there popular expansions? Anyone who reads about the birth of Moses in *Exodus 1–2* can tell you it’s not a very good story. First of all, Pharaoh sets out to kill all the Israelites. And just by bad luck, as it were, Moses happens to be born at that time. That is a sort of transcendental tackiness. Was it just coincidence? Surely, somehow, Moses was at the center. Surely the children were being killed in order to get Moses. And that’s exactly how the popular traditions make it happen.

Second, why would the Israelites go on having children if their male infants were going to be killed? Why didn't they simply stop having children? Again, the popular expansions, pinpointing where they see problems in the text, address those questions.

Let me talk again about a drama, this time a drama with three acts divided into scenes. We're looking at Matthew's account of the infancy of Jesus in parallel with and exaltation over the infancy of Moses. But notice, of course, that if patriarchs, prophets, Moses and the law aren't important, you don't bother doing this. This is all a debate within Judaism.

The first act of Moses' and Jesus' births is the Ruler's Plot. This act has four scenes. I call them Sign, Fear, Consultation and Massacre. Notice how exactly parallel they are in both accounts.

Here's what happens in the popular accounts. Pharaoh dreamed he was sitting on his throne and saw an old man before him with a merchant's balance in his hand. The old man took all the elders, princes and nobles of Egypt and put them on one scale of the balance. Then he took a lamb and put it on the second scale, and the lamb outweighed them all. Pharaoh wondered about this terrible vision, but then he awoke to find it was only a dream. That Sign is the first scene of the Ruler's Plot.

The second scene is Fear. The next morning, Pharaoh arose, summoned all his courtiers, narrated his dream, and everyone was extremely frightened.

Consultation is the third scene. The courtiers explain that a great evil must be coming upon Egypt. What is it? A child will be born in Israel who will destroy the land of Egypt. They accordingly ask that a royal statute be written and promulgated throughout the land of Egypt to kill every newborn male of the Hebrews so that this evil will be averted.

Now, at last, we have the story properly told. The point of the Massacre is to kill Moses, who is soon to be born. The story in Exodus continues about the massacre of all newborn males in order to kill Moses.

When you look through that lens at Matthew, you see something very similar. There is a Sign (*Matthew 2:1-2*). In the time of King Herod, wise men come from the East asking, "Where is the child?" There is Fear (*Matthew 2:3*). "When King Herod heard this, he was

frightened, and all Jerusalem with him,” just like Pharaoh and his court. There is Consultation (*Matthew 2:4–6*). “Calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him “In Bethlehem.” So Herod decrees the Massacre (*Matthew 2:7–8, 16–18*). Sign, Fear, Consultation, Massacre. Exact parallelism.

The first act, with four scenes, is the Ruler’s Plot. We now have a parallel. Pharaoh kills the children in order to kill Moses. Herod kills the children in order to kill Jesus.

The second act is the Father’s Decision. All you have in Exodus is that, “A man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son” (*Exodus 2:1*). But, as I asked before, why did they do that if they knew the child might be killed? That question is answered in the popular accounts.

The Father’s Decision has three scenes: Divorce, Reassurance, Remarriage. The Divorce scene narrates how some Israelites, when they heard the decree ordained by Pharaoh that their male children would be killed, divorced their wives, but the rest stayed married. The second scene is Reassurance. The spirit of God comes on Miriam, Moses-to-be’s elder sister, and she announces that a son will be born to her father and mother who will save Israel from the power of Egypt. The final scene is Remarriage. Amram listens to Miriam and remarries his wife.

When you look at Matthew through that lens, you see those same three scenes for the birth of Jesus. There is the Divorce scene in *Matthew 1:18–19* where Joseph, piously but lethally, “being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.” The Reassurance episode follows in *Matthew 1:20–23* where “an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.’” Finally, there is the Remarriage scene in *Matthew 1:24*: “When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.”

