

The Socio-Political Elements of the Birth Narratives

From Richard A. Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas* (Continuum, 1993)

Arranged by Mark Moore

1. **Baby Jesus**, announced as a new king being born, stood in direct opposition to both the kingship of Herod and the imperial rule of Caesar. Furthermore, he was announced as “savior” and one who would bring “peace.” Both of these had already been applied to Caesar Augustus who had received divine honors around the empire as the Savior who had brought *Pax Romana*.
2. **John the Baptist** had the spirit of Elijah (Lk 1:17), who happened to be the prophet most famous for accosting kings (cf. Sirach 48:6, 8, 10).
3. **Gabriel** means “God is my warrior.” Likewise, the Shepherds were surrounded by “Heavenly Hosts” which are, of course, armies (cf. 1 Kgs 22:19; 2 Macc. 5:1-4; 10:29-32; *War* 6.298-99).
4. **Mary** stands in the Biblical tradition of Jael and Judith, the other two women to be addressed as “Blessed are you among women.” Moreover, her song (the Magnificat), reflects the revolutionary words of Miriam’s song (Exo 15), Deborah’s (Judges 5), and Hannah’s (1 Sam 2). The closest stylistic parallels of the Magnificat come from Jewish hymns of war (e.g. Judith, 1 Maccabees, the War Scroll of Qumran, and the apocalypses of 2 Baruch and 4 Ezra). Furthermore, Mary’s commission is literarily similar to the call of Moses (Exo 3:2-6, 10-12) and Gideon (Judges 6:11-24), both quintessential liberators of their people.
5. **Anna**, identified as a prophetess, stands in the tradition of Miriam and Deborah, who both sang songs of Israel’s liberation.
6. **The poor** were often the source of rebellions since they were oppressed to the boiling point. Peasant, rural, agrarians made up approximately 90% of Palestine’s population. **Joseph**, who has been displaced from Bethlehem, may represent one of the throngs of people who became refugees, trying to escape the impossible tribute laid on him.
7. **Herod**, who was an Edomite, often came into sharp conflict with his subjects, the Jews. He was a client-king, more interested in serving Rome (and himself), than serving his subjects. He was actually inaugurated in the Roman Forum and emerged from the Senate house between Augustus and Antony. Together they made a sacrifice and then celebrated at a banquet thrown by Antony (see pp. 41-43). He instituted a police state in Israel, which included loyalty oaths, surveillance, informers, secret police, imprisonment, torture, and brutal retaliation against dissent.
8. **The High Priests** were not the Hasmoneans but (mostly) foreign Jewish priestly families installed by Herod, who would be more loyal to him. Thus, throughout the period of Jesus’ life, the rulers of the Temple hierarchy would have been loyalists to Roman rule. In fact, the revolt of 66 C.E. was as much against the Priestly aristocracy as it was against the Romans. The regular **priests**, such as Zechariah, would have aligned much more closely with the poor and disenfranchised than with the hierarchy. In fact, these local leaders fostered the rebellion of 66 C.E., partly because the Aristocratic Chief Priests had, for years, been robbing them of their rightful tithes, even with great violence. They also objected to the sacrifices made on Caesar’s behalf twice daily. The local priests were likely part of the communicative network that mobilized the peasant revolt (cf. *Ant.* 20:180-81, 206-7 as well as *War* 2.409-10, 417).

