

Matthew's Christmas Allegory

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If someone started out to interpret Matthew's nativity as an allegory with Exodus meaning, most onlookers would shake their heads knowing the would-be preacher had started down the wrong trail. Yet Paul Scott Wilson, in his recent book, *God Sense*, would encourage the interpreter, "Right On!" Allegory, condemned since Reformation times and heaved out of our bag of interpretive methods long ago, should be recognized as an often-used tool. In fact, Wilson surmises, it probably figures incognito in much sermon preparation. Throw it out the front door, it returns through a back window.

Historically, allegories abound that curl an interpreter's hair. Origen and Augustine illustrate flights of fancy when they draw out parables in many spiritual, far-fetched directions.¹ The problem usually occurs when an 'inversion' takes place that denies any literal sense of a passage in favor of meanings that are the opposite of the common sense reading that today's reader, scholar, or layperson would allow. Thus, David E. Reid reported visiting a church where the preacher waxed eloquently on Genesis 24:63-64, Isaac's servant returning to Isaac to deliver Rebekah, his bride. Rebekah gets off the camel and the preacher gets off on six characteristics of camels – the camel's nose that detects water from far away that exemplifies God's grace leading us to spiritual water; the camel's feet that hold the traveler up in shifting sands; his durability in tough places, and so on.² The historical sense has disappeared. The meaning was 'inverted'.

But, suppose the interpreter stays with the plain, historical sense of the text and remembers what the ancients never forgot – that scripture is to lead us to a "God sense," and that the journey works through multiple-point comparisons. In fact, a three-point comparison (different from a three-point sermon) is a normal way to read a text in sermon preparation. We make connections between the biblical texts under consideration, the rest of scripture followed by connections to contemporary situations. A simple definition of allegory is this: to say or interpret something in light of something else.³ This definition could also fit metaphor, except that with allegory there are multiple meanings – a web or grid – even though not every point in the grid has to match.

Enough! Let us look at the Christmas story in Matthew 1:18-2:23 and distinguish it from the version in Luke. So many Christmas cards, Christmas pageants, creches under the tree come to mind that we blur the details unless we separate the two stories. In Matthew, there is no manger or inn, no trip from Nazareth, no shepherds abiding in the fields, no speech or songs of Mary. The focus is on Joseph, who speaks and repeatedly dreams. In fact, dreams are especially prominent. An angel tells Joseph in a dream to take the pregnant Mary as his wife (1:20). The same dream connects him with the Emmanuel prophecy in Isaiah (1:23). A dream warns him to flee to Egypt to escape Herod (2:13). Another dream advises him to return to "the land of Israel" (2:19). This advice is refined in another dream in which Joseph is warned to go to Galilee to escape possible danger in Judea.

It is hard to miss Matthew's interpretation of 'Joseph the Dreamer' as a version of the patriarch Joseph, who was also known as the 'Dreamer'. Especially is this so when Matthew goes out of his way to make Old Testament ties in his telling of the nativity as well as throughout this Gospel. His phrase, "This was to fulfill," is a formula that introduces the prophecy of Isaiah, the designation of Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Christ, the weeping of Rachel's children during the flight to Egypt, and the purpose of it all, that "out of Egypt have I called my son." Forty times Matthew uses the formula "this was to fulfill" to reference New Testament events to Old Testament happenings.⁴ Allusions would bring the total to at least sixty times.

This being so, it is not a stretch to say that Matthew's nativity has a grid of meanings tying his plain meaning with the Exodus, and encouraging preachers to think in terms of a new Exodus with a new definition of Promised Land. Herod is much like the Pharaoh who "didn't know Joseph." Pharaoh's decree to kill all the Hebrew boy babies is parallel to "the slaughter of the innocents." The birth of the baby Moses, who has to grow up before he is the great deliverer, is akin to the baby Jesus who must grow through the 'silent years'. God in both stories is the One who hears the cry of his people and prepares for their salvation. Joseph the Dreamer is the agent whom God uses in both cases to prepare for the deliverance from 'Egypt', first to the wilderness and then to freedom.

There is one intersection of the two stories that is not obvious, but still a real possibility. Matthew ends his Gospel on an Exodus note. To see this, we must make a connection between the Christmas prophecy and the Great Commission. Isaiah's prophecy, his name shall be called "Emmanuel" (1:23), has as its usual interpretation, "God with us." This meaning at face value has the comforting reminder that even in troubled Egypt or Bethlehem or wherever the people of God happen to be, "the Lord of Hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge." But suppose more than comfort is suggested. Suppose the suggestion is a promise to lead us aggressively toward a Promised Land that is on up ahead in whatever land or time the nativity text is used.

