Margaret Barker is an independent scholar, a Methodist local preacher and a former President of the Society for Old Testament Study. She has developed 'Temple Theology' as a new approach to biblical studies, and was given a DD for her work on the temple and the origins of Christian liturgy. For many years, she has been a member of the Ecumenical Patriarch's Symposium on Religion, Science and the Environment, and has made Temple Theology the basis for her work on the environment. This is her fourteenth book, reading the Christmas stories as Temple Theology.

Her recent books include: *Temple Themes in Christian Worship* (2008), *The Hidden Tradition of the Kingdom of God* (2007), *Temple Theology* (2004), *An Extraordinary Gathering of Angels* (2004), *The Great High Priest* (2003) and *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (2000).

CHRISTMAS

The Original Story

MARGARET BARKER

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In memory of
David Melling
who died in September 2004

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.
Isaiah 9.2

Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord; and by thy
great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night;
for the love of thy only Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Collect for Aid against all Perils
Book of Common Prayer

Contents

Preface

For many years I have been leading pre-Christmas study days: 'Exploring the Christmas Stories'. These looked at the well-known texts in the New Testament, and then at the less well-known, such as the *Infancy Gospel of James*, the *Arabic Infancy Gospel*, and the Qur'an. Eventually they became this book.

The great festivals of the Church have been almost taken over by supermarkets and sporting events. Easter is a time for bonnets and bunnies and chocolate eggs; Christmas, which starts at the end of October, is for reindeer and mistletoe and mince pies. Nativity plays have come a long way since St Francis first set up his crib. Either they are banned to satisfy the politically correct, or they are modern and have the birth in a bus shelter, or they are sentimental and have squirrels and even sea creatures at the crib.

The original story is so much better. It has suffered from over-familiarity, and the words are sometimes lost in a flurry of domestic distraction. Reread and repondered, the original story of the incarnation is one of the greatest treasures in the Bible.

I dedicate this book to the memory of a dear friend, who shared my love for the ancient traditions of the Church.

Margaret Barker
Easter 2008

Introduction

The Christmas stories are not only beautiful; their meaning is at the heart of the Christian faith, and they show how the first generations expressed their understanding of Jesus as both God and man. The creeds are later statements of Christian belief, summarizing the essentials. The first to be set out formally was the Apostles' Creed, the declaration made before baptism in the Western churches which was in use in Rome at the beginning of the third century.[1] It says nothing about the life of Jesus as depicted in the four Gospels, nothing about his parables and miracles, about debates with the Jews of his time, or about his disciples. It records his birth, and then his death and resurrection: Christmas and Easter. The events in Bethlehem and Jerusalem were recognized as the essentials of the faith. Of Christmas the Apostles' Creed says: 'Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary'.[2]

The other creed most familiar to Christians is the Nicene Creed, recited[3] at the Eucharist in churches of both Eastern and Western traditions. It was probably developed from a baptismal creed used in Palestine, was adopted by the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, and expanded by the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE. The precise history of its development is complex. Like the Apostles' Creed, it lists as essentials of the faith only the teachings about the birth and death of Jesus. Of Christmas it says: 'One Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God, Begotten not made, Being of one substance with the Father, By whom all things were made: Who for us men and our salvation came down from heaven, And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, And was made man . . .'. This is the theology of the Christmas story, but it is in two stages. There is the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of

[1] Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 21.

[2] The Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed are quoted in the form in the Book of Common Prayer.

[3] The important difference in the statement about the Holy Spirit does not concern us here.

his Father before all worlds, and there is the Son of God who became incarnate of the Virgin Mary.

Christians have always been careful to remember and distinguish the 'two births'. The Orthodox Church calls Christmas 'the Nativity according to the flesh', a constant reminder of the 'other' birth. Augustine, who died in 430 CE, summarized this in a Christmas sermon:

> Our LORD Jesus Christ, the Son of Man as well as the Son of God, born of the Father without a Mother, created all days. By his birth from a Mother without a Father, he consecrated this day. In his divine birth he was invisible; in his human birth, visible; in both births, awe-inspiring.[4]

Both births are found in the New Testament: the Son of God was *born* in eternity, beyond our understanding, as John wrote in the prologue to his Gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word . . .' (John 1.1). The Son of God *became incarnate* with the Bethlehem birth – the Virgin birth, and of this birth John wrote: 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1.14). *The Christmas story does not describe the birth of the Son of God; it describes the incarnation of the Son of God who was 'born' in eternity*. Throughout any exploration of the Christmas story there is the problem of words with a special meaning that differs from their normal use. If this mystical element is not recognized, the result can be a literalism that, far from being faithful to the fundamentals of the story, in fact distorts it.

