

Study notes on

The First Christmas

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan

SPCK

Edward James April 2016

Study notes on *The First Christmas*

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan

These notes are a terse summary of the contents of this book by Borg and Crossan, to help you to study the Christmas stories and to provide you with a framework for a group to study and discuss the book during the four weeks of Advent leading up to Christmas.

Why is *The First Christmas* important to me?

I have found that this book has helped me to have a better understanding of all the stories surrounding the birth of Jesus.

What about the authors?

The authors of the book are Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, American theologians.

Marcus Borg was Canon Theologian at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Portland, Oregon, and a retired Professor of Bible studies.

John Dominic Crossan is a theologian, formerly a Catholic priest and monk, later Professor in the Department of Religious Studies, DePaul University, Chicago. Both men have spent their lives in Jesus studies.

What is significant to me about this book?

It makes full use of the recent great increase in knowledge about life in New Testament times and the changing meanings of words since that time. We can now read independent written accounts of some events contemporary with Jesus and we can amplify the meaning of events in the New Testament by relating them to those reports. For example, terms like 'Messiah' and 'Son of God', which we have associated only with Jesus, were both applied to the Emperor in Rome during the lifetime of Jesus. This knowledge brings us closer to the writers of the New Testament. It reveals more of what they understood and experienced.

Is this approach the right one?

This is for you to decide. I might stress that the stories of Jesus' birth in the New Testament were set down many years after the events described, and were based on stories circulating mainly in oral form around small groups of Jesus followers in various towns and cities.

I make no claims for the historical veracity of the original stories, and often it may not even concern me. I can only offer some views and encourage discussion as you continue on your Jesus journey.

Is this sort of approach a good idea?

Many of us may retain the undeveloped ideas about Jesus that we first heard as children. And it is naturally disturbing to be presented with new understandings that may be very different from those with which we are familiar. Such changes are disturbing, even startling. It could be natural to oppose these new ideas, and hope that they would go away.

But I will assume that we have an ecumenical outlook, a concern for *all* people, and might call ourselves liberal. And naturally, that we are all deeply concerned with Jesus, as are the book's authors.

What is in the book?

The source of the Christmas stories about Jesus are to be found only in Matthew's and Luke's gospels. The gospels of Mark and John do not include stories about the birth or the early years of Jesus. What we hear at Christmas are usually amalgamations of stories from *all* the different gospels.

Why this particular book, *The First Christmas*?

I use this book because I believe that it looks more carefully at what was going on than most of the other commentaries on the Christmas stories.

But remember that our book is a product of particular people with particular backgrounds. You may learn from it but you need not accept it as the only possible view. Interpret it as you can, which is all that we can do with everything we read.

Some will say the Bible does not err. What they usually mean is that *their* interpretation of what the bible seems to say brooks no discussion.

I have found it stirring to read *The First Christmas*, and hope that these notes will help you to develop your own understanding of Jesus.

Here is an outline of the contents of the book, with the relevant page numbers, arranged in five sessions (with the original page numbers in blue) as a suggested study programme during Advent. It is designed to provide prompts for a personal presentation at such a session, or as an aide memoire for the listener or reader.

Session One 3-53

Preface, what the book is about.

The stories of the first Christmas, from Matthew and Luke.

Fact, Fable and Parable, differences and richness in the stories.

The birth stories as Parables.

The birth stories as overtures to the rest of Matthew and Luke.

Old and now New Testament.

How we see it now. Subversive writings.

The different characteristics of Matthew and Luke.

Session Two 56-78

The context of the Christmas stories.

The importance of context.

The Imperial Kingdom of Roman.

The coming Kingdom of God in Judaism.

The coming (Advent) of the Messiah.

Hopes crushed at Nazareth.

Session Three 81-127

The significance of the Genealogies. They aim to show where Jesus came from, as Son of God, as Son of David, in both the Royal and Priestly line. These are *political* statements. 81-98

An Angel comes to Mary 99-127

How Mosaic stories influenced the Christmas stories.

Why Divine *conception* for Jesus was important to stand against the Roman Empire's tradition of God-emperors.