The third and final act of the drama is the Child’s Deliverance. The popular accounts of Moses’ birth make no attempt to improve on the Exodus story of Nile bulrushes and Pharaoh’s daughter. Matthew’s account makes little attempt to continue the detailed

parallelism into the third and final act. But in that last act, parallelism turns ironic. Jesus flees and takes refuge in, of all places, Egypt.

That's the first level: Matthew compares Jesus with Moses, and thence with the legal traditions; Luke compares Jesus with John the Baptist, and thence with the patriarchal and prophetic traditions. Both use parallelism to exalt Jesus. Both do exactly the same thing in totally different ways. But isn't this a little too coincidental—to do exactly the same thing, even if in different ways?

The Middle Level: Virginal Conception And Bethlehem birth

Now let's move down to the second, deeper level—the virginal conception and Bethlehem birth of Jesus. These are two things on which Matthew and Luke agree. They disagree on almost everything else except maybe the names of Jesus, Mary and Joseph and a few minor details. And that a child was born. It's sort of useful in an infancy story for somebody to be born.

Born of the Virgin Mary. Matthew, notice this, makes an explicit reference to *Isaiah 7:14* in *1:20–23*. “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel,’ which means God with us.” The prophet cited is *Isaiah 7:14*, who spoke in Hebrew about an *‘almâ*, a virgin married but not yet pregnant with her first child. In Greek the word was translated as *parthenos*, which in this context meant the same thing, a newly married woman, presumably a virgin, who will have her first child soon. Matthew reads this prophecy of Isaiah as one of hope. She will conceive and remain a virgin. He takes it literally and applies it to the virginal conception of Jesus.

Let me stop here for a second. I've used the word prophecy. Imagine two different kinds of prophecy. I call them projective and retrojective prophecy. If I say now that on the first of January in a specific year in the future I will have a heart attack, and it happens, that is a projective prophecy. If I were to have (this is a horrible example) a heart attack today and say to myself in the hospital bed (let's give me the benefit of

survival in this hypothetical example), “Ah, that’s what that pain was last week and the week before,” that’s retrojective prophecy. That’s going back after the fact and seeing the future in the past. This is what I mean by prophecy here. It’s not as if everyone was reading this text and waiting for, say, a virgin birth. This is retrojective prophecy, going back after the fact and selecting a certain text and saying, “See!” Whenever I speak of prophecy today, I’ll be talking about retrojective prophecy.

We talked about the virgin birth in both Matthew and Luke. But notice that Luke never explicitly mentions Isaiah, so if we didn’t have Matthew, we might miss the Isaiah prophecy completely. But Matthew and Luke use the same phrase, almost verbatim. In *Matthew 1:21*, “The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus.” In *Luke 1:31*, “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” For two independent sources, such as Matthew and Luke here, this requires some explanation. Matthew explicitly quotes Isaiah, and Luke implicitly. How did that happen?

You shouldn’t assume that all early Christian tradition viewed *Isaiah 7:14* as prophesying a virginal conception of Jesus. In fact, you can’t find it anywhere except in Matthew and Luke. But it is a common point, and it tells us something about the tradition prior to Matthew and Luke. Some Christians applied *Isaiah 7:14* to Mary’s virginal conception.

Once opponents of Christianity heard claims of the virginal conception and divine generation of Jesus, they would reply with instant and obvious rebuttal. No known father means a bastard. The pagan philosopher Celsus, toward the end of the second century, declared in the name of both Judaism and paganism that a cover-up for bastardy must have been the real reason for assertions of the virginal conception of Jesus. The illegitimate father was, he claims, a Roman soldier named Panthera, in whose name we catch a mocking and reversed (*n* and *r* are reversed) allusion to *parthenos*, the Greek word for the young woman in *Isaiah 7:14*. That is the first major common element in *Matthew 1–2* and *Luke 1–2*, the virginal birth.