At the heart of Jerusalem today is the Muslim shrine of the Dome of the Rock, erected on what is popularly believed to be the site of the ancient temple of Solomon. The first Muslim structure there had been the simple wooden building erected when Omar conquered the city in 637 CE, but this was replaced in 691 CE by the magnificent shrine familiar today. Two domes then dominated Jerusalem: the dome of the great Church of the Resurrection, built by Constantine over the site of Jesus' tomb, and the Dome of the Rock. On the inner and outer faces of the octagonal arcade of the Muslim shrine there is a huge inscription, some 240 metres long: excerpts from the Qur'an are set amidst invocations and other pious words.

The first quotation on the outer face is an early Meccan surah: 'Say: He is Allah, the One and Only: Allah the Eternal, Absolute; He

[4] Augustine, *Sermon 13, Christmas Day*.

begetteth not, Nor is he begotten; And there is none like unto Him' (Surah 112, 'Purity of Faith'). An explanatory note adds here: 'This is to negative the Christian idea of the godhead, "the Father", "the only-begotten Son" etc.'[5] The inscription continues with: 'Praise to Allah who begets no son and has no partner in (His) dominion . . .' (Surah 17, 'The Night Journey', 111). The explanatory note says: 'A first step towards the understanding of Allah's nature is to clear our mind of superstitions, such as that Allah begot a son.' On the inner face of the arcade there is:

> O people of the Book!/ Commit no excesses/ In your religion: nor say/ Of Allah aught but the truth./ Christ Jesus the son of Mary/ Was (no more than)/ A Messenger of Allah,/ and His Word,/ Which He bestowed on Mary,/ And a Spirit proceeding/ From Him: so believe/ In Allah and His messengers. (Surah 4, 'The Women', 171–2)

The explanatory note says: 'Here the Christian attitude is condemned, which raises Jesus to an equality with Allah; in some cases venerates Mary almost to idolatry; and attributes a physical son to Allah.' The next piece is a third-person form of words attributed to Jesus himself in Surah 19.33–5.

> Peace is on him, on the day of birth, on the day of death and on the day he is raised up again. This is Jesus son of Mary. It is a word of truth in which they doubt. It is not for God to take a son. Glory be to him when he decrees a thing. He only says 'be' and it is.[6]

Notes to this text explain:

> The disputations about the nature of Christ were vain, but also persistent and sanguinary. The modern Christian churches have thrown them into the background, but they would do well to abandon irrational dogmas altogether. Begetting a son is a physical act, depending on the needs of men's animal nature. Allah Most High is independent of all needs, and it is derogatory to Him to attribute such an act to Him. It is merely a relic of pagan and anthropomorphic materialist superstitions.[7]

Here is the heart of the matter – *the meaning of the Christmas stories*. The inscription with its extracts from the Qur'an makes clear

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[5] All the translations and notes are from *The Holy Quran. Translation and Commentary by 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali*, Birmingham: IPCI, except the translation in n. 6.

[6] Translation in O. Grabar, *The Dome of the Rock*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 92.

[7] *The Holy Quran* (see n. 5), p. 855.

that the point at issue is the meaning of Sonship. Was it a question of physical begetting, or was there another meaning of 'sonship'? In what sense was Jesus the Son of God, and how did the earliest Christian traditions record their beliefs? What was the original Christmas story?

1

The setting

Our images of Christmas have been shaped by familiar carols and above all by the paintings that appear on traditional Christmas cards. There is a winter scene with a wooden stable, a manger, shepherds, Mary wearing a halo, an ox and an ass sharing the stable, and then maybe the shepherds or the wise men. In the sky, or dancing on the roof of the stable, there may be angels. The emphasis, depending on the preaching needs of the time, may be on the status of Mary as a homeless woman, or as a humble girl who accepted the will of God. Investigating journalists will seek to establish the truth or otherwise of the stories by attempting to identify the Quirinius, governor of Syria mentioned in Luke's account of the birth of Jesus (Luke 2.2); or to amaze the public with the revelation that Luke's 'inn' was in fact a guest room,[1] and that there is nothing in Luke's story about Mary and Joseph knocking on many doors to find themselves a place to stay.

The real 'setting' for the Christmas stories, however, is the world in which they were first written. For the Jewish people of Palestine in the first century CE, the world was shaped by the temple. Their culture was shaped by its calendar and its taxes, its purity rules and its sacrifices, and especially by the holy books and prophecies that were preserved there. The temple had long been the focus of their politics, since the Romans controlled the country through the high priests. There were, however, many who thought the temple impure and longed to see it replaced – but this was as much a political aspiration as it was religious. The promised Messiah would destroy the temple and rebuild it, they said.