To see this, we must return to the Exodus story of the burning bush, where Moses asks for God's name (Exod. 3:13), and God says, "I Am Who I Am." God the "I Am" promises to bring them up out of the affliction of Egypt. This enigmatic name of God has tantalized interpreters for centuries and has centuries of encrusted meaning. However, Walter Brueggemann found an etymological connection between the verb form in Exodus 3:14 and the name of God, Emmanuel, in Isaiah 7:14, which Matthew quotes in the nativity story (1:23). If that is true, then Matthew's ending, the Great Commission, has an Exodus connotation, "Lo, I AM with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt. 28:20). The promise of Matthew's nativity is not just the comforting presence of God with us, but the challenging presence of the Exodus God. It is the God of the Exodus who is ready with his new Moses to lead us on a latter day quest for the Promised Land, an aggressive and not a cuddly Christmas presence.

Of course, this approach to the nativity could be made without saying we were picking up an allegorical method, and yet Wilson (who is not responsible for my interpretation) thinks we should be unashamed to make allegory an acceptable approach once again. His reasons are informed from an historical perspective:

1. Interpreters up to the Reformation assumed there was a unity to scripture that allowed them to interpret scripture by scripture. They also assumed the purpose of

scripture was to encounter the Trinitarian God. That is, a text was not completely understood without meeting the God who was acting through it and acting through all other parts of scripture related to it. These assumptions have been neglected since the Enlightenment and must be recovered. David L. Bartlett reminds us “we do not preach so that people may encounter the Bible, but so that people may encounter Christ.”⁵

2. This warning is given to all who use the historical-critical method, and focus on the backgrounds of texts—their linguistics, historical contexts, sociological conditions, distinctive features in isolation from similar texts—but who forget the ultimate purpose of texts is to put us into the presence of God. An interpretation that misses the God sense of a passage makes for a thin sermon. Ironically, interpreters may end up using all the modern textual tools, but open themselves to Fosdick’s wry observation that people didn’t come to church to have explained the background of the Jebusites.⁶

3. Interpreters up to the Reformation knew there was a higher literal sense which they tried to find, along with and accompanying the plain sense of a text. Medieval theologians called this a “double literal sense,” though the term needs careful definition. Literal as used in pre-Reformation times should not be confused with a literalistic or fundamentalist reading of scripture. A literal meaning up through Luther and Calvin could relate to the grammar of a passage or to its history or its plain sense. Such a meaning would be similar to all the various criticisms that modern interpreters employ. However the Reformers did not stop there, nor should we. The interpreters’ job was not finished until a theological sense, the double sense, was found. Wilson thinks that modern interpreters, those since the Enlightenment, have lost this “double literal” sense, which has caused them often to leave God out and misinterpret the scriptural message in the interests of academic purity. It would be better to recover allegory, which deliberately and unashamedly looks for a theological meaning. “A double literal sense brings history and theology into relationship as a team and serves the issues that really matter for preaching.” This is Wilson’s repeated conviction.⁷

4. If allegory is an attempt to recover the God sense of a passage, why is it needed, when it is ringed with excesses and far out uses? The story of the birth of Christ, either in Matthew or Luke, has a God sense easy to detect—call it an allegorical or ‘double literal’ or theological meaning. Why then bring up allegory at all, when bad examples of allegory abound and when no encouragement is needed for eisegesis? Actually, even reading Matthew’s nativity in an allegorical way, the interpreter needs to avoid whimsical meanings. Deeper meanings of gold, frankincense, and myrrh may get past harsh criticism in the mystical season of Christmas. Furthermore, lovely stories that often get tied sentimentally to the nativity are fine for books on the coffee table. Carlo Menotti’s *Amahl and the Night Visitors* will play on TV or in church chancels. Christmas allegories, even when fanciful, add to the loveliness of Christmas despite the fact that they don’t add strength to the pulpit. However, *these* diversions of the season aside, it is allegory that encourages a wider search through scripture for possible connections with the text under consideration. It is allegory that helps Christian interpreters find Christological meaning in the earlier covenant, just as Paul found allegory a good way to interpret the story of Hagar (Gal. 4:21-31). And it is our use of allegory that puts us in the good company of the ancients in the Bible and

beyond, who used allegorical interpretations to bring congregations face to face with the triune God.

Notes

¹ A.M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (London: SCM Press, 1960), 25ff.

² Paul Scott Wilson, *God Sense* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 137.

³ Ibid, 113. John Dominic Crossan defines allegory as “a story in figurative language whose several points refer individually and collectively to some other event which is both concealed and revealed in the narration.” Quoted in Wilson, *ibid*.

⁴ M. Eugene Boring, “Excursus: Matthew as Interpreter of Scripture,” *The New Interpreters’ Bible*, vol. VIII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 151.

⁵ Quoted in Wilson, 65.

⁶ Harry Emerson Fosdick, “What’s Wrong With Preaching?” *Harper’s*, vol. 157(1928), 135.

⁷ Wilson, 57. This stress puts Wilson in the same camp with Brevard Childs, Walter Brueggemann, and the late Raymond Brown, who sought “to preserve traditional interpretations of biblical texts alongside the new historical readings” (54).