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# Newsweek vs. The New Testament

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With December 25 fast approaching, both TIME and Newsweek are out with special Christmas editions, complete with cover stories featuring beautiful works of Christmas art and articles addressing the nativity narratives from the New Testament. Unfortunately, the content of the articles hardly corresponds to the classical presentations found in the cover artwork. To the contrary—both articles cast doubt upon the historicity of the Christmas story.

Of the two, the Newsweek article is more problematic by far. TIME's article, "Secrets of the Nativity," is written by reporter David Van Biema, a skilled writer who often covers religious stories for the magazine. Even as the article opens with questions about the identity of the wise men, the nature of the star, and whether or not Jesus was born in Nazareth, rather than Bethlehem. Van Biema goes on to report: "In the debates over the literal truth of the Gospels, just about everyone acknowledges that major conclusions about Jesus' life are not based on forensic clues. There is no specific physical evidence for the key points of the story."

Van Biema points to supposed divergences between the narratives found in Matthew and Luke. His article cites liberal scholars such as Amy-Jill Levine of Vanderbilt University and James Schaberg of the University of Detroit Mercy, with inadequate corresponding voices from conservative scholarship. Van Biema does cite Professor Paul L. Maier of Western Michigan University, who rejects the idea that the gospels cannot be harmonized. "Radical New Testament critics say it's a hopeless jumble," Maier notes. "I myself do not think it's impossible to harmonize them."

The TIME article raises serious questions about the Virgin Birth, in terms of both its historicity and its meaning. Schaberg, identified as "an iconoclastic feminist critic," argues that the virgin birth is about transmuting "a ritually taboo pregnancy into an occasion of glory in the birth of the Holy Child." In other words, there was no Virgin Birth, and it was simply an invention of the early church.

Throughout the article, Van Biema raises issues concerning the historical truthfulness of the New Testament birth narratives. Lurking in the background of this article is the late Raymond Brown, a Catholic scholar whose scholarly investigation of the birth narratives led him to deny the historicity of many scriptural claims. In Brown's view, the historicity of the biblical accounts was simply "unresolved."

In the end, Van Biema assumes that Christians will continue to look to the New Testament accounts for the meaning of Christmas. "Most Christmas worshippers, of course, are not currently focusing tightly on the Gospels' backstory. In this holiday season, they will be less interested in analyzing Matthew's message than in celebrating it, less concerned about parsing Luke's sentiments than in singing them."

This is mere sentimentality, of course, for if the New Testament accounts are not historically truthful, there is no basis for celebrating Christmas in the first place. If we cannot trust the New Testament to communicate truthfully, accurately, and faithfully what actually happened in the birth and infancy of Jesus, we have no basis for preaching the gospel—or telling anyone anything about Jesus Christ, for that matter.

But, if TIME's article raises questions about the historical truthfulness of the New Testament, Newsweek goes on to deny many essential biblical truth claims out of hand. In "The Birth of Jesus," writer Jon Meacham goes right to the heart of the matter, arguing that the infancy and birth narratives were simply invented by the early church in order to answer awkward questions and develop a fully-orbed theology and understanding of Jesus. He argues that "the Nativity narratives are the subject of ongoing scholarly debate over their historical accuracy" and that "almost nothing in Luke's stories stands up to close historical scrutiny."

This is not the first time Meacham has attacked the historical accuracy of the Bible. Once identified by The New York Times as Newsweek's "Young Turk," the 35-year-old reporter has served as the magazine's managing editor since he was only 27. Earlier this year, Meacham wrote another cover story for Newsweek, arguing in that story that the passion narratives [accounts of Jesus' trial and crucifixion] are also untrustworthy as historical accounts. In "Who Killed Jesus?," the cover story of Newsweek's February 16 issue, Meacham asserted that the Bible "can be a problematic source." He went on to argue, "Though countless believers take it as the immutable word of God, Scripture is not always a faithful record of historical events; the Bible is the product of human authors who were writing in particular times and places with particular points to make and visions to advance." Meacham went on to argue that "overly literal readings" of the New Testament can become the basis for anti-Semitism and other forms of prejudice and distortion.

In a "live talk" feature published on the MSNBC website, Meacham responded to critics of his article by arguing, "Many of the Biblical writers had theological points to make with their stories and were understandably influenced by the circumstances of their times. This is not to say that scripture was not divinely inspired or revealed to the authors, but it is to say that to read the Bible as if every word were literally true is to misread the Bible—a view held by many, many Christian denominations and theologians and believers."

Repeatedly, Meacham asserts his identity as "a believing Episcopalian." Nevertheless, Meacham redefines what "believing" means when it comes to the Bible. He dismissively argues that we should not read the Bible "as if every word were literally true," and that to do so is not only wrong-headed, but simplistic and unsophisticated.

In a statement from Newsweek's editor published in the December 13 edition—the issue with the Christmas cover story—editor Mark Whitaker identifies Meacham as a graduate of the University of the South at Sewanee, "the only Episcopal university in America." Whitaker goes on to identify a professor who exercised a particular influence on Meacham, teaching him "that there is no inconsistency between belief in Christ and the willingness to question the worldly roots of Scripture."

Yet, Meacham does not merely question the "roots" of the story. Citing an entire corps of liberal scholars, Meacham subverts the truthfulness of the New Testament text and argues—often through the words of the sources he quotes—that the New Testament is basically untrustworthy as an historical document.

