# WHERE WAS JESUS BORN?

# CHALLENGES FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATORS TEACHING THE INFANCY NARRATIVES

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**Introduction**

The biblical stories about Jesus' birth and childhood can only be found in the first two chapters of the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Mark and John are virtually silent about anything to do with Jesus' life before his public ministry. Matthew and Luke vary markedly in their details about the birth and early life of Jesus, but both agree that he was born in Bethlehem. Nevertheless, a strong trend has emerged among contemporary biblical scholars that questions the historical plausibility of the infancy accounts. A feature of this questioning is a consistent supposition among a growing number of scholars that Jesus was actually born in the Galilean village of Nazareth, not in the Judean village of Bethlehem as recorded by Matthew and Luke.

This article surveys the views of contemporary scholars on this question. The implications and consequences for religious educators teaching the infancy narratives will be considered and three possible ways of proceeding when teaching the Christmas story will be discussed.

**Historical Perspectives on the Birth Place of Jesus**

Doubts about the actual birth place of Jesus have circulated in and around Christian communities for centuries. In the nineteenth century, a chorus of critics raised questions about the historical plausibility of the gospel accounts in general and the birth narratives specifically. David Friedrich Strauss (1860) was influential among many scholars in his estimation that the infancy narratives contain little or no historical fact. He claimed that the stories we read in the gospels are mythical rather than factual and tell us more about what the first Christians believed and understood about Jesus than biographical details of the life of Jesus himself. Strauss thought it most likely that Jesus was born in Nazareth:

> The statement that Jesus was born at Bethlehem is destitute of all valid historical evidence; nay it is contravened by positive historical facts....It can therefore cost us no further effort to decide that Jesus was born, not in Bethlehem, but, in all probability at Nazareth. (Strauss, 1860, p. 190)

A later generation of scholars influenced by the growing field of form criticism noticed that the infancy stories shared a similar form to legendary stories in other religious traditions. Martin Dibelius (1933) was reminded of the stories of the Buddha as an infant when he read the infancy accounts of Jesus in the gospels. In the encounter in the Jerusalem Temple between the infant Jesus and the religious elders, Simeon and Anna, "the law of biographical analogy is obviously active when a holy man, while still a child, is recognized by an aged seer" (Dibelius, 1933, p. 127). Dibelius thought that literary forms –

legends, tales, stories – were at work in these independent accounts of the birth and infancy of holy men that could not be explained by reference to any historical connection between them.

We cannot be surprised to learn that these and other similar criticisms of the gospel accounts of Jesus' birth and infancy disturbed many Christian commentators: if these narratives are merely myth or legend without any specific historical reference point, what religious value did they contain and how might such categorisations affect the foundations of personal Christian belief and practice? These constant questioners were challenged by Sir William Ramsay (1898) who replied specifically to Strauss and others – whom he labelled as scholars of the "destructive school" (Ramsay, 1898, p. 2) – with the simple question: "Is it consistent with human nature that a writer who claims to be earnestly setting forth the simple facts should begin with so impudent a series of fabrications?" (Ramsay, 1898, p. 51). Ramsay answered his own question, *where was Jesus born?* with a strong affirmation of the historical validity of Luke's account of the birth: yes, we could confidently trust Luke's gospel; Luke was as reliable an historian as any of his contemporaries.

**Modern Questioning of the Location of Jesus' Birth**

Despite attempts to settle the question of the birth place of Jesus in favour of the gospel accounts, the issue never completely retreated from scholarly interest. In the modern era, attention was drawn to the issue by the work of two Roman Catholic priests from the United States - Raymond Brown and John Meier. Brown wrote an encyclopedic study of the infancy narratives in 1977 which he subsequently updated in 1993 titled, *The Birth of the Messiah*. In this influential study, he argued that gospel evidence for a birth in Bethlehem was weak, citing "grave objections against the claim that we are dealing with a historical fact" (Brown, 1993, p. 514).