A second one is that Jesus is born in David’s village, Bethlehem. Matthew and Luke agree that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a village south of Jerusalem in the Judean hills. Once again, however, this is mythology rather than history. In the Hebrew Scriptures, according to *1 Samuel 17:12*, “David was the son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah, named Jesse, who had eight sons.” In Israelite tradition, David

was much more than a past monarch. He was, like Arthur, the once and future king. As waves of social injustice, foreign domination and colonial exploitation swept across Jewish territory, people imagined, hoped and dreamed of a future Davidic leader who would bring back the peace and glory of a bygone age. This hope was hallowed, of course, by long-standing nostalgia and suffused with utopian idealism. The Davidic monarch is the ideal king who will remedy those evils.

For example, among the prophecies in the book of Micah, a younger contemporary of Isaiah in the late eighth century B.C.E., in verse 5:2, “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.” Once again we have the same thing in *Matthew 2:5–6*, where we have an explicit quotation of *Micah 5:2*. In *Luke 2:4, 11* we have only an implicit quotation of *Micah 5:2*. Both Matthew and Luke have to have Jesus born in Bethlehem in order to fulfill *Micah 5:2*.

How does Luke do it? Well, you know the story in *Luke 2:1–6*: “In those days, a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration that was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.”

There are three problems with this story. And I really hate to do this because it is a marvelous story. Remember that we have to get Jesus born in Bethlehem.

First, of course, there was no worldwide census under Octavius Augustus. Second, there was indeed a census in Judea, Samaria and Idumea, the territories formally ruled by Herod the Great’s son Archelaus, when the Romans exiled him to Gaul and annexed his lands in 6 C.E. But 6 C.E. is about ten years after the death of Herod. Publius Sulpicius Quirinus, the imperial legate for Syria in 6–7 B.C.E., would have been in charge of that census, and of course he would only have done it once, ten years after the death of Herod the Great. Third, why did the Romans take a census? Did they just like to count? They took a census for taxation purposes. They wanted to know where you were so they could get your money. We know from census records in Egypt under

Roman law that if you left your home you had to tell the authorities that you had left. But now think for a moment of the administrative nightmare imagined by Luke. Everyone goes back to where they were born to register and then returns to wherever they work. That, in the first century, just as in the 20th century, would be a bureaucratic nightmare. (I shouldn't make any cracks about Washington, should I?)

The story is pure fiction. It's a marvelous story if you don't think about it. But I'm not mocking Luke. I wouldn't dare mock a story that has lasted for 2,000 years and hasn't been picked apart by most people. Most people don't ask how such a census would facilitate taxation. The simple fact is that Jesus' story begins in Nazareth and Luke has to get him to Bethlehem to be born. Matthew, by the way, doesn't have the same problem. He starts the story as if they were living in Bethlehem. He seems to take it for granted they were living there originally and only afterwards had to leave because of Archelaus.

Notice, by the way, once again, that only Matthew and Luke seem to know this material. For example, in *John 7*, where they're arguing about whether or not Jesus is the Messiah, "Others said, 'This is the Messiah.' But some asked, 'Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?'" You can imagine, if John knew Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the marvelous put-down he could have used there: "But he was born in Bethlehem. Gotcha!"

There is no indication anywhere else in the New Testament that anyone thinks Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Understand very clearly what this means. That Jesus was born of a virgin is told in a story that fulfills *Isaiah 7:14*. That Jesus was born in Bethlehem is told in a story that fulfills *Micah 5:2*. What we are interested in is the fulfillment of prophecy. But, it looks like prophecy is the force creating the story. We know Jesus was born; that is the best way to start your life. But then, some of us want to go back into the past and tell the story in the light of that past, as the fulfillment of our ancient scriptures.

The Basic Level: Augustus And Jesus

I'm now down to the third level, which is for me the most important one. Everything I have said so far seems negative. That's what I hear from my undergraduate students

when they plan to go home and bug their parents by telling them that there were no Magi.

Yes. On the negative side, I am saying there was no journey to Bethlehem, there was no birth in the stable, there was no presentation in the Temple, and there was certainly no put-down of the teachers in the Temple when Jesus was 12; there was no massacre of infants, there were no Magi, no star, and there was no flight into Egypt. That's all negative. But I've tried to put all this in a positive framework so you can see what those writers intended to emphasize.

