

Christmas According to the Evangelists: The Veracity of the Gospel Testimonies

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Let us cease treating the Evangelists as men on trial whose every word is suspect. When one of them is alone in stating something, certain modern critics who pride themselves on their independence reject his testimony as isolated; when several say the same thing, it seems, we are told, that they must have copied from one another, and their testimony is equally worthless. Were such radical norms applied to profane writers, history could not be written.

*Father Ferdinand Prat
Jesus Christ: His Life, His Teaching, and His Work I, 29*

Introduction

The liturgical calendar surrounding Christmas is a tremendous grace for Catholics whom worship at the Traditional Roman Missal. The prayers at this special time which constitute the Missal contain some of the most significant theological and spiritual events: truths that pertain to the Infancy Narratives of St. Matthew and St. Luke. At this liturgical juncture, Catholics will inevitably witness these precious truths undergo godless assaults by “experts,” whom are given free expression in the media. Some of the common assertions made by these critics, whom are ultimately challenging the veracity of Divine Revelation, will be discussed in this article.

The Gospels are Apostolic Writings

Central to any scrutiny of the truthfulness of the Infancy Narratives is the issue of Gospel authorship. A large number of contemporary biblical scholars assert, with a kind of pseudo-infallibility, that the Gospels were not composed by the traditional authors: Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Moreover, these Gospel accounts, say such scholars, were likely “redacted” (i.e. edited) to their final form in the late first century, decades removed from the actual words and events. This redaction was done according to the “needs” of the “early faith community.” Such erroneous views are found in study editions of the *New American Bible*. Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium hold a different view.

With respect to Gospel authorship, two kinds of evidence are considered: internal (i.e. the Bible itself) and external (i.e. extra-biblical data or Tradition). A thorough study of the internal evidence for Gospel authorship would include an analysis of the writer's literary style, his use of Old Testament citations, his familiarity with geography, his knowledge of religious customs, and his cognizance of the political and social conditions of the day. Such indicators assist in identifying if the text under examination came from an eyewitness or close companion to the recorded events. Space limitations preclude this kind of detailed study of the internal evidence. However, we can still focus briefly on certain Scripture passages, and see what is later confirmed by Tradition.

We readily grant that none of the Apostles were present at either the miraculous conception or miraculous birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. This fact, however, is irrelevant. The traditional authors were connected closely to the life of the Savior; not several generations removed from the actual events of the God-man. St. Matthew and St. John were part of "The Twelve" hand-picked by Our Lord to accompany His public ministry (cf. Mt. 10:1-4; Mk. 3:13-19; Lk. 6:12-16). St. Mark and St. Luke were contemporaries to the persons and events that surround the life of the Savior: one reads links between St. Luke and St. Paul (cf. Col. 4:14), St. Luke and St. Mark (cf. 2 Tim. 4:11; Phm. 23-24), and St. Mark with St. Peter (cf. 1 Pet. 5:13). As well, St. Luke's Acts of the Apostles testifies to the connection between St. Paul and St. Mark (cf. Acts 12:25; 13:13), and St. Paul with St. Luke (cf. Acts 16:10-16; 20:6ff). For the sake of clarity, we may distinguish the Evangelists with terms such as "Apostles" for St. Matthew and St. John, and "Apostolic men" for St. Mark and St. Luke. Tradition and the Magisterium employ these distinctions.

Tradition validates the biblical passages mentioned above. The Church Fathers, the earliest Christian scholars to comment extensively upon the Gospels, assume (and rarely argue the point) that such writings came from the hands of the Apostles or Apostolic men. Patristic testimony in the second century comes from St. Papias' *Explanation of the Sayings of the Lord* (preserved in Eusebius' *History of the Church* 3, 39, 15-16; A.D. 300-325), *The Muratorian Fragment*, and St. Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* 3, 1. The third

century testifies to the same Tradition from Tertullian's *Against Marcion* 4, 2, Origen's *Commentary on Matthew* 1, and Eusebius' *History of the Church* 6, 14, 5-7. Tertullian's reference is one among a vast selection that could be quoted:

First of all, we take the position that the evangelical Testament has as its authors Apostles, upon whom the task of promulgating the Gospel was imposed by the Lord Himself. And if there are also Apostolic men, they are not on their own, but appear with the Apostles and after Apostles; because the preaching of disciples might be open to the suspicion of an affection of glory, if there did not accompany it the authority of the masters, which means that of Christ, for it was that which made the Apostles their masters. Of the Apostles, then, John and Matthew first introduce the faith to us, and of the Apostolic men, Luke and Mark refresh it for us.