Session Four *129-197*

Why Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem, the home of David, the King of the Jews *129-167*

The significance of Light *169-197* :

Light as the great cross-culture symbol, Light against our Darkness

Light in the Old Testament

Light in the New Testament

Light in Matthew

Light in Luke.

Light in Revelations

Light as fundamental to prayer.

Session Five *200-end*

Jesus fulfilling Prophecy *200-224*

Matthew and the Old Testament

Luke and the Old Testament

The King of Justice and Peace.

Joy to the World *227-end*

Christmas, Joy and Conflict.

Advent as anticipation.

Summary

Borg and Crossan see the particular Christmas stories given in Matthew and Luke as miniature summaries of the whole contents of each particular gospel.

Through this approach they hope that we may have a richer appreciation of the origins of the Christmas stories, which will help to make them more meaningful for us today.

Session One **The birth stories in Matthew and Luke** 3-53

These Christmas stories are among the best-known stories in the world, but what are they about? Often not looked at carefully, but sentimentalised, seen as child-like, rather nice. But we can show that they are far more important than that to the purpose of the writers.

The stories of the first Christmas are in Matthew and Luke only.

Matthew: 31 verses (To read later)

1. *Conception* Found with child, Joseph had a problem, his dream as fulfilment of "Virgin, son, Emmanuel". So took her and waited for birth, called him Jesus. All about Joseph, nothing on Mary.
2. *Wise men from East* "Where to be born?" Herod heard, scared, told them "Go to Bethlehem for me".
3. *Adoration of Magi*: In ordinary house, gave gifts, Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh, and went off quietly.
4. Flight to Egypt: *Joseph* dreams the 'Get out' and the 'Get back'
5. The Holy Innocents are killed by Herod.
6. The return from Egypt and the move to Nazareth: *Joseph's* dreams moves the action forward. End of Birth stories.

Luke: four times as long:

1. John Baptist, his amazing conception and birth.
2. Mary's visit to Elizabeth and her song, the *Magnificat*
3. The birth of John Baptist and his song, the *Benedictus*
4. Caesar's decree, go to home town, Bethlehem, for taxing.
5. The Shepherds and Angels sing the song *Glory to God*
6. His circumcision and Simeon's song, the *Nunc Dimittis*
7. His quick learning, in the Temple, aged 12.

Fact, Fable and Parable. There are differences and separate richnesses in the two sets of stories. We usually hear through a *filter*, a harmony of the two sets, or just using one, or with later traditions built in. Examples of difference in the two sets are:

- *Where did the family live?*

Luke: in Nazareth, but to went to Bethlehem for the birth.

Matthew: In Bethlehem, and they go to Nazareth after Egypt later.

• *Who brought gifts?*

Matthew: Wise Men, Magi.

Luke: Shepherds came first, Kings later, we are not told how many, but they gave three types of gift which are *symbolic*.

Note: Why Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh? **Frankincense** was hard to get, rare, one pound weight was labourer's pay for a month. **Myrrh** was twice that. Both worth more than gold per ounce at the time, so could *only* be gifts for a King. *That was the point of describing the gifts in detail.*

The birth stories as Parables.

How are they seen in recent New Testament research? All the birth stories are *late*, 80-90AD, not in Paul, Mark or the later John. Not in the earliest tradition, so when were they created? Were they still being developed when our Gospels first circulated before being written down?

What *kind* of stories are they? It is *not* relevant to discuss *true* or *false*. This question was not raised until the *Enlightenment* in the 18th Cent, which adopted the principle of rational argument, everything must be either perfectly *True* or perfectly *False*: which are *opinions of persons*, not possible descriptions of events in real life. If not *fact* or *fable*, then what are they? Borg and Crossan see them as *parables*. Like the parables that Jesus told. Each story involves actions. Those who insist they are 'not true, therefore meaningless, useless' are called *fact fundamentalists*. They must have problems all the time with such a limited viewpoint.

But parables *may* be **truer** than History, in that they may demonstrate human experience at many different times, not just once in the past.

Parables can also be *subversive stories*. Jesus invited his listeners to see things in a different way, eg in the *Good Samaritan*, a role reversal between Samaritan and Priest. He told of new ideas, dangerous to consider under the current imperial regime. Ideas like:

The King of the Jews: is not Herod but Jesus.

The Son of God: is not the Emperor but Jesus.