The Virgin Birth is a particular point of issue in Meacham's article. He passingly acknowledges that the Virgin Birth just might have actually happened, but he quickly dismisses the idea, noting, "It is somewhat odd that there is no memory of it recorded in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry or in the Acts of the Apostles or in the rest of the New Testament." He proceeds to assume "for the sake of argument," that the story of the virgin conception of Jesus "is not a fact but an article of faith." Accordingly, the narratives of Jesus' virgin conception must be explained in terms of fiction and theological invention.

Like Van Biema, Meacham cites Raymond E. Brown as proposing that Jesus was actually the product of extramarital sex between Mary and some man—perhaps Joseph. If not Joseph, the situation would have been far more problematic. As Meacham suggests, "If Jesus had been conceived by a human father before Joseph and Mary had begun their lives together as husband and wife (either by Joseph himself, a soldier or someone else), then the Holy Ghost would have provided a convenient cover story for the early church."

Continuing his attack upon the historicity of the Virgin Birth, Meacham explains that "Jesus was such a revolutionary force that both Matthew and Luke sought to make him comprehensible in the context of established Jewish imagery and prophecy." In an act of astounding arrogance and breathtaking audacity, Meacham corrects Matthew in the interpretation of Isaiah 7:14 arguing that Matthew misunderstood Isaiah's prophecy and misused the text as he was inventing the cover story of the Virgin Birth.

Meacham makes extensive use of material drawn from liberal forces and biblical scholars who represent the extreme left in American theological scholarship. There is no attempt at balance in this article, and Newsweek's resident religion expert seems completely unaware that there is an entire world of evangelical biblical scholarship that would be quite ready to provide an answer to his questions and present a scholarly case for the historical accuracy of the New Testament accounts.

As Meacham sees it, Matthew and Luke were "confronted with a literary problem that had to be solved." As he frames their challenge: "They wanted to tell the story of Jesus' birth, but apparently had little to work with."

In other words, Matthew and Luke simply invented their stories, drawing from pagan parallels and casting about for other materials they could use, ranging from Isaiah 7:14 to snippets of ancient mythology.

To top it all off, Meacham argues that we really shouldn't be concerned about whether the accounts are historic in the first place. In a December 7, 2004 appearance on MSNBC's "Hardball with Chris Matthews," Meacham cited the authority of the second Vatican Council, which, in his words, "says that the scriptures can be true without being accurate." Christianity, he explains, "is a religion of perplexing contradictions. To live and examine faith, believers have to acknowledge these complexities and engage them, however frustrating it may be."

It is one thing to confront the challenges, but it is another thing to condescendingly reject the truthfulness of the New Testament, while citing the supposed insights from liberal scholarship as adequate intellectual warrant to correct the Word of God and claim, all the while, to be doing so as a believing Christian. This "true without being accurate" nonsense is an insult to the very concept of truth. If the events claimed in the Bible didn't happen, or didn't happen as they were claimed to have happened, the biblical authors are lying.

In Meacham's view of the matter, Christians should simply grow up and get over a concern with whether or not there is a clear historical basis for Christmas, or for any other aspect of Christianity, for that matter. He clearly believes that something happened, and he does not question that Jesus Christ actually lived on earth, but he does subvert and deny the truthfulness of the Scriptures and suggests that the gospel narratives are largely fictional.

Compare Meacham's approach to this statement from the Apostle Peter: "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty." [2 Peter 1:16] If the biblical accounts are merely "cleverly devised myths," Christianity falls and the gospel is null and void.

As might be expected, Meacham's approach to the Bible goes far beyond Christmas, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. In a May 6, 2002 cover story in Newsweek, Meacham argued that Christianity should change its convictions about human sexuality, allowing for the normalization of homosexual acts and the possible goodness of homosexual relationships. "For many of us, faith, like history, is an unfinished story, a running argument," he argued. Unsurprisingly, Meacham argued that the biblical passages declaring homosexuality to be sinful "are actually not quite so clear and unequivocal" as the church has believed for twenty centuries. He used the same interpretive methodology he applies to the birth narratives in suggesting that the Bible can be read in such a way as to justify homosexuality. Acknowledging that the Bible does appear to condemn homosexual acts as sinful, Meacham explains that "enlightened people have moved on from the world view such passages express."

Jon Meacham is the classic self-congratulatory theological liberal. He identifies himself as a devoted and believing Episcopalian, even as he assails the historical trustworthiness of the Bible and suggests that much of the faith he claims to believe is simply the product of literary invention and theological construction.

Newsweek should be embarrassed by this one-sided article presented as a serious investigation of the Christmas story. The magazine's editor may brag about Meacham's extensive study as a college student, but there can be no justification for the lack of balance and the absence of credible conservative scholarship in this article. This is not a serious and balanced consideration of the Christian truth claim, but a broadside attack packaged as a condescending essay of advice from Newsweek's very savvy, very sophisticated, very Episcopalian, and very ambitious managing editor.

In his editor's note, Mark Whitaker indicated that Meacham's article "also made us realize how little even some of the most committed and educated Christians know about the evolution of their deeply held beliefs and assumptions."

Here's the big question for Newsweek: How much do you know about the "evolution" of your own "deeply held beliefs and assumptions?" Those beliefs and assumptions are published in this very article, for all the world to see.

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