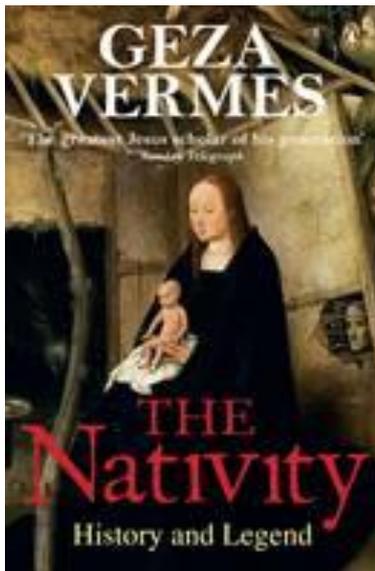


Review: Geza Vermes, *The Nativity: History and Legend*, Penguin 2006, ISBN 9780141024462.



This popular volume by Jewish scholar Geza Vermes (1924-2013) is a spin-off from his earlier scholarly work *Jesus the Jew*, which created the “Third Quest for the Historical Jesus”. In this book he examines the Nativity of Jesus, as it appears in the only ancient sources to discuss it – the gospels of Matthew and Luke – and, unusually, the nativity as it appears in popular culture. In the latter case he focuses mainly on Roman Catholic popular culture, probably because of his Hungarian origins.

The approach taken is to examine the narratives in Matthew and Luke, “line by line, word by word” (p.23), with the assumption that miracles do not happen. This is what all of the “Quests for the Historical Jesus” were all about; excluding the supernatural from the bible, and then seeing what is left over. In principle such a narrative ought to be possible. In practice, in the past, it has been found impossible to produce an objective narrative.

It is important for the lay reader not to get confused about the basis on which the book is working. That miracles do not happen is NOT the conclusion of the book. It’s the starting point. Likewise, that the gospel writers are unreliable is NOT the conclusion. Again, the book starts with the assumption that they were wildly wrong, precisely because they include miracles. It is pointless to expect a book to demonstrate something when it does not set out to do so.

As someone who went through theological college in the 1950s, Vermes was taught the dogma that miracles cannot happen, and that to hold this belief is to be “scholarly”, and to express belief in miracles is “unscholarly”. But scholarship is in fact a matter of method, and the most important part of it is to avoid imposing one’s prejudices on the data. An opinion on whether miracles happen is not a scholarly issue, but a religious belief, whether in favour or against. Our answer will depend entirely on our personal beliefs. To write an account of the nativity of Jesus of Nazareth with the guiding assumption – not the conclusion, mind, but the assumption – that miracles do not happen is not a value-neutral activity. However there is no reason why men should not write books from their own point of view. Accepting his point of view, we need to see how well it is achieved.

The book does not set out to determine whether the accounts in the gospels are correct. The author has already decided, in advance, that the gospels are not reliable. He assumes that the gospel

writers were mistaken, or indifferent to truth, on the most important points in their work. This again is not a conclusion – it is what the author starts with. The reader must guard against a tendency to assume that the book demonstrates that the gospels are unreliable. It does not. Rather the author assumes this, and seeks to write an account of events which is consistent with his starting point.

The approach taken consists of a line-by-line reading of the gospel nativity narratives, screening out the unreliable material, and seeing what is left over. We must see to what extent the book carries out its agenda, and how well the examination is done or otherwise. Finally we can evaluate whether the book is convincing.

The purpose of the book is stated at the start (p.4), “to squeeze the truth out of” Matthew and Luke. For the author believes that “this truth [about the origins of Christmas], as we shall see, belongs only very slightly to history and mostly derives from man’s hopeful and creative religious imagination.” But it is not just the bible that is the subject. The actual Christmas celebrations go under the microscope too.

The first chapter discusses the popular celebration, especially Catholic celebrations. These are indeed only loosely related to the ancient data (p.10-11).

However it is a modern myth that the date of Christmas was established under Constantine in order to displace the festival of the Unconquered Sun, and is first attested in 334 AD.(p.10) The manner of the selection of the date of Christmas is not in fact attested in any ancient source. Nothing connects it to Constantine. The “Dies Natalis Solis Invicti” pagan festival in question is very obscure and is not attested at all prior to 354 AD, in the very same ancient source, the *Chronography of 354*, as Christmas. The main pagan festival was Saturnalia. The origins of the 25 December date for Christmas are not known. This is a minor point, but it is a shame that the author did not check it.

The second chapter is headed “The enigma of the Infancy Gospels”. What this means is that Vermes believes that the nativity portions of Matthew and Luke circulated as independent texts, which he calls “Infancy Gospels”, prior to being incorporated into the gospels. His reasons for this belief appear only in the epilogue, however.

We then are launched into a list of “bible difficulties”. There is nothing special about any of these, which could have been culled from a Google search, in fact; and which could be rebutted by the same means. He adds a blast at those sinister yet vaguely specified “religious authorities” who “dislike contradictions” – although he does not mention any actual authors who discuss this –, includes an irrelevant mention of the Diatessaron; and then simply claims that the two narratives cannot be reconciled, and jeers at the efforts of various people to do so. Much of this chapter seems like conspiracy theory. But in reality Vermes is summarising much of what he intends to discuss. Throughout the book he tends to make his claims first and then discuss them in detail.