Brown's objections included the fact that Matthew and Luke do not agree with each other in their presentations of the birth narratives: in Matthew the parents live in Judea; in Luke they are from Galilee and journey to Bethlehem for the birth in response to a requirement to enrol for a Roman census. Also, Brown maintained that outside of the second chapters of both Matthew and Luke, Bethlehem is never mentioned as the birth place of Jesus: "There is not only a silence in the rest of the New Testament about Bethlehem as the birth place of Jesus; there is positive evidence for Nazareth and Galilee as Jesus' hometown or native region: his *patris*" (Brown, 1993, p. 515). Brown observed that Mark betrays no knowledge in his gospel of a birth in Bethlehem and only ever identifies Nazareth as Jesus' *patris* (Mark 6:1-4). John similarly offers no indication of a Bethlehem birth. Brown rounded out his argument by asking: "how can there have been such a general ignorance of Jesus' birth place in Bethlehem when the parents would have had to come from there as strangers with their child to a small village in Galilee (Matthew's scenario), or to come back to the village with a child born to them during a short journey to Bethlehem (Luke's scenario)?" (Brown, 1993, p. 516). While not pronouncing definitively on the issue, Brown raised sufficient doubt about the historical plausibility of a Bethlehem birth to encourage a new generation of scholars to pronounce their own views on the question.

John Meier from the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, was another influential advocate for the birth of Jesus in Nazareth. He claimed that "while Jesus' birth in Bethlehem cannot be positively ruled out (one can rarely 'prove a negative' in ancient history), we must accept the fact that the predominant view in the Gospels and Acts is that Jesus came from Nazareth and – apart from Chapters 1-2 of Matthew and Luke – only from Nazareth" (Meier, 1991, p. 216). In support of his position, Meier noted the consistent New Testament attribution of Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Nazarene, or Jesus the Nazorean – never Jesus of Bethlehem.

Meier pointed to the fact that apart from the infancy narratives, the only time in the whole of the New Testament where Bethlehem is mentioned is in the gospel of John 7:42. This is an ambiguous scene

and Meier devotes an extended discussion to examining its meaning in relation to the issue of Jesus' birth place. John records the doubtful opinion voiced by some members of a crowd who had gathered to listen to Jesus: "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?" (John 7:41-2). Meier thinks this passage should be read as an example of John's irony: "what the objector says is perfectly true and totally irrelevant. Thus in 7:42, the objectors are correct in saying that Jesus comes from Nazareth, not Bethlehem. This is not surprising, since John's Gospel as a whole does not show great interest in a Son-of-David Christology" (Meier, 1991, p. 215). Like Raymond Brown, Meier cannot definitively rule on Nazareth as Jesus' birth place, but raises sufficient doubt about the historical plausibility of Bethlehem to make Nazareth the more likely candidate.

**Scholarly Opinions on the Birth of Jesus of Nazareth**

The ground-breaking studies by Raymond Brown and John Meier encouraged other scholars to offer support for the idea of a birth in Nazareth. One of the significant planks used to bolster arguments for a Nazareth birth by these scholars is the notion that both Matthew and Luke located the birth in Bethlehem in order to demonstrate the fulfilment of the prediction of the prophet Micah that the promised messiah, the Son of David, would come from David's home town of Bethlehem:

> 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 Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days. (Micah 5:2)

Scholars suggest that the gospel authors' identification of Bethlehem as Jesus' birth place originated in reflections on this passage in Micah and the desire to confirm the messiah as a descendant of King David, rather than from any historical event. Bethlehem is a town six kilometres south of Jerusalem. In the bible, it is the place where Ruth and Boaz met, married and produced their son Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of King David. Bethlehem remained a town of significance to David throughout the stories of his life and career. Micah's prophetic work was conducted in the late eighth century BCE at the time of the Assyrian invasion. Micah yearned for the time when a new leader would once again be raised up from Bethlehem to rule and save the people. Such powerful imagery associated with Bethlehem, embedded in the psyche of the Jewish people, presumably proved irresistible to the gospel authors who wished to fortify their claims for Jesus as the messiah descended from David.