The Light of the world: is not the Emperor but Jesus.

Our book says that the Christmas stories are not only Parables but **overtures** to the rest of Matthew and Luke respectively.

Consider the Overture in music. It has all the main themes. It is an *introduction* to rest of the work, a publicity flyer.

Matt 1-2 is an *overture* to the rest of Matthew, Luke 1-2 to the rest of Luke.

Old and New Testament.

Two different fulfillments flow from The Old Testament (Jewish Bible) : *Christianity* (New Testament) and *Judaism* (Mishnah and Talmud). We say that both are valid. And the *Koran* is essentially Christian except for no mention of the Virgin Mary.

The christian New Testament writers claimed that **Jesus** is the completion and perfection of Old Testament Messianic hopes. This was dangerously subversive to the existing imperial world view.

The different characteristics of the two overtures

Matthew: Jesus is the *new* Moses (Exodus 1-2), he fulfils prophesies (though some of his Old Testament quotes are not very accurate?)

But the Sermon on the Mount is *new* law: "But I say unto you.." The new law is *harder* to keep than the existing Jewish law.

Luke: In the Christmas stories the emphasis is on Women and other marginalised people at that time, eg Shepherds. The Holy Spirit drives the story forwards..

The power of Parable

For us to consider: The Christmas stories were *not* written as precise history, but to show that Jesus fulfilled the hope for a *Messiah*, already present in Old Testament traditions.

From the time of Francis of Assisi, scenes from the Christmas story began to be acted out realistically, developing into the medieval *Mystery Plays*. Their audiences (non-readers) perceived those plays' events as real. Has this process left a general impression that the original Jesus stories tell of what 'actually' happened in our current 'historical' sense?

Questions to the reader

Do we all not have hopes of a better world similar to those of the Messianic tradition?

Do we simply enjoy the Christmas stories as if they were real history?

Do they challenge us in any way today?

What stories would *we* create in order to express our hopes for a better world?

Session Two **The context of the Christmas stories** 56-78

The meaning of any text depends on when and where it was written, its historical *context*. Three different *levels* of interpretation have been defined recently. A *First* level reads the words in the context of an existing church group in a particular place. A second level looks at its context as a sect inside the local Judaism, an outer level considers its place in the context of the Roman Empire. We can only approximately grasp any meaning outside our *own* present context, but we can continually learn more.

The Imperial Kingdom of Rome

The Romans took from Greece the idea of five periods of history, of five kingdoms, of which the fifth would be *final*. This final one was *Rome*, which had *military, economic, political, and ideological* strength. All military men were also engineers, who stayed on and developed their conquests. The new areas were *monetized*, soldiers retired there, so Rome had *economic* power. Locals could become Roman, there was no racism, so everybody could wield *political* power as well. The Emperor was raised to God status, so Rome was an *ideological* power. The Roman Peace was through conquest.

The coming Kingdom of God in Judaism

The very different *Jewish* view of history was *Eschatological*, a final consummation by God was the end of history. So their final Kingdom would be ruled by God. It did not end the *present* world, but was a transfiguration of the *present* world. It is all described in Daniel 7. How different from the Roman view? Not about *ends* but *means*. It means finally Peace, *but Peace through Justice*, non-violent.

What would happen to Gentiles? Two views: *One*, Armageddon, extermination. *Two*: All men are called to a Great final feast (*Micah* 4).

The coming (Advent) of the Messiah (=anointed one)

How does the last Kingdom come about? Will there be a Viceroy, an anointed one, to reign on Earth? This was widely expected in first century BC. There were various views on how this reign would begin, but it would be through justice rather than violence.

Hopes crushed at Nazareth

At the time of Jesus' birth, (about 4AD), there were many violent uprisings, fed by the Messiah concept. There was one in *Sepphoris*, close to Nazareth. The city was captured, destroyed and burnt, and all its young men killed by Roman soldiers in retaliation.

Conjecture: The same happened at Nazareth (4 miles away), Jesus and his Mother fled to the hills, her husband was killed.

Session Three **The significance of the Genealogies** 81-98

The namelists of forebears show most clearly the *nature* and *purpose* of the birth stories, that they are symbolic parables in themselves, miniatures of the birth stories. They show where Jesus came from, as Son of God and Son of David, in both the Royal *and* the Priestly line. They are *political* statements (and incidentally, incompatible with virginal conception).

