

CHAPTER 15: RECONSTRUCTION: CHRISTIAN MYTH

“For you bring some strange things to our ears; we wish to know therefore what these things mean.” (Acts 17:20)

In Chapter 14 we looked at the “sin and salvation” complex of traditional concepts. In this chapter we will look at the themes that deal with Jesus of Nazareth himself. Our primary question, however, will not be whether these themes fit with our common sense. We have already asked this of many of these, and it is clear that major portions of the Jesus story and its interpretations are simply incompatible with modern common sense. But in the story of Jesus we are dealing with more than just doctrine. We have here ideas and images that are central to the Christian faith itself. So the question for this chapter is, since some of the Jesus stories and concepts are so eminently incompatible with common sense—what do we do with them?

The usual alternative to defending their literal truth is to ignore those particular stories we find incredible, shoving them like unwanted family skeletons into hidden closets and bolting the door with a fervent prayer that the lock will hold. We badly need to discover a way to disavow neither our common sense nor this large portion of the Jesus tradition. We need a way to use them *both* constructively in our faith.

There is a way to do this, but only if we dare to be bold, only if we can be different and creative in our approach. We need to take the most honest and most constructive option available to us: creation of the category of “Christian Myth”. We do not mean this in the technical sense of any story referring to the supernatural (see Chapter 4, p. 44). This has already been done by scholars. What we mean here is myth in its everyday, nontechnical sense as understood by you and me: a story that is told as if it were literally true, but which is no longer accepted as factual, and which explains or symbolizes a belief or insight.

“Myth” in this sense has been applied before to the story of Jesus, but almost always by people who were trying to dismiss Jesus of Nazareth and undermine the Christian faith. These people saw it as a weapon

against Christianity. What we are doing is to wrest this from the grasp of those who know not its proper use. We are claiming it for our own, using the concept of "Christian Myth" to mean something valuable and meaningful to us.

To classify a story or theme as Christian Myth is therefore not at all to dismiss it but rather to elevate it to a special status. In fact, the question of its historic accuracy is rendered irrelevant at the same time as we affirm the story's meaning and value.

To qualify as Christian Myth a story must meet four criteria:

- (1) It has a place in Christian tradition and was originally understood as factual;
- (2) We no longer claim that it represents factual truth;
- (3) It serves to exemplify or reinforce proper Christian belief, attitude, or action; and
- (4) It can do this without being taken as literally true.

The majority of the elements that make up the Christian Mythology can be grouped in three broad clusters corresponding to the birth, the life, and the death of Jesus of Nazareth.¹ The *nativity cluster* includes not only the supernatural and pseudohistorical events preceding and attending his birth (the annunciation, the virgin birth, the angels and shepherds and wisemen, the location in Bethlehem, etc.), but also the claims as to the nature of Jesus' being and identity that are not in keeping with our common sense theology. The *life and ministry cluster* includes many of the miracle accounts, those prophecies and messianic claims which were quite apparently inserted by the early Church, and any claims as to the perfection or total sinlessness of Jesus as an individual. The *death and resurrection cluster* includes the theme of the atonement and various elements of the resurrection and of the post-resurrection appearances. After considering these three clusters, we will then look at a couple of other concepts that are ideal candidates for inclusion as Christian Myth.

It is important to note the obvious: major aspects of the story of Jesus cannot be included as Christian Myth for the simple reason that they are very probably true. These would be such things as the fact that Jesus was baptized by John, kept company with sinners, called disciples and chose twelve as a special group, performed some "faith healings", reached out to outcasts, entered Jerusalem in triumph, defied the authorities, was arrested and crucified, and was experienced afterwards by his disciples. Also not classifiable as myth is the most important thing about Jesus of Nazareth: his message. In fact, his message of God's call and God's love is the norm to which Christian Myth must conform.

¹There are also other stories and themes from the Old and New Testaments that meet the criteria of Christian Myth and can be constructively used in this way. We are limiting ourselves here primarily to the Jesus myths due to space limitations and due to the centrality of Jesus to our faith.

But how do we relate the mythical to the non-mythical? How do we relate what we claim as Christian Myth to what we claim as historical fact?

To repeat: we are not setting up this category so that we can then ignore those stories that fit in it. But neither can we pretend that they don't require to be treated any differently than anything else we say about Jesus. Neither of these is appropriate or helpful. Christian Myth must be treated differently precisely in order that we neither ignore nor dismiss it, precisely in order that we can claim its positive significance for us.

What then do we do? Do we need to create a different kind of "red letter edition" in which we print in red not the words of Jesus but instead all those passages that qualify as Christian Myth? Or do we need to do with the New Testament as is sometimes done with the Book of Daniel—parts of it included in the text as canonical, parts of it relegated to an appendix of Apocrypha? No, this sort of thing is hardly necessary. And while something like this might be helpful in specialized teaching circumstances, in general such an approach would be unwarranted and unhealthy. We don't need to go to such extremes. What we need to do is recognize that:

(1) The stories and themes about Jesus of Nazareth fall into two different categories, those which we claim as factual and those which we do not.