Second, there is the virginal birth and the Bethlehem birth. Let me focus on the virginal conception just to show what is positive and what is negative. If you ask me if the virginal conception should be taken literally or metaphorically, I would say metaphorically. It is not a literal statement about the biology of Mary. It is a credal statement about the status of Jesus. In a certain sense, that whole debate—about the literal or metaphorical and the biology of Mary—misses the point completely. And I don't mean the point just for the 20th century. I mean the point for the first century, too. I think if we had Luke and Matthew here and we got into that debate, that's what they'd tell us: "You're missing the point."

So what is the point? What is the real question? Forget Jesus for a moment, and go back 40 years and cross the Mediterranean to a different shore and come to Rome. Julius Caesar has just returned engorged with the spoils and slaves of Gaul in 46 B.C.E. He buys a large piece of land at the northwest corner of the ancient Roman forum, and there he builds and consecrates his own forum, which is said to be more beautiful than the old one, which had grown without any overall plan. In his new forum he puts a temple, the temple to Venus Genetrix, Venus, my ancestress, my mom Venus.

Watch very carefully. Watch how the religious and the political are totally and inextricably intertwined here. Venus Genetrix. The Julian gens, the Julian family, claims that, at the time of the Trojan War, Aphrodite, or Venus (different names, same goddess), and Anchises produced Aeneas, from whom the Julian tribe descended. Julius Caesar claims to be descended from a goddess, from a divine and human conjunction. Imagine Cassius and Brutus having a discussion about that. Cassius says, "You know I really think, Brutus, the big question is if we should take this literally or metaphorically. That really bothers me, Brutus." And Brutus says, "Cassius, go count the

daggers.” Cassius: “But is it literal or is it metaphorical?” Brutus: “You do have a lean and hungry look. Go count the daggers.”

In one sense, of course, the claim of divine origin is to be taken metaphorically. And I don't even know how they took it, to be honest. Maybe they took it literally, and maybe they took it metaphorically. I know they took it seriously. And I don't think anyone was laughing. So Caesar died two years later. Julius Caesar and of course Augustus and the Julian-Claudian dynasty are descended from a goddess and a human man. Over against that we have the story of Jesus descended from God and a human woman.

Is there any validity to putting those two things together? Let me give you two arguments. The first argument is this. There is extant a decree of calendrical change for the Roman province of Asia. It's on marble stelae in the Asian temples dedicated to the Roman Empire and Augustus and dates to around 9 C.E. “Whereas Providence ... has ... adorned our lives with the highest good, Augustus ... and has in her beneficence granted us and those who have come after us [a *Savior*] who has made war to cease and who shall put everything [in *peaceful*] order, with the result that the *birthday* of our *God* signals the beginning of *good news* for the world because of him. ... Therefore ... the Greeks in Asia decreed that the New Year begin for all the cities on September 23 ... and the first month ... be observed as the month of Caesar, beginning ... ,”⁽²⁾ etc., etc.

Notice the key words (my italics). And listen once again to what the angels say to the shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem. Forget for the moment whether it actually happened or not, and just listen to the words. “But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you *good news* of great joy for all the people: to you is *born* this day in the city of David a *Savior*, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ... Glory to *God* in the highest heaven, and on earth *peace* among those whom he favors!’” (*Luke 2:10–11, 14*). We begin to catch a glimpse of the real question here. It's not about the biology of Mary. It is where God is manifested for you. Is it in the peasant Jesus or the imperial Augustus?