All this, and much more, was the setting for the Christmas stories as they were first told. The truth of the stories will elude us if we substitute our own sense of 'accuracy' and wrench the stories from their cultural, political and theological setting.

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[1] Luke 2.7 uses the word *kataluma*, which appears also in Luke 22.1 as the 'guest room' where the Passover was eaten.

The world of the temple

The people who wrote the Christmas stories lived in a world filled with angels. They expected angels, and they expected the ancient prophets to reappear. When Jesus asked his disciples what people were saying about him, they said: 'Some say [you are] John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets' (Matt. 16.14). Mark records Herod's fear:

> Some said, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; that is why these powers are at work in him [Jesus].' But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet like one of the prophets of old.' But when Herod heard it he said: 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.' (Mark 6.14–15)

Judas Maccabeus, struggling to free his people from their Syrian overlords,[2] had dreamed about Onias the high priest meeting Jeremiah in the temple. The prophet had given him a golden sword to strike down his enemies (2 Macc. 15.11–16). Angels came to defend the temple when Heliodorus tried to loot its treasures (2 Macc. 3.22–30); angel armies appeared in the sky over Jerusalem just before Antiochus attacked the city (2 Macc. 5.1–4) and before the Romans attacked and destroyed it in 70 CE (Rev. 14.1). John Hyrcanus the high priest, when he was offering incense, heard a voice in the temple saying that his sons had that day been victorious in battle (109 BCE). He emerged and announced this to the waiting people.[3] Angels and ancient prophets were woven through the realities of life. Nobody would have questioned that Zechariah conversed with an angel in the temple (Luke 1.11), nor that the shepherds of Bethlehem heard the heavenly host (Luke 2.8–14), nor that John had seen angels coming from heaven and heard their voices, as he recorded in the book of Revelation.

The world view of the first Christians was expressed in, and derived from, the shape and the liturgy of the temple in Jerusalem. Tradition attributes the original temple to Solomon, although the plan for it had been revealed to David (1 Chron. 28.11–19). It had been rebuilt by the exiles who returned from Babylon in the sixth century BCE – the 'second' temple – and by Herod the Great, whose temple Jesus knew. The rebuilding is mentioned in the Fourth Gospel, when the Jews disputed what Jesus meant when he said he would rebuild the temple. 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will

[2] They recaptured and purified the temple in 164 BCE.
[3] Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.282–3.

you raise it up in three days?' (John 2.20). There were other major restorations, most famously in the time of Josiah, 623 BCE, who purged the temple and the religion of his kingdom (2 Kings 22.1—23.25).

All the temples had the same plan and proportions, or rather, should have had the same plan and proportions; and they were built for one purpose: so that the LORD could dwell in the midst (Exod. 25.8). Any departure from this plan was a sign of disobedience; a distorted temple meant disobedience and distortion elsewhere in society too. In the sixth century BCE, Ezekiel had a vision of the glory of the LORD departing from the temple (Ezek. 10.1—11.25), and later, a vision of an angel instructing him exactly how the temple should be rebuilt after the exile, so that the glory of the LORD could return (Ezek. 43.1–5). The words of the angel show that errors in the temple meant errors in society. 'You, son of man, describe the temple to the house of Israel, so that they are ashamed of their iniquities/distortions, and measure the measurement/proportion' (Ezek. 43.10). In Hebrew, 'iniquity' and 'distortion' derive from the same word, and so wordplay was possible. Ezekiel ended his oration on temple measurements by condemning the rulers of the time: they had to turn away from violence and oppression, restore justice and righteousness, and have a just economic system (Ezek. 45.9–12). The Second Isaiah, his younger contemporary, said the same: if the restored community would amend their ways, 'then shall your light break forth like the dawn' (Isa. 58.8). The glory would return. This was the world view of the early Christians. Like so many others, they were longing for the glory to return, and so John described the coming of the Messiah as the return of the glory. 'We have beheld his glory' (John 1.14). Jesus drove from the temple the traders who were abusing the holy place (Matt. 21.12–13 and parallels), and the mighty angel commanded John to *measure the temple* just before the Romans destroyed it (Rev. 11.1–2).