(2) Our beliefs about who Jesus was, his relationship to God and his role for us, must be based on the factual, as indeed our theology in general must be consistent with the factual.

(3) Once our theology and faith themes are established, those stories and themes about Jesus which we do not claim as factual, but which are consistent with our faith themes, can be used as Christian Myth to illustrate, illuminate, and emphasize these themes.

This is all neither terribly difficult nor very mysterious, as we shall see as we now proceed to look at some important parts of Christian Myth.

I. The Nativity Cluster

The nativity cluster of Christian Myth can be subdivided into the circumstances of the birth itself, the events announcing the birth, and the claims made about the nature and identity of this child.

IA. The Birth: Born of a Virgin in Bethlehem

Matthew and Luke agree that Jesus was born in Bethlehem of a virgin and was descended from David through a man who was not his father. Mark and John are either unaware of this or do not think it worthy of mention. Matthew and Luke do *not* agree on how it happened that

Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem for Jesus' birth but later resided in Nazareth,² or on how Joseph was descended from David.

How do we explain this? We must consider the circumstances of the followers of Jesus after his death. We can reasonably assume that they searched their Scriptures for any explanations that would help them understand this man who had had such an impact on their lives. Since they had come to believe him to be the Messiah they naturally gave great importance to those Old Testament passages traditionally identified as messianic prophecies. We need also to remember that these early Christians were human just as we are. Besides the established fact that legends have a way of springing up about great public figures, there must also have been an almost irresistible urge on the part of some to bolster the claim that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, especially since his behavior was in some ways most unmessianic (see p. 97).

Among the passages which were widely interpreted at the time as referring to the Messiah were II Samuel 8:12f and Isaiah 11:1, both of which say he will be a descendent of David; Isaiah 7:14, which in its Greek mistranslation says that a virgin shall bear a son (the original Hebrew says "young woman"); and Micah 5:2, which indicates that a ruler would be born in Bethlehem. Matthew and Luke—written later than Mark's Gospel and Paul's letters—tell us that Jesus fulfilled these prophecies (but as we said, have different explanations of *how* he fulfilled two of the three). Does it not seem likely that the conviction that Jesus was the Messiah gave rise to the belief that he fulfilled these prophecies, and not the other way around? Does it not seem likely that the prophecies occasioned these birth stories? If so, then what do we do with this part of the Jesus story?

What we do is affirm these aspects of the Jesus story as Christian Myth. This means we do not claim that Jesus of Nazareth was actually born in Bethlehem of a virgin (which is not the least bit important to his message). As myth, however, these elements of the story that claim this specialness for him serve to symbolize the Christian theme that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed "he who was to come"—not in the sense that he fulfilled human expectations nor in the sense that this particular person was foreseen by any of the prophets, but rather in the sense that it is in *this* individual that we find the key to understanding God and God's call, the key to meaning in our lives.

The virgin birth in Bethlehem as well as the descent from David, even if not taken as factual, serve to connect Jesus with the hundreds of years of seeking God in the Old Testament. They also serve to highlight the importance we give to Jesus and so draw attention to his message. If

²In Matthew the wisemen find Jesus and his family living in a house in Bethlehem, from where they flee to Egypt, later to return to a different part of the country—Nazareth. In Luke, Joseph and Mary already live in Nazareth and come to Bethlehem for the census.

these parts of the story are not viewed as Christian Myth, however, but are claimed as true, then they distract from the message and in fact impede access to it for many people.

IB. Angels and Shepherds and Stars and Wisemen

We have here a combination of (1) events that are incompatible with our common sense, and (2) events that just don't seem historically very likely. The former include an appearance by the heavenly host and a star that served as a trail guide. The latter, the merely improbable, include the resulting visits by the shepherds and the wisemen. We might also include in this category the trip to Bethlehem to be enrolled, the too-full inn and the birth in a stable.

Both of these kinds of events are peripheral to the message of Jesus but both can be appropriated as Christian Myth. I expect that the Sunday School Christmas play will continue to include angels and shepherds and crusty innkeepers and three wisemen who travel by camel and whose names are Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar. And rightfully so, for the purpose of these stories is not to tell us about angels and wisemen but to say something about Jesus of Nazareth. We can use these stories, as myth, to help us celebrate the good news of Christmas and to emphasize the point, "Hey! This is the Christ! Here is the message, the key!" Their use is analogous to the flourish of trumpets that introduces the protagonist in an old melodrama. And if adding some detail to the stories helps them to do this, so much the better—as has happened with the wisemen, about whom Matthew tells us neither their number, nor their mode of travel, nor their names.