Contemporary scholars have explained how the stories of the birth of Jesus reveal something of the processes of gospel composition. Both gospel authors create unique scenarios to align Jesus at his birth with the events and great figures of Jewish sacred history. Both Matthew's and Luke's accounts of Jesus' birth, each in their own fashion, "reflect distinct mechanisms for narrativizing the idea of Jesus' descent from David" (White, 2010, p. 241). John Dominic Crossan expresses the same idea more bluntly: "It is a little sad to have to say so, because it has always been such a captivating story, but the journey to and from Nazareth for census and taxation registration is a pure fiction, a creation of Luke's own imagination, providing a way of getting Jesus' parents to Bethlehem for his birth" (Crossan, 1994, p. 20). E.P. Sanders (1993) thinks "the birth narratives constitute an extreme case" of the way the gospel authors placed Jesus within Jewish salvation history:

> It seems they had very little information about Jesus' birth (historical in our sense), and so they went to one of their other sources, Jewish scripture. There is no other substantial part of the gospels that depends so heavily on the theory that information about David and Moses may simply be transferred to the story of Jesus. But we note that the early Christians regarded this as perfectly legitimate. By their lights, it was. Their view of God was that he planned it all: the call of Abraham, the life of Moses, the exodus, the reign of David, the life of Jesus. (Sanders, 1993, p. 88)

To accept the argument of the scholars opting for the birth in Nazareth is to believe that, in the infancy narratives, the desire to communicate a theological message trumped concerns to communicate an historically accurate narrative. Henry Wansbrough (2009, p. 5) explains how this was achieved in the story of Jesus' birth at Bethlehem in Luke and Matthew:

> That Jesus was son of David is a principal message of Matthew's first chapter, with its great drum roll of Israelite history and its story of the divinely inspired adoption of Jesus into the House of David. In this case theology will have shaped quasi-history, or (to put the matter more clearly) the theological truth that Jesus was the fulfilment of the promises to David and his lineage was expressed by the placing of Jesus' birth at Bethlehem. Each of the two evangelists will have used this location and decorated it in his own way, expressing in a picturesque narrative form some aspects of the theological truth about Jesus that seemed to him important.

This view is supported by Francois Bovon (2002, p. 82) who says that "the birth probably took place in Nazareth. By Luke's time, however, only Bethlehem could be considered the birth place of the Messiah".

The other major plank in the scholarly discussion of Nazareth as the birth place is the silence of all other sources, apart from Matthew and Luke, about Jesus' birth in Bethlehem and the universal recognition of Jesus as coming from Nazareth, never Bethlehem. Robert Crotty (2009, p. 169) thinks "that Jesus was conceived in the normal way by two Jewish parents, named Joseph and Mary, born around 4 BC in Nazareth not Bethlehem". Etienne Nodet (2008, p. 106) argues that the gospel of John consistently says that Jesus was from Nazareth and never mentions any association with Bethlehem, even when it would have been appropriate to do so (see John 1:46: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"; 4:43-5: "He went from that place to Galilee (for Jesus himself testified that a prophet has no honour in the prophet's own country)"; 7:52: "Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you?"). Paul in his letters available to us in the New Testament never mentions anything about Jesus' birth place. Neither does the gospel of Mark, nor Josephus the Jewish historian and contemporary of the gospel authors. Nor does any other Roman historian (Mason, 2009).

Notwithstanding the burgeoning scholarly option for a Nazareth birth place, Steve Mason (2009) explains why any declaration about the actual birth place of Jesus must be tentative and cautious. In answer to the question, "where was Jesus born? Was it Bethlehem or Nazareth or even Sepphoris, Tiberias or Jerusalem? We cannot know for sure because the early Christians themselves apparently did not know" (Mason, 2009, p. 45).

