

*The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Birth: Borg & Crossan*

Four Sessions November 28 thru December 19

**Chapter 3: The Context of the Christmas Stories**

Background and Context: Background are scenes. Context interacts with you and so changes you even as you change it. Borg and Crossan ask, "What is the contextual matrix that you must know to understand those Christmas stories as products of their first-century location?"

Sequence:

- 1) establish the clash between the kingdom of Rome and kingdom of God as the matrix for our Christmas stories.
- 2) look at the kingdom of God to see precisely how it differed from the kingdom of Rome. Titles of Caesar Augustus ascribed also to Jesus: Lord, Son of God, Bringer of Peace, Savior of the World.
- 3) consider the terrible brutality with which the kingdom of Rome struck Jesus' Galilean heartland around the time of Jesus' birth.

Three layers of the Christmas stories in the context/matrix: 1) Christmas stories understood only *within Christianity*, within the New Testament as well as Christian legend and tradition, art and liturgy. 2) Within the expanded matrix *within Christianity within Judaism*, esp. after the traumatic 1<sup>st</sup> cen. CE. 3) At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the full context of those stories within Christianity *within Judaism within the Roman Empire*. Our present is always and necessarily in creative interaction with *their* past.

Two huge tectonic plates grinding against each other in the depths below Mediterranean history in the 1<sup>st</sup> cen. CE. The imperialism plate grinding against the Judaism plate. As ancient as Pharaoh's 1000 year old decree of genocide against the Israelites in Exodus 1-2. Around the 2<sup>nd</sup> cen. BCE it became the kingdom of Rome against the kingdom of God.

Both kingdoms were announced as the 5<sup>th</sup> and climactic kingdom of earth @ 200 BCE. That idea inherited from Greece, elaborated by Paterculus, is the chronology of Rome from the Assyrians, to the Medes, to the Persians, then the Macedonians. Following their overthrow at Carthage, the world power passed to the Roman people.

Rome's republic became an empire, but the empire couldn't hold. Consuls became warlords, Rome locked into civil war between legions, anarchy between legions, Octavian backed by Italy, Mark Antony backed by Egypt. Actium's naval battle: "Never had so much been gained for so many by so little."

Octavian, grandnephew and adopted son of the deified Julius Caesar, became in Latin Augustus, the "One Who is Divine." In Greek Sebastos, the "One Who is to be Worshipped." Rome became an imperial monarchy. Its imperial power had four strands: military, economic, political and ideological power. The birth of Jesus came with ideology against ideology, theology against theology. Roman imperial theology was the rule across the vast empire, emblazoned on mile

posts across the whole empire's roads. At the time of Jesus' birth Rome had 28 legions, each composed of 5000-6000 fighting engineers. The contact zones of the frontiers were slowly monetized and eventually planted with veterans on estates created from the landholdings of the indigenous people. Political power supreme. (See below the Acts of the Divine Augustus, posted in Latin and Greek on the sides of temples to Augustus/Roma and elsewhere.)

Caesar Augustus' titles were: Divine, Son of God, God from God, Lord, Redeemer, Liberator, and Savior of the World. *To assign any of them to newborn Jesus was either low lampoon or high treason.*

Greco-Roman tradition knew of immortal gods and goddesses, and also recognized humans who became divine, who were deified. Horace wrote, "Upon you, Augustus, however, while still living among us, we already bestow divine honors, set up altars to swear by in your name, and confess that nobody like you will arise hereafter or has ever arisen before now." Augustus was divinity incarnate.

Roman imperial theology has four successive elements: religion, war, victory, peace. Monument in Nicopolis inscribed, "Victory with peace secured on land and sea." What is the alternative to peace obtained by war?

### **The Eschatological Kingdom of God.**

God's vision for the 5<sup>th</sup> final kingdom (Greek *eschata* = last things). The *eschaton* = the kingdom of God, the Great Divine Cleanup of the World. Antiochus 4 Epiphanes launched a religious persecution in 160 BCE against Judaism itself. Some Jews resisted militarily, successfully.

The book of Daniel has a dream vision in which the first 4 of the ancient empires are depicted as feral animals rising from the raging ocean: 4 great beasts came up from the ocean, each different from the other- these great beasts are the four kings that shall rise out of the earth: Babylonian (a lion with eagles' wings), Medean (like a bear), Persian (like a leopard) and Macedonian (exceedingly strong with great iron teeth, devouring, breaking in pieces, stamping what was left, different from all the beasts preceding it). Antiochus' kingdom not even mentioned.

Then comes Daniel's vision of the 5<sup>th</sup> and final empire depicted "like a son of man", a human being. How is the 5<sup>th</sup> empire different from the others?

