

## Celebrity Ancient Style: The Christmas Story in Matthew's Gospel

Our modern culture has its own cult of celebrity with well-known and well-rehearsed contents. These are often aired in magazines and newspapers. A glimpse through the supermarket magazines reveal some of these: money, sex, substance abuse, scandals, exotic locations and so on.



The ancient world had its own version of “celebrity” and its own way of reporting it, though we must remember that, in the days before the printing press, this was never the mass circulation enterprise of our time.

The ancient version of celebrity revolves around what was considered worthy of praise or blame. Social anthropologists call it an “honour/shame” culture. Symbols showing honour are found in ancient pagan and Christian art.



*Ancient Greek vase showing the sun god, Helios, with a halo signifying his divinity.*



*The halo was appropriated by Christian artists to show the importance of Jesus and other Christian luminaries.*

The literary form of this praise and blame culture is found in one type of rhetoric (public speaking) known formally as epideictic rhetoric. It manifests itself in accounts of the lives of the famous. Like its modern counterpart, celebrity reporting, it has a number of elements and conventions which readers expected to see worked through. One element of epideictic was in the story of the birth or origins of the person being praised. A good "birth story" would include details about some or all of the subject's ethnic

affiliation, nation, clan, ancestors or fathers. Their ancestry/ fathers would show their good breeding, and the place of birth something about character.

Whilst we may think the ancient world got its connection of place and character and breeding wrong, they still persist in popular thought. Think of those dour Scots, efficient, humourless Germans and loveable larrikin Australians.....And there are still concerns with breeding, think of the English class system, American Mayflower families, and those ancestors on the first or second fleets....

Another feature has not stood the test of time so well. Ancient accounts of the births of the great and the good often describe miraculous signs and portents at the time of the character's birth: these might include omens, dreams, signs in the heavens, prophecies and so on.

Matthew's story of Jesus' birth can be read according to the conventions of its time, the rhetoric of praise, and we may get some fresh insights from considering the Christmas story from this angle. What follows is a summary of Jerome Neyrey's *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, Louisville: WJK, 1998:

### *Geography*

Jesus' birth is associated with Judea and Egypt, Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth. Judea is a place of leadership and power, Egypt functions as the place to which he escapes and from where he returns. The cities are probably more significant. Jerusalem is a city with a high status, as a royal city and a "mother city", yet is some ways, surpassed, in Mt, by Bethlehem which, whilst smaller and in some ways dependent on Jerusalem, is also an important city as the prophesied birthplace of the Messiah. Jesus is associated with two important towns, both suggest his birth is significant.

Nazareth, on the other hand, appears much more insignificant (cf. John 1:46, 7:52). Yet the play of words on Nazerene (Mt. 2:23) gives an importance to the place through a pun on *nazir* (holy one). It is also possible that an association with an insignificant place is also worthy of note: in surpassing people's expectations about what a person from Nazareth or Galilee might do, he shows he is worthy of respect and honour: he has not been constrained by the place he came from. Nazareth, though apparently insignificant, is made to give honour to Jesus by (a) the pun, and (b) what he achieves although associated with such a place.

### *Generation/Ancestry*

Matthew 1 presents a genealogy of Jesus: one of the lesser-preached parts of the Christmas story. It differs significantly from the similar genealogy presented in Luke. We can note the following points of significance:

- Jesus' direct descent from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Not just a bloodline, but also important for the significance of covenant, faith and obedience.
- Judah, the royal clan of David. He gains honour by coming from a noble line, but also by triumphing over the shortcomings of some of his ancestors. It also anticipates his fellowship with sinners (there are some in his background), but his not succumbing to temptation himself.
- The four female figures. In praise language, there are two possibilities: the ennobling of female as well as male ancestors by Jesus (which is a mark in his favour), or signs of the divine favour given to Jesus, as to them. Either way, their presence is a source of praise for Jesus.

The description of Joseph, Jesus' supposed father, to a royal line also is a mark of praise. As is the seemingly insignificant, if not potentially sinful single mother-to-be, Mary initially seems an unlikely candidate for honor, but she is not an adulteress and is ultimately faithful to God and his purposes. Thus, she too becomes a source of praise.

### *Dreams, Signs & Portents*

Four dreams give honour to Jesus' birth:

- Protection for the wise men
- Re Mary's purity and honour and heavenly ordained name ( 1<sup>st</sup> dream to Joseph)
- Warning to flee to Egypt
- Advice to return from Egypt

The star (2:2,7, 9-10) marks a significant birth, marks Jesus as king of the Jews and signifies the bringing in of the Gentiles (via the wise men).

### *Prophecies*

Significant events in Mt. often "fulfil" previous expectations or prophecies (1:22; 2:23). Note too that people in Jerusalem also look for scriptures being fulfilled (2:6; Micah 5:2). However, these Jewish prophecies differ from Graeco-Roman equivalents because they are backward looking to the past, rather than looking to the future.

### *Conclusion*

The birth narrative in Mt uses contemporary categories of "celebrity" that is, praise and honour, to lace the story with signs of the greatness of Jesus: these are indicated principally by prophecies, the genealogy, dreams and reference to places.

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