**Support for Bethlehem as Jesus' Birth Place**

While many modern scholars question the historical foundations of the infancy narratives including claims about the likely birth place of Jesus, some scholars challenge these ideas and defend Bethlehem as the birth place of Jesus. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor (2009) offers a spirited defence of Bethlehem. He says that conflicts in the infancy accounts between Matthew and Luke actually add weight to the identification of Bethlehem as the birth place.

> Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2 are completely independent witnesses. One does not borrow from the other, nor do they both draw on a common source. This only enhances the reliability of the points on which they agree. According to Matthew, "Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king". (2:1). Luke mentions "the days of Herod, king of Judea" (1:5) as the period of the annunciation of the birth of John the Baptist, which was separated from that of Jesus by only a few months. Jesus' birth took place after a journey "to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem" (2:4). The two evangelists, therefore, independently confirm each other as to the time and place of Jesus' birth. (Murphy-O'Connor, 2009, p. 52)

In addition to the gospel accounts of the Bethlehem birth, Murphy-O'Connor cites a range of early Christian traditions that focus on Bethlehem as the location of the birth. Principal among these early Christian sources is the *Protoevangelium of James*, an anonymously authored second century non-canonical gospel which describes the birth of Jesus in a cave in Bethlehem: Mary is guided by Joseph to the cave during their journey to Bethlehem. Later, a star guided the magi to the cave.

Murphy-O'Connor argues for a careful, nuanced reading of the gospel infancy narratives. He agrees with the majority of scholars who doubt the historical existence of the census described by Luke (2:1) and its connection with the birth of Jesus (McLaren, 2005). But, he does not think the fact that Luke mistakes the existence of the census is significant for the rest of his account: "that Luke is wrong on X (the census) does not necessarily mean he is wrong on Y (the location of Jesus' birth)" (Murphy-O'Connor, 2009, p. 54). In Murphy-O'Connor's estimation, the gospel reader is left to decide whether Matthew and Luke wrote about Jesus' birth in Bethlehem: because they had read about the prophecy in Micah; or, because it had actually occurred there and Micah's prophecy was later relied upon to provide context and significance to the story of his birth.

Some other scholars, while not prepared to accept Bethlehem in Judea as the birth place, nevertheless wish to maintain some links with Bethlehem in Jesus' story. These historical links may have influenced the identification of Bethlehem in the gospel accounts. Consider, as an example, the idea advanced by Sean Freyne (2010) who was asked in an interview whether he believed Jesus was born in Bethlehem. He responded:

> My sense would be no. He was born in Nazareth, I believe. He's never called "Jesus of Bethlehem"; he is called "Jesus of Nazareth." Now, that said, what I would want to add is that he comes from parents who may well have roots in Bethlehem. From the second century B.C. onward, we know that émigrés from Judea settled in Galilee….So I would say Jesus' family may well be a Judean family who moved to Galilee. Therefore one can't dismiss entirely the possibility of links with Bethlehem.

Another inventive solution, though one that has so far failed to gain a groundswell of scholarly support, has been advanced by Bruce Chilton (2006). He claims the existence of another biblical Bethlehem in Galilee about ten kilometres from Nazareth, and this village may have been the reference for the stories in Matthew and Luke. The Galilean Bethlehem is mentioned in Joshua 19:15 as a village assigned to the tribe of Zebulun. Chilton thinks this Galilean site is "much more plausible than having Joseph and Mary traveling to Judea for the birth" (Chilton, 2006, p. 96) and suggests that "the Bethlehem that Matthew and Luke remember, dimly and distantly (and through the lenses of scripture and legend), was actually in Galilee" (Chilton, 2006, p. 95).

Modern scholars who defend the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem appear not to comprise a majority. However, sufficient doubt and lack of compelling evidence exist to limit those on either side of the discussion from making definitive claims.