There are some additional points made by these stories as well. The wisemen's recognition of kingship in a powerless infant, the angels' choice of humble shepherds to whom to announce the news, Jesus' birth as an outcast in a stable—all these point to a very different kind of king, to a power and truth that transcend worldly power and the socially acceptable status quo. Here is a new and freeing message!

IC. Implications: What Child Is This?

We also include in the nativity cluster the ideas about Jesus' special nature and origin. Such ideas range from the full-blown doctrine of the Incarnation to the pre-existent semi-deity in the prologue to John to the idea of Jesus being "sent".

What do we say about the Incarnation, the orthodox consensus about Jesus' nature for all these centuries? We have discussed in Chapter 7 why we can no longer support this belief. Can we not, however, appropriate this as Christian Myth? We can, and the Incarnation then becomes a symbol that emphasizes in a beautiful way several important Christian themes: (1) that God is here with us, not in some far off dimension;

(2) that God loves us so much as to come seeking us out; and (3) that God does not merely sympathize with us but rather shares in an important way in the human condition. We do not have to claim that the Incarnation is literally true in order for it to have meaning for us. As Christian Myth, without affronting our common sense, it can signify and help us to grasp these important truths.

II. The Life and Ministry Cluster

The life and ministry cluster of Christian Myth includes the miracle stories, prophecies and messianic claims erroneously attributed to Jesus, and claims of his perfection or sinlessness.

IIA. Miracles

The miracle stories are among the very first to come to mind when we speak of Christian Myth. But do they qualify? This is not an idle question, especially when Jesus himself rebuked those who sought a sign from him. We must see if miracle stories meet the four criteria we have established for Christian Myth.

The first two criteria are clearly met: miracle accounts are a part of Christian tradition, and we do not now claim that they are literally true. (The exception, again, is those faith healings which fit with the genre as we understand it today, and which we need not understand as miraculous).

The third criterion is that these stories serve "to reinforce or exemplify proper Christian belief, attitude, or action". This is not so clearly met. The miracles can signify different things to different people, not all of them appropriate. For instance, Jesus' stilling of the storm or coming to his disciples across the water or multiplication of the loaves and fishes could all be taken to symbolize Jesus' love and concern for the human fears and bodily needs of people. This would certainly meet this criterion. But these miracles might more readily be understood to symbolize things inconsistent with our common sense theology such as Jesus' divinity or God's willingness to interfere with natural law. Likewise they might be understood to symbolize things inconsistent with our Christian faith such as Jesus' worldly kingship or material power and, therefore, to mean that the Christian message is about what we control instead of about whom and how we serve. The symbolism of magic and power is strong in the miracle accounts. Before they could meet the third criterion for Christian Myth they would have to be clearly reinterpreted so that they did in fact come to symbolize appropriate Christian themes. This could be done, but it would entail a lot of work.

The fourth criterion, that these accounts could symbolize these themes without being taken as literally true, is the key to helping us work on

proper interpretation. When we make it clear that we do *not* in fact understand the miracle stories to be true (per criterion #2), that Jesus did not actually still the storm or walk on water, then the implications of magic or worldly power or divine intervention fade away. We can also understand that to Jesus' contemporaries these stories would have entailed claims about his authority. But these miracles no longer have religious significance for us, and could not carry these claims if not seen as true. So again some real work is needed on reinterpretation of the miracles for them to have appropriate Christian symbolism.

Do the miracle stories, then, qualify as Christian Myth? I'm not sure that they presently do. But they *can*, if enough creative Christians do the necessary interpretive work on them.

IIB. Jesus' Prophecies

Some of the sayings attributed to Jesus are thought by scholars to have very probably originated with the early Church and not with Jesus himself. In the next section we will consider his messianic claims, in this section his predictions of his crucifixion and resurrection.

There are three "predictions of the Passion", as they are called, in each of the first three Gospels ("passion" in the ancient sense of "martyrdom", meaning here the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus—as in the medieval "Passion plays"). There is also Matthew's version of the "sign of Jonah" saying (see Chapter 4, p. 49), as well as various references in John.

The first prediction follows "Peter's confession" that Jesus is the Christ. Jesus responded with an admonition to tell no one and then told the disciples "that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." (Matthew 16:21; cf Mark 8:27f, Luke 9:18f.) This is echoed by the second prediction: "The son of man [that is, himself] is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day." (Matthew 17:22–23; cf Mark 9:31, Luke 9:44.) This is expanded in the third prediction: "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles to be mocked and scourged and crucified, and will be raised on the third day." (Matthew 20:18–19; cf Mark 10:32–34, Luke 18:31–33.)

The attribution of these predictions to Jesus himself is extremely dubious. They are simply too specific and too detailed. They are *too* good to be true. No one has ever made such precisely accurate predictions before the fact.³ If Jesus *had* made these very specific predictions, how could the

³The other best example in the Bible of very precise predictions is in Daniel. Supposedly writing in the 6th century B.C., he reports an astoundingly accurate vision of the rise and