Matthew and Luke different from each other.

Matthew gives his genealogy at the start of his birth stories, Luke at the start of Jesus's ministry when he was a grown man.

Matthew traces from Abraham *forward* to Jesus, Luke from Jesus *back* to Adam.

Matthew says 42 generations, though gives only 40, Luke gives 77. Some names are the same in both, but many different. Both are patriarchal, but with some remarkable female insertions in Matthew.

Matthew says Jesus was Son of David.

The list is split: Abraham to David, David to Exile, Exile to Jesus. Implies David big, Exile big, Jesus big in the stories.

It shows that Jesus is 'son' of David, so able to be the 'Messiah'.

The generalogy is *parabolic*, aiming to *prove* that Jesus is Messiah.

Luke says Jesus was Son of God.

At his annunciation and at his baptism. At the end of his genealogy: "Adam is son of God". Implies that Jesus is the new Adam, and after his baptism, a new creation begins.

But why did they create genealogies?

A competing Son of God

Someone else claimed exactly the same: Julius Caesar and adopted son Octavian (who became Caesar Augustus). They claimed 1000-year old descent from goddess Venus and Trojan hero Anchises. Virgil created this story in the Aeneid. Aeneas escapes from Troy to Italy with his father and son Julius, and forms the Roman race. Shown in carvings all over empire, Venus guided all events through her star. So for Jesus you need a *better* than 1000-year genealogy from divinely born Isaac (Matthew) or divinely created Adam (Luke) to replace the Caesar family one in importance. Not history but destiny, not accuracy, but advertisement.

An Angel comes to Mary 99 -127

The two *conception* stories are *different*, as are the whole *birth* stories.

Matthew is all about *Joseph*, Luke is all about *Mary*.

So in Matthew, the Annunciation is to *Joseph*, in Luke, to *Mary*.

In Matthew:

Divorce 1:18-19, Revelation 1:20-23, Remarriage 1:24.

Jesus' birth story seems derived from the stories of Moses's birth, in the form of a creatively developed *Midrash* (interpretation) as in first century Judaism. Borg and Crossan provide specific Old Testament texts which might have been used.

Suggestion: Jesus' birth is a *parable* based on the Moses stories, to show that he was a suitable successor to Moses. The stories have Amran (=Joseph) in divorce, revelation and remarriage. No mention of Mary, because she was not in those stories.

Matthew and Luke agree that Mary was a *virgin*, engaged to Joseph, so this was from an earlier tradition than both authors. Note: The *conception* was *Virginal*, not the *birth*, *virginal* birth was a later church doctrine, never in the story.

Why is *virginal conception* so important in the story?

Divine conception is already in *Jewish tradition*. That is, an ordinary human father is not involved, though nobody denies that there was a human mother. Also related, a child is conceived and born to *barren* or *aged* parents, eg Sarah and Isaac, Hannah and Samuel.

Divine conception is also in the *Roman tradition*. The father is divine eg Augustus, the current emperor, raised to God status in Jesus' time. But Jesus has a divine father, and a *virginal* conception, so better than Augustus. It is the *theology* about the child, not the *biology* of the mother which is important in the story.

The pre-enlightenment world was not restricted by our biological models, so this was all possible. Hence we may nowadays fail to understand the power and message of the story as *parable*.

The real question is not about history but: who do *you* commit to?

Session Four 129-197

Why born in Bethlehem? Because it was (literally or metaphysically) the traditional home of David, the King of the Jews.

David was the idealised champion of the Jews, so Jesus gains credence by being related to him *and* born in the same place,.

Matthew and Luke agree that Jesus was the new David, and therefore must be born in Bethlehem. Apostles Paul and John also agree. So this idea is from an earlier tradition than the Gospels.

Matthew says Joseph is Son of David, so Jesus the Messiah is son of David. Luke says that Joseph went from Nazareth to Bethlehem for the 'census' because he was descended from David.

Messiah and King of the Jews

Matthew says Jesus is the Messiah *and* King of the Jews. But the Romans had made *Herod* King. So this is an anti-Roman statement, provoking inevitable trouble, as told in the rest of his book.