**Implications for Religious Education**

For religious educators who teach the Christmas story, scholarly opinion on the birth place of the historical Jesus presents some immediate educational challenges. Scholarly assertions about the birth place of the historical Jesus in Nazareth undermine the historical plausibility of the events traditionally associated with Jesus' birth, especially the visit of the magi following a star, the flight of the family into Egypt, the visit of shepherds, the over-crowded Bethlehem inn, the placement of the child in a manger, the journey of the couple to Bethlehem for a census, and the slaughter of young boys in the Bethlehem area by King Herod (Ryan, 2012). Christians maintain a fondness for the events celebrated at Christmas; modern scholarship that casts doubt on the historical plausibility of these events can be

met with resistance, even hostility. A religious educator would be wise to recall the experience of the celebrated teacher, Francisco Sanchez de las Brozas, at the University of Salamanca, Spain in 1584. His students reported him to the Spanish Inquisition after a lecture in which he criticised church paintings of Jesus' nativity. He told his students that Jesus was not born in a stable, nor were his parents rejected by an innkeeper, and that Mary gave birth to her son in a private house (Carlson, 2010). While this over-heated reaction to a plain reading of the gospel texts could be rated as extreme, it might serve as a caution to those who doubt the seriousness with which some may respond to modern gospel studies. Promisingly, it should be added that de las Brozas was exonerated by the Inquisitors for his progressive biblical interpretations of the birth of the Saviour.

When deciding how religious educators should proceed in teaching the infancy narratives in the light of this research, three options seem possible. These will be discussed in this section.

*Option 1*: Teach only the version of the infancy contained in Matthew and Luke

The first option is to teach the infancy narratives as they appear in the gospels. This approach opts for a presentation of the events as intended by the two gospel authors who mention Jesus' birth place in their accounts. The presumption is that we know the authors' intention concerning the birth of Jesus: we assume both Matthew and Luke believed that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. While the precise circumstances surrounding that birth vary between the two accounts, they agree with each other on the place of the birth. This close reading of the gospel text can be conducted in a way that identifies and evaluates conflicts and discrepancies between the accounts of the birth presented by Matthew and Luke. Also, with this option, the study can highlight discrepancies that arise between the two gospel accounts and the conventional Christmas story as celebrated by Christians over the centuries.

An example of this kind of study is Carlson's (2010) research on *kataluma*, the accommodations mentioned in Luke 2:7 which is usually translated in the phrase "no room at the inn". Carlson interrogates the biblical and historical evidence to imagine what the author intended in describing the couple as having no place at the inn. Another example is provided by O'Kane (2005) and his study of representations of the magi – the wise men who visit the child bearing gifts in Matthew's account – in traditional and modern art. O'Kane (2005, p. 373) explains how "a range of visual instances of a biblical subject, whether traditional or contemporary, can be used to expand the viewer's horizons to think, feel, and reflect on a biblical story or text as it becomes bodied forth in surprising, gentle, challenging, shockingly immediate or meditative fashion in a work of art". An engaging third example of this kind of study is provided by Trexler's (1997), *The Journey of the Magi* – a research study of the magi in biblical and Christian tradition. The common thread in these studies is the close reading of the gospel texts and an exploration of the way these texts have been received throughout Christian history. They do not raise the issue of the historical plausibility of the people and events mentioned in the gospels.

The positive dimension of pursuing this option is to maintain fidelity to the gospel accounts, to the tradition of celebration of Jesus' birth over the centuries and to confront and manage the specific challenges of understanding the conflicting accounts of Jesus' birth in Matthew and Luke. The negative dimensions of following this option are contained in the question posed by Gregory Dawes (2006, p. 158): "Can one claim to be expounding what the evangelists intended – while remaining indifferent to the historicity of the events they narrate?" This issue raises a fundamental dilemma: while modern scholars may raise a litany of doubts over the likely historical foundations of the gospel accounts of the birth, this does not mean that the original gospel authors believed anything other than that their accounts were based on historically verifiable facts about the birth.