The desert tabernacle described in Exodus 25—40 shows the basic structure of the temple: a rectangle divided into two areas by a curtain – the veil – which separated the holy place from the most holy place (Exod. 26.31–33). The tabernacle and the later temples represented the creation, the most holy place beyond the veil being the invisible creation, the glory of the LORD and the angels; and the outer area the visible, material world. The two areas were also two aspects of time: the visible creation was the state of time and change, and the invisible creation the unchanging state of eternity. 'Eternity' and 'hidden' in Hebrew are written in the same way. More wordplay. What the temple structure depicted was the hidden glory of God at the heart

of the material world, the eternal within the temporal. Thus Paul, thinking in this temple framework, could write: 'God sent *forth* his Son . . .' (Gal. 4.4). The Son coming into the world was envisaged as One emerging from the glory into our material world, passing from eternity into time.

The division between the two parts of creation was marked by the veil, and there were detailed instructions as to how it should be woven: 'blue and purple and scarlet stuff and fine twined linen; in skilled [*ḥošeb*] work shall it be made, with cherubim' (Exod. 26.31–33). No explanations were given for the prescriptions for the tabernacle/temple and its furnishings – or rather, none was made public in the scriptures. The meanings were, apparently, the secrets of the high priesthood; 'all that concerns the altar and that is within the veil' were entrusted to the sons of Aaron (Num. 18.7). Even the porters who carried the tabernacle in the desert were not allowed to see the furnishings. The sons of Kohath had to wait until the high priests had wrapped the sacred items, before they could take them up (Num. 4.5–15).

Josephus, a member of the high priestly family and a younger contemporary of Jesus, did reveal the meaning of the temple furnishings. Nobody knows when the explanations he knew originated, but he said the veil represented matter. 'For the scarlet seemed to represent fire, the fine linen the earth, the blue the air and the purple the sea, the comparison in two cases being suggested by their colour, and in that of the linen and the purple by their origin, since one is produced by the earth and the other by the sea.'[4] Josephus' rationalizations about the white and the purple could well have been his own, but the veil as a symbol of matter was widely known. Philo, an older contemporary who lived in Egypt, explained the tabernacle veil in the same way: 'What is spoken about is the workmanship of the materials woven together, which are four in number and are symbols of the four elements: earth, water, air and fire . . .'[5]

Only the high priest was permitted to pass beyond the veil into the holy of holies, and this symbolized his going into the divine presence. He entered the world of the angels, and stood before the throne. There are many descriptions of Jewish mystics making this 'ascent', but it is not always possible to date them. Texts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, however, can be dated, and these show

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[4] Josephus, *War* 5.213.

[5] Philo, *Questions on Exodus* II.85.

that mystical experiences were known when the Christmas stories were written. One text describes an unnamed person who sits in the congregation of the heavenly beings (4Q 491.11); another prays that someone may stand with the angels of the presence (1QSb IV); in another, someone declares he has been cleansed of great sin in order to stand among the holy ones, the sons of heaven (1QH XI). John described his own ascent to stand among the angels. First he saw the risen LORD in the outer part of the temple – the man with the seven lamps (Rev. 1.12) – and then he was summoned: 'Come up hither' (Rev. 4.1) and he stood with the angels before the throne. The early Christians knew of the world beyond the veil.

The high priest's outer vestment was made of the same fabric as the veil: blue, purple, scarlet and linen, interwoven with gold (Exod. 28.5). It represented the created world: 'Upon his long robe the whole world was depicted' (Wisdom of Solomon 18.24), and he wore it only when he officiated outside the holy of holies. Within the veil he wore white linen robes like the angels, as he was deemed to be one of them. In other words, those who entered the state of glory became a part of it. The high priests and kings of ancient Jerusalem entered the holy of holies and then emerged as messengers, angels, of the LORD. They had been raised up, that is, resurrected; they were sons of God, that is, angels; and they were anointed ones, that is, messiahs. The robes of the high priest in these two parts of the temple symbolized his passing from the angel state into the material world. He came from the glory, and by putting on a vestment that symbolized matter, he veiled that glory when he was in the world. The first Christians used these images to describe the incarnation. The writer of Hebrews could say, without any explanation, that the curtain of the temple was the flesh of Jesus, the great high priest (Heb. 10.20), and the Gospels record that the temple veil tore when Jesus died (Matt. 27.51; Mark 15.38; Luke 23.45). 'Veiled in flesh the Godhead see' is one of Charles Wesley's best-known lines, familiar to anyone who has sung Christmas carols.

The secret rituals of the holy of holies can only be reconstructed from texts in the Old Testament that seem to describe them, but the problem here is the date of the texts. Many parts of the Old Testament were compiled and even edited in the sixth century BCE, and some much later, that is, in the exile or in the troubled years that followed resettlement in Judah. The Davidic monarchy disappeared from history, and the high priests became the rulers in Jerusalem. The history of the high priesthood is not easy to reconstruct, especially