A second argument, to confirm that I'm not just imagining this from a 20th-century point of view. Sometime between 177 and 180 C.E., when the emperor Marcus Aurelius was already persecuting Christians, Celsus, whom I mentioned earlier, wrote his *On the True Doctrine* as an intellectual attack on Christianity. When Celsus discusses Jesus' virgin birth, for example, he never says such an event is incredible in itself. He would

never say that. He knows too many stories about similar events from his own pagan tradition. What is incredible to him is that it could happen to a member of the lower classes, a Jewish peasant nobody like Jesus. That blows his mind. Here are his words: “What absurdity! Clearly the Christians have used the myths of the Danae and the Melanippe, or of the Auge and the Antiope, in fabricating the story of Jesus’ virgin birth. ... After all, the old myths of the Greeks that attribute divine birth to Perseus, Amphion, Aeneas and Minos are equally good evidence of their wondrous works on behalf of mankind—and are certainly no less lacking in plausibility than the stories of your followers. What have you done by word or deed that is quite so wonderful as those heroes of old?”⁽³⁾

That’s the objection. It is not absurd in Celsus’ mind to claim that Jesus was *divine*. It is absurd to claim that *Jesus* was divine. Who is he, or what has he done to deserve such a birth? Class snobbery is in fact very close to the root of that objection. Let me confirm it again by quoting him. “First, however, I must deal with the matter of Jesus, the so-called savior, who not long ago taught new doctrines and was thought to be a son of God. This savior, I shall attempt to show, deceived many and caused them to accept a form of belief harmful to the well-being of mankind. Taking its root in the lower classes, the religion continues to spread among the vulgar: Nay one can even say it spread because of its vulgarity and the illiteracy of its adherents. And while there are a few moderate, reasonable and intelligent people who are inclined to interpret its beliefs allegorically, yet it thrives in its purer form among the ignorant.”

In summary, then, it is not enough to keep saying that Jesus was not born of a virgin, was not born of David’s lineage, was not born in Bethlehem, that there were no stables, no shepherds, no star, no Magi, no massacre of the infants, no flight into Egypt. All of that I think is absolutely true. But it still begs the real question, which is, then as now, where you find the divine manifest on this earth. Is it in Caesar, or is it in Jesus? Is it in imperial grandeur or peasant poverty? Is it in domination and subjugation of others from the top down, or is it in the empowerment and liberation of others from the bottom up? That’s the real question.

Questions & Answers

Question: What was Luke’s intent when he wrote the Gospel? Why did he fabricate this mythological construct of Jesus? What did he have to gain by doing this, and why did

he write what he did?

John Dominic Crossan: As clearly as I can see, Luke is taking on Augustus and the myth of the divine Roman emperor. In case the reader missed it, he mentions Augustus just before he mentions his announcement to the angels. I think Luke's intent is to ask exactly this question. Where you are going to find your God? He says we're going to find him in a peasant born of God, a peasant who is both divine and human. Now I think we can't hear that today because we go religious. We ask if that can happen. And then we debate whether it could or could not happen. We debate, let's call it, a religious question.

But Luke is a political-religious manifesto. I don't want to say it's political as against religious because, in the first century, no one could make that distinction. How could you make the distinction for Julius Caesar's forum and temple of Venus and say what's political about them and what's religious? Luke is taking on the Roman Empire. It's the beginning of the knockdown battle between Christianity and the Roman Empire. That's what he's up to, and I think he's doing it quite, quite consciously. I think if Luke were here today, at least until I got to the third layer, he'd be saying, "He doesn't get it, he doesn't get it. He really doesn't get it." I hope by the time I got to my third level, he'd know that I had begun to see the point. We're taking on Caesar.

Q: I'm curious what, if anything, from a historical perspective, we know or have figured out. When was Jesus born? Who were his parents? Where was he born? Herod existed, I know that. But you said there was no slaughter, and the census was much later. So I'm curious about what we can pinpoint historically.

Crossan: Here is my historical reconstruction. At Nazareth, Jesus is born in the normal way human beings are born, to parents called Mary and Joseph. I do not think he was necessarily the firstborn son. If Mary was a virgin and had other children, he would have to be the firstborn son. I have no reason to think that because I do not take the virgin birth literally. He may well have been the youngest son. It would make more sense to me, in a way, if James was the eldest. We know of four brothers and of at least two sisters. So at least a family of seven children and two parents. My understanding is that Joseph probably died young (presumably from exhaustion).

