

Bit Parts in the Christmas Pageant

by Thomas G. Long

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Ga.

The story is, I suppose, as old as Times Square and as corny as "Mary Poppins": a Broadway producer has spent a long and tiring day reading through a stack of plays by hopeful, but hopelessly pedestrian, playwrights. Nearing the end of the day, and his tolerance, he reaches out for the last play in the stack and accidentally picks up a copy of the Manhattan telephone directory. He thumbs through a few pages, then scribbles a note to himself on the cover, "No plot . . . but what a cast!"

When it comes to the Christmas story, the ancient narrative of the birth of Jesus, the plot, of course, moves us, inspires us; but, in some ways, it is the cast of characters that knocks us off our feet. The plot is shaped by God's mighty and redemptive act into a parabola of grace. Heaven touches earth. The proud are scattered; the low exalted. The hungry are filled; the rich are sent away empty. A divine *coup d'état*. Into the fabric of this majestic plot, however, are woven the unlikeliest of threads. What a cast! The children's Christmas pageants in country church basements on Sunday evenings perhaps capture it best with their slack-jawed shepherds in terry-cloth bathrobes, fawn-eyed Marys more child than woman, and gauzy angels with Reynolds-wrap wings bouncing wildly to the beat of "Gloria in Excelsis."

In what is arguably the best of the scholarly commentaries on the Christmas narratives, *The Birth of the Messiah*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co. 1977) Raymond Brown notes how the fanciful imagination of later Christian piety has worked overtime on the characters of the nativity stories, most notably the Matthean "wise men." First they were elevated to royalty, becoming kings instead of mere magi. Then they became three in number and were given names, such as Balthasar, Melchoir, and Gaspar. By about A.D. 700 they were given *colors*: Melchoir was "white-haired," Gaspar was "ruddy complexioned," and Balthasar was "black-skinned and heavily-bearded" (Brown, pp. 197-200). That these characteristics of the wise men are extrabiblical may come as a surprise to the art department at Hallmark Cards, but not to Brown, who knows the text. Having rehearsed how it is that we have tinted the Matthean magi with non-biblical crayons, however, Brown makes a startling remark:

We may smile at the anachronisms in such descriptions, but this imaginative reflection on the magi *is not too far from Matthew's own intent*. In the persons of the magi Matthew was anticipating the Gentile Christians of his own community . . . Subsequent Christian midrash continued this process of coloring-in the outline of the magi with hues familiar from the lives of Christians of later centuries . . . Naive? Yes, *but a valid hermeneutic instinct nevertheless*. (Brown, pp. 199-200) [emphasis added]

What do we have here? If I read him correctly, we have none other than the respected Dr. Brown suggesting that by dressing our children in cardboard crowns and lamé sashes, filling their small palms with bottles of allspice and English Leather, and gently urging them on cue toward the Christ child; by allowing these ancient magi to invade our folk-art imaginations so deeply that they emerge as *our* children, wearing *our* clothes, and presenting *our* gifts to the infant king; we have somehow firmly grasped the secret wish of the gospel writer himself!

If that notion is anywhere even close to the truth about the power and purpose of the birth narratives, then it will serve us well to pay a visit to the wings at the Christmas drama, to discover who some of the "bit players" in this divine tragi-comedy are and what has happened to them in what Dr. Brown would call "subsequent Christian midrash."

Extras: The Genealogy

While Luke has the dramatic flair to wait until Jesus is 30 years old before trotting out the family tree, Matthew is clearly from the "you-can't-tell-the-players-without-a-scorecard" school. He *opens* his gospel with Jesus' genealogy, a list spanning forty-two generations and including nearly fifty names, containing such notables as Abraham and David along with clearly peripheral types like Eliakim and Matthan.

While Brown acknowledges the tendency of modern readers to pass over such lists with a yawn or a joke ("When Adam and Eve ate from the tree they 'began the begat.'"), he points to the importance of genealogies to the biblical writers themselves (Brown, p. 64). He suggests a number of key features of Matthew's list (e.g., the three "sets" of fourteen generations each), the most interesting of which is the presence of the names of five women (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary). He discusses this aspect in a section cleverly, if riskily, entitled, "Why Bring on the Ladies?" (Brown, pp. 71 f.).