*Option 2:* Emphasise the theological meaning of the infancy narratives

The second option is the reverse of option one. To follow this option involves the religious educator presenting the gospel infancy narratives as "quasi-history", literary creations of the gospel authors who were not primarily concerned with accurately portraying the biographical facts concerning Jesus' birth. Pursuing this option, the religious educator would emphasise the theological meaning and intentions of the gospel authors. Robert Crotty explains this way of reading the gospel accounts:

> As historical sources the Matthew and Luke stories are practically worthless. But, history aside, they are brilliant and dynamic stories that have been grossly devalued because readers, especially Christian readers, have treated them as history rather than Christian drama. Instead of expecting to find and then not finding history, Christians should have read the stories in Matthew and Luke as sacred stories. (Crotty, 2009, p. 170)

The advantage of this option is to align with the trend in modern scholarship that emphasises the literary and theological dimensions of the infancy narratives. This way of reading the stories accepts them as central to the treasury of sacred literature cherished by Christians over the centuries. The negative aspects involved in pursuing this option concern the way this approach might be exercised with children and others not sufficiently skilled, or ready, to accept and respond to the literary subtleties and nuances involved in this way of reading the gospel texts. Can unsophisticated readers of the bible be expected to comprehend the complex structures of the literature which the infancy narratives represent?

*Option 3*: Present the range of scholarly opinions about the birth and infancy of Jesus

The third option seeks to present a middle path between the two options described above. Religious educators can present a range of ways to read and understand the infancy narratives, including the versions described in the gospels. This way of proceeding allows for students to consider the issues and come to their own conclusions about the likely foundations for the Christmas story. It also allows them to contend with the nature of the gospel as a text and its role in the life of the Christian community.

So, religious educators will present the evidence for the gospel authors' choice of Bethlehem and the associated events surrounding that location recorded in their gospel accounts. They can also present the fruits of modern scholarship on the question and engage in critical appraisal of the evidence for Nazareth or alternative locations for Jesus' birth. It allows students to replicate what biblical scholars do in their own work. As David Clines (2010) has observed, most teaching and learning approaches to biblical material ignore the contested nature of biblical interpretation and the process for coming to understand both the particular text and the nature of biblical texts: "we screen from our students the contested nature of all that we handle, and we teach them to believe what really matters is the conclusion". This style of biblical study is one devoted "always to the punch lines, never to the arguments" (Clines, 2010, p. 26). This insight refers not only to the meaning of the infancy narrative accounts, but also to the understanding of the gospels as texts.

Scholars currently debate among themselves the nature and purpose of the gospels as a genre (Diehl, 2011). They discuss how the words and deeds of Jesus were remembered by the followers prior to them being written down in the gospels as we know them. Many accept that the gospels are "the memory of Jesus interpreted and applied to the context of the early Christians" (Bird, 2005, p. 134). This context compelled Luke and Matthew to tell about the birth of a Jewish child whose life and career would be significant for Judaism in particular but also for all people in general throughout the Greco-Roman world. Students can be introduced to some of this contested and lively scholarly discussion.

This option offers fairness and intellectual freedom to the study of Christmas. Unfortunately, it does not resolve the issue of how to present this complex material to unsophisticated gospel readers. It may, in fact, be appropriate only for senior secondary students who have achieved some advanced

skills in critical reading and biblical studies. Nor is it likely to meet approval from conservative Church members who are likely to prefer a reading of the gospel texts that remains closer to the stories presented in the gospels.

**Conclusion**

Any religious educator who would tamper with accepted readings of the Christmas story should do so only with full recognition of the potential perils. It seems that most modern Christians prefer to imagine, despite the absence of any corroborating gospel evidence, a baby Jesus resting peacefully in a stable in the presence of three oriental kings. For these gospel readers, even a plain reading of the infancy narratives is a bridge too far. So, a confrontation with the growing tide of scholarly convictions about a Nazareth birth place for Jesus is likely to be inflammatory and to be met with sustained resistance. Biblical education has a two-fold purpose – to understand the meaning of particular biblical texts and to understand the meaning and significance of the bible as a sacred text for committed believers. The case of the infancy narratives provides a series of fruitful challenges for religious educators who wish to pursue these dual aims with their students.

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