9. **The Shepherds** were disliked because their work often rendered them dirty and ritually unclean. They would have been scorned as outcasts.
10. **The Magi** were a caste of the highest-ranking political/religious advisers and/or officers of the Median and later Persian imperial courts. This area of Mesopotamia continued to foster some of the sharpest opposition to Rome's Eastern expansion. Furthermore, the Magi were often instrumental in predicting and establishing new kingships. This is clearly seen in the story of Tiridates who initiated Nero into their cult (Pliny, *Natural History* 30.6.17).
11. **The Star** may not have merely represented the birth of a king, but perhaps, in its Palestinian setting, also the harbinger of bloodshed from rebellion (e.g. *War* 6.289, 298-99).
12. **Galilee** was a seed-bed of revolution and dissatisfaction both of Roman intervention as well as Jerusalem's imposition of religious control over their lives.
13. **Palestine** had been subjected to Roman forces multiple times before Jesus was born (e.g. 63 B.C.E. under Pompey; 54-53 B.C.E. Crassus plundered the Temple to fund his expedition against the Parthians; 37 B.C.E. to establish Herod's rule). *Pax Romana* came to Palestine with a heavy price of tribute, slavery, bloodshed and violence. There was also, of course, the great revolts of 66 C.E. and 135 C.E. still to come (see pp. 30-32).
14. **Roman Taxes and Tribute** consisted of approximately 12.5 % of Palestinian's income. Because these were farmed out to the highest bidders, the system of levy was filled with corruption. Furthermore, Herod took more than his fair share to fund his extravagant building campaigns as well as his lavish bribes, banquets and "honors" of Roman rulers. On top of this were the temple tithes and taxes. Thus the Palestinians were reduced to poverty and slave labor because of the overwhelming financial burdens of the economic trinity: Caesar (tribute), Herod (taxes), and Temple (tithes).
15. **The Egyptian sojourn** represents a "reenactment" of Israel's journey through slavery. This story would have touched a nerve with the oppressed peasants of Palestine.
16. To be sure, whereas Mathew's stories focus more closely on the opposition to Herod, with the corresponding explicit reference to the high priests and scribes, Luke has in broader focus the opposition that the birth of Jesus means to the Roman emperor and tribute" (p. 52).

Parallels between Matthew's Birth Narratives and Israel's National Epic

From Arland J. Hultgren, "Matthew's Infancy Narrative and the Nativity of the Emerging Community," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 19/2 (1997) 91-108.

OT and Midrashic Legends	Matthew 1 and 2
1. The Father of Joseph is Jacob (Gen 35:24).	1. The father of Joseph is Jacob (1:16)
2. Joseph is righteous (Wis 10:13) and a man of virtue (Philo, Josephus, and rabbinic legends).	2. Joseph is righteous (1:19)
3. Joseph dreams (Gen 37:5-11).	3. Joseph dreams (1:20; 2:13, 19, 22).
4. Balaam (<i>magos</i> from the East) speaks of a king of Israel and the rising of a star of Jacob (Num 23-24 and Philo).	4. <i>Magoi</i> from the East speak of a king portended by the star of Bethlehem (2:1-12).
5. Joseph gets Israel to Egypt (Gen 45-47).	5. Joseph gets Jesus to Egypt (2:14).
6. Sojourn of Israel in Egypt (Exo 1:1-7).	6. Sojourn of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus in Egypt (2:15, 19).
7. Amram is told in a dream that the son will be a savior of Israel (Josephus and rabbinic legends).	7. Joseph is told in a dream that the son will be savior of his people (1:21).
8. Pharaoh is informed by scribes or astrologers of the birth of Moses (Josephus and rabbinic legends).	8. Herod is informed by wise men of the birth of Jesus (2:1-2).
9. Pharaoh seeks to destroy Moses (Exo 2:15).	9. Herod seeks to destroy Jesus (2:13-14).
10. Pharaoh orders the extermination of male children (Exo 1:22).	10. Herod orders the extermination of male children (2:16).
11. Pharaoh is tricked by Moses' mother and Miriam (Exo 2:7-10).	11. Herod is tricked by the wise men (2:16).
12. In spite of the threat on the child Moses' life, he is given divine protection (Philo and Josephus).	12. In spite of the threat on the child Jesus' life, he is given divine protection (1:20; 2:13, 19, 22).
13. Moses escapes death (Exo 2).	13. Jesus escapes death (2:14-15).
14. Pharaoh dies (Exo 2:23).	14. Herod dies (2:19).
15. Moses is directed to return to his homeland with his wife and children (Exo 4:19).	15. Joseph is directed to return to his homeland with his wife and child (2:19-20).
16. Israel comes out of Egypt in the Exodus (Hos 11:1).	16. Jesus comes out of Egypt with Joseph and Mary 2:15/Hos 11:1).