This odd presence of five females in an otherwise male-dominated inventory is treated in a fashion similar to, but even more engaging than, Brown by Fritz Kunkel in his Matthew commentary, *Creation Continues* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1973). Kunkel was a Jungian psychotherapist, not a biblical scholar, by trade, and his unrelievedly psychological approach renders his commentary something of a loose cannon on the deck of Matthean studies. *Creation Continues* is, though, a rare example of a genuinely readable commentary, and every now and then Kunkel actually catches some valuable insight about Matthew which has fallen through the slats of historical criticism.

It is Kunkel, for example, who spots how infuriating and disgusting Matthew's genealogy would have been to the first readers of the gospel. The list unfolds pleasantly enough, Abraham . . . Isaac . . . Jacob . . . Judah . . . Perez . . . Zerah . . . , then, *wham*, Tamar, whose very name conjurs up stories of incest. The list goes back to its sonorous cadence: Hezron . . . Ram . . . Aminadab . . . and so on until, *wham*, Rahab, a harlot. Then Ruth appears, a foreigner, and Bathsheba, involved in adultery and murder. *Wham, wham.*

Through fourteen generations the lineage soars to its climax in David the King. Four times, however, the solemn rhythm of the temple gong is interrupted. In opposition to the ancient custom four women are mentioned—famous women it is true, but each one representing a taint in the ancestry of Christ. (Kunkel, p. 34)

The reader begins to suspect that something is up. Each time the predictable routine of the list is interrupted by a woman's name the whiff of scandal is in the air. Matthew knows what is coming; his readers begin to anticipate it, perhaps to dread it: "Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ." When all is said and done, Matthew's genealogy is something of an offense. As Kunkel puts it, "Jesus is neither Joseph's son nor David's nor Abraham's; a new 'scandalon'!" (Kunkel, p. 35). Brown is more prosaic, "These women were held up as examples of how God uses the unexpected to triumph over human obstacles and intervenes on behalf of His planned Messiah" (Brown, pp. 73-4).

Supporting Cast: Mary and Joseph

In Cynthia Pearl Maus' book *Christ and the Fine Arts* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1938) there is a print which captures it all. It is Francois Lafon's "The Son of a Carpenter," and it depicts a scene from "the world's most famous carpentry shop." The boy Jesus stands at a workbench, his hands confidently grasping what appears to be a T-square. Somehow you know that the miters will be *precisely* correct. From the edge of the painting Mary, seated, looks serenely on, her face full of the sort of dark romantic beauty one associates with silent movie starlets. At Jesus' side is Joseph, looking far more comfortable to be holding that saw in his left hand than he does to be wearing that halo, which appears to have been borrowed for the picture. Joseph is clearly trying, as most fathers do, to be a wise and helpful father under difficult circumstances, somehow knowing already that the boy will not remain in the family business.

Lafon's painting is classic Christian piety in art, and yet something warm, appealing, and authentic about the holy family shines through nevertheless. These are simple people, gentle people. We want to draw near to these people, and we are mysteriously assured that they will receive us, though we sense that we are unworthy to be received by *them*. Their reverent and calm acceptance of the miraculous in the midst of the everydayness of their lives touches a hunger in us to discover the treasure in our own much-furrowed lives.

Rembrandt's much-abler hands have depicted a similar truth in his 1646 painting "The Holy Family." Mary and Joseph are at home, not in Bethlehem but in an ordinary Dutch dwelling. A small, cheery fire blazes on the hearth. Joseph sits to one side, on the boundary between light and shadow. Mary has her shoes off (for goodness sake!) and warms her bare feet by the fire as she plays with the baby Jesus. A purring cat is curled on the wooden floor beside its dish. Almost every detail of the painting virtually shouts of domestic routine. *Almost* every detail. Curiously painted onto the edge of the canvas is a

pleated drapery, a stage curtain, creating the expectancy that any moment an unseen hand may pull the veil across the painting, barring the scene from our view.