Sibylline Oracles- fictional prophecies borrowed from Rome by Judaism and then Christianity from the age of Augustus:

"The earth will belong equally to all, undivided by walls or fences, It will then bear more abundant fruits spontaneously. Lives will be in common and wealth will have no division. For there will no poor man there, no rich, and no tyrant, no slave. Further, no one will be either great or small anymore. No kings, no leaders. All be on a par together." A model of Family. A commonwealth. Therefore Rome's program was peace through victory. **The kingdom of God program is peace through justice.** Both intend peace, one through violence, the other by non-violence.

**Gentiles:** Micah says God will simply destroy the current great empire. The Revelation to John has the Great Final battle where God's vengeance will be visited on those who defy the program of Christ. And Isaiah has a Great Final Feast on Mt. Zion where all the nations will be converted no to Judaism but to the God of justice and peace. (p. 71)

Thus there are two utterly divergent descriptions of God's final solution to the existence of imperialism, one violent, the other non-violent. One extermination in a great final battle, the other a conversion at a great final feast. Both there from one end to the other in the Christian Bible. Which is announced by the Christmas stories?

**Two pre-Christian Jewish expectations of Messiah** as an intermediary figure for transforming the world: "Son of David" and "Lord Messiah" while the other speaks of "Son of God" and "Son of the Most High." Both date to last half of 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, just before Jesus' birth.

Psalm of Solomon's matrix is the first direct experience of violent Roman power within the Jewish homeland, desecrating the temple in 63 BCE: "A man alien to our race...a lawless one laid waste to our land.... He did in Jerusalem all the things that gentiles do for their gods in their cities. But in 48 BCE Pompey was assassinated on an Egyptian beach. So surely soon, surely now, God would "raise up for them their king, the Son of David... to smash the arrogance of sinners like a potter's jar; to shatter all their substance with an iron rod; to destroy the unlawful nations with the word of his mouth...All shall be holy, and their king will be the Lord Messiah. He will not rely on horse and rider and bow, nor will he collect gold and silver for war."

The other is from a Dead Sea Scroll fragment from Qumran: "He will be called Son of God, and they will call him Son of the Most High.... His kingdom will be an eternal kingdom, and all his paths in truth and uprightness. The earth will be in truth and all will make peace. The sword will cease in the earth, and all the cities will pay him homage. The great God will be his strength."

Two alternative transcendental visions: Empire promises peace through violent force; Eschaton promises peace through nonviolent justice. "The clash of those visionary programs for earth is the context and matrix for the Christmas stories- they proclaim God's peace through justice over against Rome's peace through victory."

View from Nazareth: Jesus was born just before the death of Herod the Great in 4 BCE. "At Herod's death were uprisings all over the Jewish homeland. Some had messianic overtones- violent attempts to replace an unjust and Rome-appointed tyrant with a just and God-appointed ruler." To put down those rebellions the Syrian legions came to fight and punish in Sepphoris, the capital of the Galilee, 5 miles from Nazareth. 18,000 elite troops accompanied by 2000 auxiliary cavalry and 1500 auxiliary infantry. Nazareth residents tried to flee to hiding places or its males were murdered, its females raped, and its children enslaved. The major event in Nazareth's life was the day the Romans came. Jesus heard time and again the stories of the day the Romans came. (Read paragraph on p. 78.)

#### **Chapter 4: Genealogy as Destiny**

Genealogies in Matthew 1: 1- 17 and Luke 3: 23 – 38 tell the nature and purpose of two nativity stories. “They demonstrate that theological metaphor and symbolic parable rather than actual history and factual information dominate the Christmas stories.”

### **Different genealogies for the Same Jesus**

Location: Matthew’s comes at the very start of his story, Luke’s comes at the start of Jesus’ public life.

Direction: Matthew’s lists the names from parents to children, from Abraham to Jesus, ancestors to descendants. Luke lists up from children to parents, from Jesus to Adam, descendants to ancestors.

Format: Differences in style have no significant purpose- Matthew: “Abraham was the father of Isaac” etc. Luke: “Isaac of Abraham.”

Number: Mathew has 14 = 14= 14 or 42 generations from Abraham to Jesus. Luke has 77 generations but never offers any count for generations.

Discrepancy: Matthew’s list descends from David thru Solomon (a king) but Luke’s descends from David through Nathan (a prophet). They are parabolic lists, not historical records.

Structure: Both signal their emphasis with specifics at the beginnings. (p. 84)

Patriarchy: Sounds like males generating sons without females, with only 4 exceptions where mothers are mentioned in Matthew.

Son of David: Mathew has Jesus’ ancestry in 3 time segments: Abraham to David (@ 750 years), David to Babylonian exile (@ 400 years) and Babylonian exile to Jesus birth (@ 575 years). Theological point: Divine patterning was established to indicate the appropriate time for Jesus’ birth. **Parabolic mathematics.**

Both Matthew and Luke guard against anyone thinking Joseph is the biological father of Jesus. Therefore Jesus was begotten by God.