The Birth of Moses and the Birth of Jesus

Matthew exalts Jesus birth story above that of Moses. The normal Old Testament sequence of events in a story: a dream, fear, then interpretation. Always men have the dreams. So our story must involve the father, a 'Joseph'.

The Magi stop for directions, though a star was already leading them? But the story needs Herod to be scared, so the Magi's request scares Herod instead of the more usual bad dream. The story about killing innocent children is added from a Pharaoh story in the Old Testament.

A decree went out

Now we take up the Luke story.

Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem (as was David), so Luke had to create a sensible reason (the flight to Egypt) for the move away from and back to Nazareth. The whole purpose was to show Jesus, not Caesar Augustus, as Lord and Saviour of whole world.

Who is Lord and Saviour? Caesar Augustus was called both.

Whose is Gospel of Peace? Augustus is praised on monuments for bringing peace to whole world.

Peace on Earth by what means? Augustus, by conquest: Jesus by non-violence.

Christmas is about the right way of bringing the ideal of perfect peace in some 'Heaven' down to Earth.

Through who? Augustus the divine, or Jesus the divine?

Light against Darkness 169-197

Light as the great cross-culture symbol: Appreciated more before artificial lighting, candles were too dear for most folks. Metaphorically: night, darkness, blindness, limited vision, stumbling, fear; Winter means Death. Religion as 'seeing the light', having visions.

Light in the Old Testament

'Let there be light' (primordial, not the sun) in creation. "Flaming torch" for Abraham, flaming ladder for Jacob, "Pillar of fire by night" at the Exodus. Isaiah says "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light": their ideal king, their Messiah. A later Isaiah says: "All nations shall come to your light".

Light in the New Testament

The idea continues on from the Old Testament. In Paul, light at his thrice-told conversion. In his letters: "The light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" In John "The Logos was life, and that life was the light of all people".

Light in Matthew birth story

The Magi, wise men, follow the light. Not about astronomy but about Jesus, the elaborations are from Isaiah: the Magi are *Gentiles*, this story is a parable of Jesus as the light of *every* nation.

Light in Luke birth story

- In the *Benedictus*, all about Jesus as Saviour, deliverer from trouble.
"To give light to them that sit in darkness."
- In the *Nunc Dimittis*: "A light to lighten the Gentiles".
- In the night sky to shepherds: "The Glory of the Lord shone round about them." Angels always tell the meaning of the events. "Born this day in the city of David, a Saviour, who is the Messiah (Christ), the Lord." A direct attack on emperor Augustus (Son of God), who called himself "Saviour of the World, bringer of Peace."

Light in a Revelations birth story (Rev. 12)

There is a third birth story in the New Testament. Nero claimed descent from Apollo, God of light, Here it is applied to Jesus, an attack on the Romans.

Light is personal *and* political

Darkness v. Light, bondage v. liberation, violence v. peace, death v. life, all apply to each story and to the world. We yearn for light for ourselves *and* for our world.

Matthew and the Old Testament 200-224

“Then was fulfilled what was spoken of by the prophet”

This statement occurs *five* times in his Christmas stories.

- *Angel tells Joseph: “Lo, a virgin will conceive... Emmanuel”*
- *Herod is told where the child should be born: “You, Bethlehem, ... out of you shall come a ruler to shepherd my people Israel.”*
- *The story of the Flight to and return from Egypt: “Out of Egypt have I called my son.”*
- *The Slaughter of innocents: “Rachel weeping for her children”*
- *Finally, Jesus of Nazareth: “He will be called a Nazorean”*

This has led to a vast market in ‘proof texts’, which predict all details of his life (and yours) in scripture. Fundamentalists say that literal belief is essential to find some perfect ‘truth’, and be ‘saved’.

But look harder and we see that *none* of these Old Testament quotes claim to be predictions of a distant future. They refer to events in their own times.

However, they express the convictions of the early Christians in a way which enables Jewish enquirers to relate to other stories they know already, and see how Jesus represents the hoped for Messianic fulfilment present in the Old Testament.

Luke and the Old Testament: Luke does *not* use Matthew’s prediction and fulfilment teaching at all. But his Jesus *does* fulfil the hopes of Christians in many ways.