Commenting on this work, art critic Horst Gerson has commented, "Drapes as a rule are meant to protect from everyday use what is reserved for Sundays. Draperies separate the sacred from the mundane." (*Rembrandt's Paintings*. Amsterdam: Reynal and Co., 1968, p. 92). Rembrandt has portrayed, then, his profound understanding of the irony of the gospel. The holy curtain has been momentarily pulled back to give us a sudden, breathtaking glimpse of the sacred, and what we see is an ordinary couple, with a housecat and a new baby. As William Willimon, commenting on another painting with a comparable theme, has phrased it:

Old masters . . . did "know it best." They understood Emmanuel, God with us. They understood our blindness not only to the tragic but also to the triumphant in our midst . . . We trudge by epiphanies with barely a shrug of the shoulders. "God comes to us only on the stage, in some fantasy drama of the extraordinary," we say. Not here, not in Bethlehem or wherever else we make our home. In life, the Presence goes unnoticed as we thumb through the evening paper. And so we wait, sitting in the darkness of the everyday until something extraordinary breaks in. Someday God may break into the everyday, we say. But for the time being, it is best to work, eat, make love, pay taxes, fill out government forms, and mind our business.

But sometimes on busy, ordinary days like this one, on my way to the breakfast table and the cornflakes, I . . . am reminded: it's the ordinari-ness, the everydayness that are our best defenses, our most effective relativization of God's advent among us.

For Bethlehem, and for us, something steals silently across the canvas of our dull lives, unnoticed, unheralded, unexpected. The One whom we await becomes present. And we, anticipating the trumpet blast of angelic messengers or the rending of heavens, sometimes miss God's advent before our very eyes. ("Advent into the Everyday," *The Christian Century*, Nov. 28, 1979, pp. 1178-9).

Walk-ons: the Shepherds, the Wise Men, and Simeon

When the shepherds appear in art and literature they are often depicted as emotional counterpoints to the brainy wise men. The wise men plot the trajectories; the shepherds simply feel their way along toward the incarnation. Poet Albert Howard Carter's "The Second Shepherd" is a good example of this drift. First published in 1969, the poem still has some sharp edges despite its clear sixty-ish tone:

Like I'm on this crazy-cold hillside
all the live-long, die-long night
while these like buddies of mine
drop out, whip off to this gone starlight.

Millions—who's seen one?—the multitude
bit, of angels, and this cat's "for unto you"
tuned them in, a neon-snowflake groove:
purple sparklers, saffron flaming blue.

Nobody was sore, but, man, afraid;
"You watch, that's your bag," what they said;
"Mack" (turns out that's for real my name),
"This is where it's at. Watch is your head."

Watched, man, saw nothing for eternal hours,
Till they blew back, faces lit like flowers.
("The Second Shepherd," in *For Magi, Shepherds, and Us*. Richmond: John Knox Press, 1976. p. 25)

If Carter slipped Maynard G. Crebbs into a psychedelic shepherd's cloak, twenty-five years earlier W.H. Auden fancied the shepherds as anonymous shift-workers adjusting the steam valves in the bowels of some metroplex and struggling, one rung at a time, up the middle-class ladder:

The First Shepherd:

The winter night requires our constant attention, watching that
water and good-will,
Warmth and well-being, may still be there in the morning.

The Second Shepherd:

For behind the spontaneous joy of life
There is always a mechanism to keep going,

The Third Shepherd:

And someone like us is always there.
("For the The Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio" in *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden*, New York: Random House, 1945. p. 436)

Bus drivers, doughnut bakers, word processors, bolt tighteners, hamburger cooks, orderlies, and shepherds: "Someone like us is always there," and always conveniently dismissed, except, Auden knew, by the gospel:

The Third Shepherd:

What is real
About us all is that each of us is waiting.

The First Shepherd:

That is why we are able to bear
Ready-made clothes, second-hand art and opinions
And being washed and ordered about;

The Second Shepherd:

That is why you should not take our conversation
Too seriously, nor read too much
Into our songs;

The Third Shepherd:

Their purpose is mainly to keep us
From watching the clock all the time.

The First Shepherd:

For though we cannot say why, we know that something
Will happen:

The Second Shepherd:

What we cannot say,

The Third Shepherd:

Except that it will not be a reporter's item
Of unusual human interest;

The First Shepherd:

That always means something unpleasant.

The Second Shepherd:

But one day or

The next we shall hear the Good News. (Auden, pp. 437-8)

For Auden, then, the shepherds gather up that part of all of us bored senseless by the mechanical routine of our well-ordered lives, glancing apprehensively at our wrist-watches, hoping for something good to *happen*.

