

“The Hopes and Fears of All the Years”
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Consider the following inscription:

*The most divine [Lord]...we should consider equal to the beginning of all things...
The common Good Fortune of all...the beginning of life and vitality...
We unanimously adopt [his] birthday...as the new beginning of the year.*

*[The] Providence which has regulated our whole existence...
has brought our life to the climax of perfection
in giving to us...our Savior...*

*[He] has put an end to war and has set all things in order...
[H]aving become god-manifest, [he] has fulfilled all the hopes of earlier times...
[T]herefore, let a new era begin from his birth.*

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What are these words, do you think? Where do they come from? Could they be part of a lost gospel? Do they stem from the early Christian church – an ancient Christmas proclamation, perhaps, or an early hymn to Jesus?

If you guessed one of those things, you’d be in the ballpark – sort of. For these words, in fact, *do* stem from the time of Jesus of Nazareth. They have a certain familiar ring. And they’re definitely directed to a “savior” of some kind. But what savior do they address? Is it the Christian savior, Jesus?

No, it isn’t. The words come from a Greek-language inscription, found somewhere in the Roman Empire, around the First Century. And the “savior” in this inscription, it turns out, is not Jesus. It’s Gaius Octavius, Caesar Augustus.

Anyone who’s ever been in a Christmas pageant knows that Jesus was born under the reign of Caesar Augustus. As I heard it in my youth, from the second chapter of Luke: “And it came to pass, in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. “

This is typical of Luke’s writing; he is careful to set the historical context of his story. At various points, he gives us helpful historical markers, telling us who was Emperor, and also who was the Emperor’s local agent in Palestine – whether King Herod at the beginning of Jesus’ life, or Pontius Pilate at the end.

By the time Jesus is born, probably around 4 BCE, Augustus has been in control of the Empire for more than a generation. As his reign progresses, so does his divinity, at least judging by titles. Back in the year 29 BCE, he'd acquired the title "Emperor," meaning Conqueror. Two years later, after he'd ended the Roman civil war, they'd started calling him "Savior." That was also when he'd acquired "Augustus," the honorific title by which we know him, and when people begin to claim he'd been born of a virgin.

Around the time of Jesus' birth, Augustus is hailed as divine. "Zeus Paternal," he's called, not to mention "Son of God, Savior of the whole human race." His empire stretches across the Mediterranean and beyond, from Spain to Armenia. His conquests completed, he has closed Rome's Temple of War, and in its place has consecrated an Altar of Peace.

In Rome, this is seen as the fulfillment of a prophecy. The great poet Virgil had predicted the coming of an age of peace, ruled by an emperor of divine virtue. And so, Augustus is now hailed as the Prince of Peace. And of course, he *has* brought peace of a kind, the *Pax Romana*.

In some parts of the Empire, Augustus' birthday becomes the festival of the New Year, with many days of feasting and revelry. One proclamation reads, "The birthday of the god has marked the beginning of the gospel for the world."

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That gospel – that good news – sounds great for Rome. But how does it play in other parts of the Empire? What about the little kingdom of Judea, for example, toward the Empire's eastern end?

We can guess that in Judea, the celebrations are subdued, at best. What's good news for Rome is bad news for the Jews – most of them, anyway. It's certainly bad news for the devout, who are determined to worship Yahweh, their own God, not Caesar. It's also bad news for Jewish peasants – impoverished from paying heavy tribute to a distant emperor. For these people, the *Pax Romana* is pacification, not peace.

Augustus' empire, brilliant in some respects, has been called "the first totalitarian state in history." It's the first empire to extend control over a vast territory, and over the lives of a huge population. Now for some peoples, living under Rome is an improvement over what they'd had before. Some of their conquerors had been egomaniacs, but Augustus was at least a pragmatist. He was willing to give the locals some religious and cultural freedom, *if* they didn't threaten the status quo.

That's a big "if," however. When the locals did pose a threat to the Empire, it was a different story. Then, repression was swift and brutal: slaughter, mass enslavement, a scorched-earth policy towards whole villages – and the execution, by crucifixion, of anyone challenging Caesar's authority.

The Judeans were especially troubling subjects, mounting sustained resistance over a long time. Over two centuries, the Romans had to put down popular insurrections four different times, before the Jewish people were finally subdued. One of these struggles happened around the time

of Jesus' birth, after the death of Herod, Caesar's hated client king. Another took place in the year 66, just as the gospels were beginning to be written down. Because of this, Roman oppression would have been fresh in the Evangelists' minds.