Genealogy of Another Son of God by working backward: senatorial decree, adoption, conception, and genealogy = Caesar Augustus. **The genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke are counter-genealogies to that of Caesar Augustus.**

**Matthew’s flight into Egypt** parallels the Roman equivalent of “The Flight from Troy” of Aeneas escaping the doomed city with his aged and infirm father on his shoulder and his young son, Julus, by the hand. Protected by Venus, they reached Italy, and from them, the Roman race and the Julian line descended. “From this noble line shall be born the Trojan Caesar [Augustus],” says Virgil, “who shall extend his empire to the ocean, his glory to the stars, a Julius name descended from the great Julius! Him [Augustus], in days to come, shall you, anxious no more, welcome to heaven, laden with Eastern spoils; he, too, shall be invoked in vows.” The speaker is the high god Jupiter, and after the story of the divine Augustus, says “wars shall cease and savage ages soften” into peace on earth.

“If you wanted to oppose and replace one Son of God born with a millennium-plus descent from the divinely born Aeneas, you would have to introduce an alternative Son of God with a better than millennium-plus descent from say, the divinely born Isaac, as in Matthew, or better, the divinely created Adam, as in Luke.” It’s about advertising.

### **Appendix: Acts of the Divine Augustus**

1 Below is a copy of the acts of the Deified Augustus by which he placed the whole world under the sovereignty of the Roman people, and of the amounts which he expended upon the state and the Roman people, as engraved upon two bronze columns which have been set up in Rome.

At the age of nineteen, on my own initiative and at my own expense, I raised an army by means of which I restored liberty to the republic, which had been oppressed by the tyranny of a faction. For which service the senate, with complimentary resolutions, enrolled me in its order, in the consulship of Gaius Pansa and Aulus Hirtius, giving me at the same time consular precedence in voting; it also gave me the imperium. As propraetor it ordered me, along with the consuls, "to see that the republic suffered no harm." In the same year, moreover, as both consuls had fallen in war, the people elected me consul and a triumvir for settling the constitution.

2 Those who slew my father I drove into exile, punishing their deed by due process of law, and afterwards when they waged war upon the republic I twice defeated them in battle.

3 Wars, both civil and foreign, I undertook throughout the world, and when victorious I spared all citizens who sued for pardon. The foreign nations which could with safety be pardoned I preferred to save rather than to destroy. The number of Roman citizens who bound themselves to me by military oath was about 500,000. Of these I settled in colonies or sent back into their own towns, after their term of service, something more than 300,000, and to all I assigned lands, or gave money as a reward for military service. I captured six hundred ships, over and above those which were smaller than triremes.

4 Twice I triumphed with an ovation, thrice I celebrated curule triumphs, and was saluted as emperor twenty-one times. Although the Senate decreed me additional triumphs I set them aside. When I had performed the vows which I had undertaken in each war I deposited upon the Capitol the laurels which adorned my fasces. For successful operations on land and sea, conducted either by myself or by my lieutenants under my auspices, the senate on fifty-five occasions decreed that thanks should be rendered to the immortal gods. The days on which such thanks were rendered by decree of the senate numbered 890. In my triumphs there were led before my chariot nine kings or children of kings. At the time of writing these words I had been thirteen times consul, and was in the thirty-seventh year of my tribunician power.

5 The dictatorship offered me by the people and the Roman Senate, in my absence and later when present, in the consulship of Marcus Marcellus and Lucius Arruntius I did not accept. I did not decline at a time of the greatest scarcity of grain the charge of the grain-supply, which I so administered that, within a few days, I freed the entire people, at my own expense, from the fear and danger in which they were. The consulship, either yearly or for life, then offered me I did not accept.

6 In the consulship of Marcus Vinucius and Quintus Lucretius, and afterwards in that of Publius and Gnaeus Lentulus, and a third time in that of Paullus Fabius Maximus and Quintus Tubero, when the Senate and the Roman people unanimously agreed that I should be elected overseer of laws and morals, without a colleague and with the fullest power, I refused to accept any power offered me which was contrary to the traditions of our ancestors. Those things which at that time the senate wished me to administer I carried out by virtue of my tribunician power. And even in this office I five times received from the senate a colleague at my own request.

7 For ten years in succession I was one of the triumvirs for the re-establishment of the constitution. To the day of writing this I have been princeps senatus for forty years. I have been pontifex maximus, augur, a member of the fifteen commissioners for performing sacred rites, one of the seven for sacred feasts, an arval brother, a sodalis Titius, a fetial priest.

(Augustus became pontifex maximus in 12 B.C., quindecimvir between 37 and 34, augur in 41 or 40, septemvir epulonum before 15, fetialis in 32. It is not known when he became a frater arvalis, or a sodalis Titius. The last three colleges had fallen into abeyance in the last days of the republic and were apparently revived by Augustus.)