The *Magnificat*, *Benedictus* and *Nunc Dimittis* used in his Gospel are already existing prophetic hymns in Luke’s Christian community.

Jesus as Saviour

In the larger framework of the Old Testament, the Prophetic writings look for the coming of a new King of Justice and Peace. The whole New Testament shows that Jesus fulfils their hopes in a much wider and fuller sense than the simple prediction and fulfillment idea.

Joy to the World 227-end

The Christmas message brings light, fulfilment and joyfulness.

Jesus is the light in the darkness, the fulfilment of God's promise and ancient Israel's yearning, and so we are filled with joy.

In *Luke*:

Magnificat: "I will magnify God because of what God is doing in me"

Benedictus: "God has visited and redeemed his people"

Nunc Dimittis: "Now I can die in peace, I have seen your salvation"

The angelic message: "Good news of great joy to all people"

But we also have *conflict*. *Matthew* tells of Herod's plot to kill Jesus, the ruler of this world against the Kingdom of Jesus.

Luke in *Magnificat*: "has brought down the powerful and raised the lowly". And *Simeon* warns *Mary* "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel". This prophecy is still working out.

Advent is the preparation time to remember the yearning of ages and the longed-for coming of a Saviour. A time for repentance.

Repentance: What it really means. Not to do with sins, but with a change of mind, a change of direction, a resolve to do better, which moves towards a new life. In the Old Testament, it is related to the Exile, feeling separated from God, and the return from exile, a reconnection with God. In the New Testament, we may enter into a new mind, a new way of seeing.

Questions for us today

Can Advent bring the past into the present? Is Christ here, now?

How can repentance be with us now?

How do *we* fit into the Christmas story? On whose side are we?

Do we, like the Magi, follow the light and refuse Herod's plan to destroy who it leads to? Or like Herod, are we intent on maintaining the present power structures and ruling through fear? Or do we seek peace through justice for all, and seek to change the status quo?

Can our repentance, change of mind, be *political* and effective?

How can it be brought about?

A Christmas for today

Advent and Christmas are about a coming New World and so about *eschatology*, an end-point to aim at. It is not about escape from a doomed bad world to a perfect 'heaven', but about the transformation of *this* world.

Has it already started? Or can it ever come about?

Three different possible meanings of eschatology.

1. *Supernatural and interventionist*. A new world comes only through the direct intervention of God. All we can do is to wait for it. Some look for the violent destruction of all evil. Peace through violence again.
2. *Participatory or collaborative*. We participate with God in bringing in the world promised at Christmas. Through non-violence.
3. A third way is to hope for a new world only in a future 'Heaven'. No attempt to improve the earth. A concern only with individual salvation *after* death, no care for other lives or the environment.

I choose number two. What would you choose?

"God without us will not: We without God cannot": *Augustine*.

We are part of the struggle to build this new world in the here and now.

Two opposing visions of change in this world. We have the choice.

1. *The 'way of the World'*: Through political conquest and domination.
2. *Jesus's Way of Justice and Mercy*. Jesus shows us the Way and *is* the Way.

Conclusion

The Christmas stories are overtures to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke respectively, each is their Gospel in miniature.

But they are also overtures to the whole Gospel, the good news about Jesus in miniature.

So how do we see the Christmas stories after studying our book?

Can we see them as richer and more meaningful than before?



Notes on *The First Christmas* by Borg and Crossan

Version 8: April 2016 Edward James

Contact me at edward@edward-james.net

www.edward-james.net

The First Christmas - Mary was sitting in the sun outside her house. It was a normal day; a bit of cooking, a bit of helping around the house. He will be loved throughout the world for thousands of years. Mary thought she was dreaming. It is hard to understand, she said hesitantly, "what shall I call the baby?" "His name is Jesus," the angel answered. "Now I must fly." The first Christmas cards were printed in 1843 in lithography by Jobbins of Warwick Court, Holborn, London, and hand-coloured by an artist named Mason. They were lithographed on stiff cardboard, with the greeting, "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to You." It also states that it was published at Summerly's Home Treasury Office, 12 Old Bond Street, London. New Year's greetings. Greeting cards were not new.