When was Jesus born? Can we be sure it was during the reign of Herod? That gives us around 33 years from which to choose. Can we be certain he died towards the end of the reign of Herod? No. Luke mentions Herod and Matthew mentions Herod, but they're in a very tendentious situation, and it could be part of their story lines. I'd put "born under Herod" with lots of question marks. We're certain when Jesus died, under Pontius Pilate, which gives us a range of ten years, 26–36 C.E. We are not certain he was born under Herod, which means we are not certain he was 30 years of age.

By the way, it is not surprising that we know nothing about the birth of Jesus. We tend to know when people are killed, and then we go back and try to find out about their infancy or when they were born, and we find out nobody really knows. It would be very surprising, actually, if we really knew when Jesus was born. I would say we do not know and we should not presume we know the date of Jesus' birth, and we should not, therefore, presume we know his age when he died. But we are absolutely certain that Jesus died under Pontius Pilate. I would say, historically, that is as sure as anything in history ever gets. No such security attaches to any date or time for Jesus' birth.

Q: Would it be fair to conclude that Matthew and Luke, in writing their accounts of the virginal conception of Jesus, intended to say nothing whatever about human sexuality?

Crossan: If we explore virginal conception a little more, we're probably going to get into the patriarchal questions that Marcus Borg raised earlier. I don't think virginal conception is a totally innocent statement. It is unfortunate that Mediterranean culture is very good on virgins and mothers and not so good on anything in between, like wives, lovers and friends. But it is very good on the two extremes, and in virginal conception we have brought the two extremes together. I am afraid it does carry prejudices from patriarchal culture with it. It's not innocent, and it has not been innocent, certainly, in 2,000 years in the way it has been handled.

Q: I got the message twice, once from Hershel Shanks and once from you, that the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history are two different things. But if they are, then the Christ of faith must be false because, if the Christ of faith is based on the Jesus of history, and if they are different, then doesn't that rule out the Christ of faith, even though there is a Christ of faith?

Crossan: I would never make that distinction. You did not hear that distinction made by me. Here's what I imagine. If you were in Galilee, let's say, in the 30s, you would have seen a person called Jesus. Let's imagine three different people responding to that person. One says, "This guy's a bore. Let's leave him." The second one says, "This guy's dangerous. Let's kill him." The third one says, "I see God here. Let's follow this guy."

Now, each of these, in its own way, is an act of faith. The Romans who said to kill him were making an act of faith in the Roman order. But I'm going to call it "Christian faith," for want of a better name, with quotation marks around it, when some people looked at Jesus in the hills of Galilee in the 30s or whenever and said, "Here is where I see God." They may also have been saying that we don't see God in the Temple, or maybe we don't see God in the Torah, and we certainly don't see God in the Roman peace. Maybe if you see God in Jesus, that's a very dangerous situation. That's an act of faith at that very moment. It's not an act of faith in Jesus, it's an act of faith in Jesus as the manifestation of God. You cannot make an act of faith in a fact. Jesus is a fact. He's just there. But to say that here is where I see God is an act of faith.

For me you never have an act of faith unless you're talking about (1) a divine referent (2) in material manifestation (3) for a believer. If everyone yawned when Jesus talked, first of all we wouldn't be talking about him now, and he would not be the Son of God. Somebody has to say, "I believe." No, it's not the Jesus of history against the Christ of faith. I just won't accept that distinction. The distinction is, when you look at Jesus, do you see God, that is, a manifestation of God, or do you not. That was the question in the first century, and that is the question in the 20th century. And the clearest evidence is that people could go either way. They did not find Jesus so compelling that they just had to believe.

My answer is that Christian faith is to see the historical Jesus as the manifestation of God for me. The dichotomy between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith comes out of Protestant theology. I am coming out of Roman Catholic theology, so I have a whole different set of prejudices.

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