In agreement with the Church Fathers, the Magisterium reaffirms the Gospels are sprung from an Apostolic origin; either Apostles or Apostolic men. The responses of the Pontifical Biblical Commission are clear in their replies from 1907 (St. John), 1911 (St. Matthew), and 1912 (St. Mark and St. Luke). The Commission's 1964 Instruction, *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*, mentions several times the Apostolic origin of the Gospels. As well, Vatican II's *Dei Verbum* #18 (1965) upholds this traditional view. The critic who rejects the classic view of Gospel authorship is not heeding Scripture, Tradition, or the Magisterium. Having established the Gospels were recorded by eyewitnesses or close associates to the public ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, we can proceed to address some of the more disputed details of the Infancy Narratives.

The Similarities of the Infancy Narratives

The accounts that pertain most directly to Our Lord's supernatural conception and birth are revealed in Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2. Critics point out the differences between the Gospel records. On the contrary, what ought to be stressed is the vast agreement between St. Matthew and St. Luke. Both inspired accounts reveal a factual concurrence amongst its three main characters of focus: the Holy Infant, the Blessed Virgin, and good St. Joseph.

Concerning Jesus, both Infancy Narratives reveal that He was born during the last days of King Herod (cf. Mt. 2:1; Lk. 1:5) at Bethlehem (cf. Mt. 2:1; Lk. 2:6). The Divine Child was given His name under divine direction (cf. Mt. 1:21; Lk. 1:31) and declared to be the Savior (cf. Mt. 1:21; Lk. 2:11). Regarding Mary, both Infancy Narratives say she was a virgin (cf. Mt. 1:23; Lk. 1:34) betrothed to Joseph (cf. Mt. 1:18; Lk. 1:27), and she conceived by the Holy Ghost (cf. Mt. 1:20; Lk. 1:35). Pertaining to Joseph, both Infancy Narratives tell us he was of the house and lineage of David (cf. Mt. 1:16; Lk. 2:4), knew of Mary's condition and cause (cf. Mt. 1:20; Lk. 2:5), while taking her as wife with the attendant paternal responsibilities (cf. Mt. 1:24; Lk. 2:22). The three individuals of the Holy Family eventually dwell in Nazareth (cf. Mt. 2:23; Lk. 2:39).

Admittedly, there are differences between the Matthean and Lukan texts, but this is because of the different emphases and audiences of each Gospel — not because of any factual errors. Father Prat's quote at the beginning of our article manifests a wealth of common sense in this regard.

The Star of St. Matthew

The vivid scene of the Wise Men being guided by a star in Matthew 2:1-12, according to some critics, is not a factual occurrence. Instead, what is asserted by some is that we really have a "literary embellishment." This is a polite and scholarly way to say the inspired Bible contains a fabrication or lie; an episode that doesn't convey what actually took place in the Matthean record.

What is at root here is a denial of the supernatural. The "star" (Greek: *aster*) is clearly a miraculous one; Matthew 2:9 indicates a heavenly body of some kind traveled and went before these special Easterners, to guide them to the very location of the Divine Child. If the critic denies such a possibility of a star in Matthew's text, then the critic is additionally going to have an array of problems with the rest of the Bible, which repeatedly employs special events involving lights. As a matter of fact, the earliest Divine Revelation indicates God will use luminary phenomena for His purposes: "And

God said, ‘Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years’” (Gen. 1:14).