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The bottom line is that it's impossible to understand the story of Jesus, without considering the context in which he lived and taught and died. Over the centuries, however, many people have tried. They've treated Jesus' story – including the Christmas story – as a “purely spiritual” matter. And they've dismissed the Roman Empire, and Caesar's reign, as mere backdrop.

When I was in divinity school, New Testament scholarship was just beginning to emerge from this apolitical approach to the Gospels. From those days, I remember one older commentary which held that Caesar's census – the one in the Christmas pageants - was nothing but a “literary device,” designed to explain how Jesus could be from Nazareth, yet be born in Bethlehem. Caesar's rule had no other relevance to the story of Jesus.

But as one of a generation of more recent commentators, Richard Horsley, points out, in his book *Christmas Unwrapped*, “To say that Caesar was incidental to the story of the birth of Jesus would be like saying that George III was incidental to the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution...”¹

If we take Empire seriously when we read the Christmas stories, then we begin to see them as more than “purely spiritual.” Looking at Luke's gospel, we understand Caesar Augustus' census as part of a scheme to extract as much tribute as possible from its subjects. We see Joseph and Mary as among those subjects - Jewish peasants, forced by poverty off their ancestral land. We see other poor peasants – shepherds – as the first to hear the Good News. And we see Jesus as the very antithesis of Caesar, his first home an animal feeding trough, far from the halls of Rome.

The cumulative effect of Luke's nativity story is to put Caesar the Savior, and Jesus the Savior, in direct opposition. Another recent commentator, Stephen Shoemaker, says, “We can see [Luke's] birth story as a kind of ‘counter propaganda.’ He was saying, ‘the real savior of the world is Jesus. The true prince of peace does not sit on a throne in Rome, but is a tiny child born to a Palestinian girl in Bethlehem.’”

The same considerations apply to Matthew's story. Turning to Matthew's account of King Herod and the wise men, it becomes clear that this is “not about [purely] spiritual salvation, but about political struggle.”² In Richard Horsley's words,

The Magi come following the star in search of the child who has been born *king of the Jews*, a political leader. But there is already a king of the Jews, Herod, who, along with

¹ *Christmas Unwrapped: Consumerism, Christ, and Culture* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001), 121.

² *Ibid.*, 139.

the rest of the ruling apparatus in Jerusalem, is understandably frightened that a revolution against his power and privilege is afoot among the people...³

Herod has sometimes been viewed as a Jewish king opposing the new Christian message. But Jesus was never a “Christian,” and Herod’s Jewish credentials were suspect, at best – and in fact his Jewish subjects hated him. Herod was a king trying to eliminate one more political threat – a story as old as the hills, and as new as today’s headlines.

Again, here’s Richard Horsley:

The whole story in Matthew 2...is one of life-and-death political struggle. In modern terms, the story is about the struggle between the dictator of a third-world people set in place by an imperial government on the one hand, and the birth of the leader of the movement of the people’s liberation from that dictator...on the other...The only way we can even begin to appreciate this dramatic story of political conflict is to hear it again in its ancient historical context...⁴

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With these considerations in mind, we can now turn to the reading for the morning. This is the song of Miryam of Nazareth - known to much of the world as Mary, the mother of Jesus.

From many points of view, Mary is an odd choice for a leading role in a great drama. She is a northerner, from Nazareth, when the center of power lies south, in Jerusalem. She’s a woman in a patriarchal society. She is young, pregnant, and without a husband – in a culture where “family values” are everything. In short, she’s a person on the margins.

And yet Luke puts Mary front and center – and gives her some remarkable lines:

God has shown strength with his arm;
and has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

God has brought down the mighty from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

God has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

This song has become known as “The Magnificat,” and set to great music. Affluent people sing it regularly, in well-appointed churches, without giving the words much thought. But Mary’s song has been known to strike terror in the heart of dictators. And its meaning is never lost on the poor.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 141.

The Christmas story is, in the end, subversive. It expresses the core of biblical faith: That there is a power moving in history – always on behalf of the poor, the powerless, the oppressed, the marginal.

This faith holds that, despite all appearances to the contrary, evil does not have the last word.

No matter how strong might seem the power of Empire, there is a power even mightier – the power of love.

Furthermore, this power is not disembodied, afloat in the universe, detached from human beings.

It appears in flesh and blood, wherever men, women, and children carry it in their hearts - and act to make it real.