If Auden's shepherds want something to *happen*, his wise men want something to *mean*. One wise man follows the star "to discover how to be truthful now," the second "to discover how to be living now," and the third "to discover how to be loving now." These three quests combine into a single, searching journey:

The weather has been awful,

The countryside is dreary,

Marsh, jungle, rock; and echoes mock,

Calling our hope unlawful;

But a silly song can help along

Yours ever and sincerely:

At least we know for certain that we are three old sinners,

That this journey is much too long, that we want our dinners,

And miss our wives, our books, our dogs,

But have only the vaguest idea why we are what we are.

To discover how to be human now

Is the reason we follow this star. (Auden, pp. 430-1)

Matthew tells us that the wise men, having sought and found, played hide and seek with Herod and "departed to their own country by another way." It is almost irresistible, of course, to wonder about them "back home," back with their dinners, wives, books, and dogs. T.S. Eliot, in his "Journey of the Magi," sketches for us a picture of an older, reflective *Magus* (a Wiser Man?), remembering the journey, still gazing in wonder at the deep mystery found at the end of it:

All this was a long time ago, I remember,

And I would do it again, but set down

This set down

This: were we led all that way for

Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,

We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,

But had thought they were different; this Birth was

Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,

But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,

With an alien people clutching their gods.

I should be glad of another death.

(*The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950*. New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1952. p. 69)

And don't forget Simeon. The composer has given him one song, the choreographer one dance step. He is old, of course, very old, kept alive on the respirator of hope and the Spirit. "I am tired with my own life," Eliot has him say, "and the lives of those after me, I am dying in my own death and the deaths of those after me. Let thy servant depart, Having seen thy salvation" ("A Song for Simeon," in *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950*. p. 70).

You know the story of course, but can you see it? Simeon has worked on his one number, endlessly practiced his soft-shoe, waits now for his cue. Can you see it? The Spirit prompts him into the temple. He sees Mary, Joseph, and the baby there. His moment has come, and his aged arms reach out for the child. Do you see it?

The artist Giotto has seen it, seen it well. His "Presentation in the Temple" is, according to John W. Dixon, Jr., "One of the few genuinely witty paintings in great art" (*Art and the Theological Imagination*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1978. p. 96). Simeon holds the babe, his lips moving now beneath his hoary beard, carefully reciting his oft-rehearsed lines, "*Nunc dimittis . . .* Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace . . ." Giotto knows his Simeon. He also knows his babies, for the infant Jesus, far from resting contentedly through this aria, is responding as all babies do when held by eccentric strangers. Jesus wants nothing of it. His dark eyes are narrowed and fixed in frozen alarm on Simeon. He reaches desperately for his mother, every muscle arched away from the strange old man. Giotto has grasped the human feeling of this scene . . . and the irony of it. For as Jesus reaches away from Simeon toward Mary we observe that the infant is suspended momentarily above the temple altar. "This very human baby is," observes Dixon, "from the beginning, the eternal sacrifice for the redemption of mankind" (Dixon, p. 96).

Curtain Call

It should now be clear what a risk God takes in giving us the Christmas stories, for look at the ways in which we have cast them: barefoot Marys, middle-class shepherds, and existentially philosophical magi. There is our next-door-neighbor reciting the *Nunc Dimittis*, the kid down the street in Nikes

carrying a cigar box of frankincense. There is our daughter, adjusting her halo and singing, "My soul magnifies the Lord." And there we are, staffs in hand, stumbling over each other to catch a glimpse of the new-born King. What a risk; what a glorious risk! As John Vannorsdall puts it:

And that's what we, the people of the Church, are intended to be. The manger in which the Word is laid each day, the body of Christ on our own city streets, the orchestra which plays on a mid-Summer's eve. We are the voice of angels singing glory to God at an interchange on I-84. We tell stories about the wheat and the tares, the future of the poor, the halt, the lame, and the blind. We know about cock's crow, speech that betrays, and sleep which cannot wait. But we are Sunday's people always, who receive into our hands the Word of God present to us now. The One who calls us to receive the future coming, to lift up our hearts and receive now the bread of life for today's living. ("The Incarnation as Danger and Promise," a sermon preached on the Lutheran Series of the Protestant Hour, December 31, 1978)