This use of various kinds of luminary action (literal and symbolic) for God’s heavenly purposes is seen in several places in the Old Testament. Examples include the pillar of fire that leads the Israelites through the Exodus from Egypt (cf. Ex. 13:21), Balaam’s prophecy of the Messianic descendent of Jacob being associated with a star (cf. Num. 24:17), the glory of the heavens which points ultimately to its Creator (cf. Ps. 19:1), and an indication of God’s future judgment tied to action in the skies (cf. Joel 2:30-31). The New Testament follows this same pattern. The Savior connects luminary phenomena with future judgment (cf. Mk. 13:24-25), St. Peter’s first sermon at Pentecost hearkens back to the prophecy of Joel about judgment (cf. Acts 2:29-30), Saul’s conversion on the Damascus road is enveloped by a great light (cf. Acts 9:3), and St. John’s heavenly visions in his Apocalypse describe startling luminary occurrences (cf. Rev. 8:5). Considering this theme traced through both Testaments, we can perhaps appreciate the great significance of the Redeemer’s own disclosure that He is the light of the world (cf. Jn. 8:12; 9:5).

God is Lord over creation, and it is His divine prerogative whether or not to use parts of His creation in a miraculous fashion, or any material things for that matter, to convey truths through the epochs within Sacred History. For a first rate treatment of this spectacular event of the star, the reader will benefit by consulting St. Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 36, art. 6-7.

The Census of St. Luke

We now must address, however briefly, the issue of the census of Luke 2:1-2. The section reads: “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria.” These verses may be the most controversial episode, with respect to historicity, in the entire New Testament. Two points will be our focus: Caesar’s decree and Quirinius’ governorship. Several critics insist these points are wrought with historical difficulties.

Regarding Caesar's decree for the census, the conventional wisdom is as follows. Caesar Augustus, during his career, initiated registrations of Roman citizens. No registrations, however, appear to have been called in the closing years of the first century B.C. Further, there are no indications such a registration would have entailed the entire empire. Most registrations in the Roman world were conducted for tax purposes, so it is argued that Caesar wouldn't have taken a census of Palestine while Herod the Great ruled the region, a king whom collected his own taxes. These common views, which put the veracity of the Lukan text in doubt, need to come under scrutiny.

Let us attempt a solution. Josephus the historian tells us that during the last years of Herod's rule, Judea was required to swear an oath of loyalty to Caesar. Archaeology confirms this kind of oath was sworn elsewhere in the empire circa 3 B.C. Perhaps, then, the registration of Luke 2:1 entailed an oath of allegiance sworn to the emperor, not a census for tax purposes. The fifth century historian Orosius says Augustus required all persons, in every Roman province, to be enrolled with a public oath. Orosius suggests in a description of this event that the oath was required shortly before 2 B.C.; when the Roman populace hailed Augustus as "the first of all men." This solution can be meshed with the information of Luke 2:1-2 — the registration was not for tax purposes, but a public enrollment for subjects expressing loyalty to the reigning emperor. This approach also falls within the estimates of the dates for the Savior's birth.

We must now examine Quirinius' governorship. The view accepted in contemporary circles is as follows. Quirinius initiated a taxation census soon after his appointment as provincial legate of Syria in A.D. 6 (recalled in Acts 5:37). He seems to have held this position once, while conducting only one census. This doesn't coincide with the census, years earlier, taken during the Savior's birth of the Infancy account.

The following proposal from among several is suggested here. The term employed in Luke 2:2 as "governor" (Greek: *hegemoneuontos*) for Quirinius offers the possibility that he was only holding an administrative role. In other words, this official position of

Quirinius in Luke 2:2 is different from his later position as an imperial legate in A.D. 6. Note that *hegemoneuontos* is used again in Luke 3:1 concerning Pontius Pilate; he was called “governor” of Judea, but was a regional procurator, not a legate of an entire Roman province. Two Church Fathers help in this matter. St. Justin Martyr states that Quirinius was a “procurator” in Judea at the time of the Savior’s birth. As well, Tertullian says Saturninus was the official legate of Syria during the time of the Nativity. With this evidence, we can offer the solution that Quirinius had two official roles in more than one census, at different time intervals of New Testament history: indicated in Luke 2:1-2, and recalled in Acts 5:37. Our solutions to these Lukan complexities are taken almost entirely from Hahn’s *The Gospel of Luke*; a fine treatment of a detailed issue.

Final Thoughts on the Infancy Narratives

Many details of the Infancy Narratives deserve attention, but were omitted from our brief study: the genealogies, the use of fulfilled prophecy, the dogma of the Virgin Birth, etc. Hopefully this article, however inadequate, has addressed a few areas that come under fire nearly every Christmas. Catholics can have certitude that both St. Matthew and St. Luke reveal the truth of the birth of the Savior.

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