An interesting section is the acerbic attack on leading “Protestant scholar” C.E.B. Cranfield, whom, we are told, notes that the narrative of the Virgin Birth is never attacked by producing evidence, but only by presenting prejudice. This obvious truism seems to cause Vermes to fly into a rage – maybe there was bad blood between the two? – and some pompous pages of accusations follow, ending in praise of Rudolf Bultmann. More usefully the methodology for the book is then stated (p.23): the

author will examine the text line by line, offering his thoughts on which bits are reliable, and then compare whatever is left with whatever other data is available.

The mention of Bultmann here will remind the reader of C.S.Lewis' essay *Fernseed and Elephants*, perhaps the best known response to the claims of Bultmann and his school; that they claimed immense authority to pronounce on the history of the text, and details within it, when it was easy to show that they were incapable of perceiving the most obvious facts about it. It does indeed look as if Vermes is repeating the method of Bultmann here, line-by-line and word-by-word. More, he is claiming for it that it is the "only safe method" to read the text (!). But the criticisms of Lewis should be kept in mind in what follows, for Vermes commits all the mistakes that Lewis identifies.

Chapter three is dedicated to showing that the genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke are different, as indeed they are. Not mentioned, but relevant, is that ca. 300 AD Eusebius of Caesarea wrote two books *To Stephanus* on differences between the gospels, which includes a section on reconciling them. We are then invited to assume that both are fictitious. But this is rather superficial.

The book rightly notes that in Matthew's genealogy there is some kind of artificial structure of 14 generations. Presumably this meant something to Matthew, but it is entirely opaque to us, living two thousand years later. No similar items are mentioned by Vermes, unfortunately, so it would seem to be a mystery to him also.

Ancient societies did not have registers of births of the modern sort, and certainly not back to Adam. So it seems clear that these are not registers of births, like those used in a 1950s Mormon family tree. They must have a literary purpose, rather than a literal one, and fit within some now forgotten genre. But unless we know what the genealogies are meant to tell us, we cannot sensibly complain that Matthew and Luke give different ones. If we don't know what they mean, we do not know what they mean.

In the end these genealogies are inscrutable. Nobody alive today knows what kind of text these are, or what they were intended to show, and it is futile to speculate. Until we know what they mean, charges of inconsistency simply involve assumptions.

The chapter also notes that other figures of the time boasted of descent from David. This is interesting material, on the Jewish side. However the reader is left unclear how that is relevant or important.

One issue raised is that the genealogy of Matthew refers to women mentioned in the bible. The author speculates on the reason for this; but few of us read a book like this to hear speculation. The critical reader will note that it is just speculation from a man living in a different culture and thousands of years later. There is indeed a lot of speculation in the book, and even Vermes acknowledges this in his epilogue (p.163). This is not a good feature of the book. The reader wants facts, not fiction.

In several places it is presupposed that, if Matthew and Luke do not say the same thing in the same way, then plainly they are both wrong and unhistorical. Here the writer falls into a mistake. It need not be so. Two different people can differ. If I say one thing and Fred says another, it does not mean both of us are wrong: one of us could be right. The same applies, surely, to Matthew and

Luke. The mistake arises because the author forgets that these are indeed separate texts by different authors, rather than a single text by both. Bash-the-Bible writers often forget this. But a scholar would seek to work out which text was reliable. The issue of whether one is more reliable than the other is not addressed anywhere, which is an unfortunate omission.

Since miracles do not happen, the Virgin Birth is rejected out of hand as a mere legend. This leaves the question as to who was Jesus' father? The author finds a variant in certain manuscripts, including the Old Syriac, where the genealogy in Mt 1:16 reads as if Joseph was Jesus' biological father, and the claim is advanced that this is the real reading, and that it is based on the supposed Hebrew/Aramaic base text for the gospel.

But the argument is once more very weak. We are given no reason to reject the consensus of New Testament textual scholars, and to prefer this minor variant. All the Greek manuscripts with that variant are very late, later than 800 AD. The reader should have been told this. The Sinai Old Syriac manuscript must be 6<sup>th</sup> century or older, but it is not based on any supposed Hebrew text, as the reader is likely to think, but rather on a translation from an unusual Greek text. Here the desire to fit the facts to a theory leads to bad textual criticism.

The rest of the chapter continues to discuss the authenticity of the genealogies, but to little purpose. On the other hand it is useful to be reminded that Julius Africanus (preserved by Eusebius, *HE* I, 7) attempts to reconcile the differences in the second century. It is doubtfully relevant that others in New Testament times claimed descent from David (p.43-5).

In a way, this chapter seems misconceived. Surely the genealogies of Jesus form part of the non-miraculous text? If the aim is to get behind the text to the original, then are not the "bible difficulties" that they pose to believers irrelevant to the exercise? The reader may well conclude that the author's real aim is bashing the bible, not in discovering a historical substratum underneath a demythologised text. That the flesh of Christ had human ancestors is obvious. That the genealogies reflect something about first century literary culture seems clear. Why do we need to go further?

This all leads into chapter four, where miraculous births in Jewish and pagan legend are discussed. The reader is naturally to infer that such stories were copied by the gospel writers who invented the claim of the Virgin Birth in the New Testament. This is rather sad. No evidence of such copying is offered, and indeed both Jews and Christians were profoundly hostile to copying pagan myth into their religion. Indeed Vermes seems well aware that "only those who are already that way inclined" will accept this claim (p.58), but suggests anyway that this "will assist the reader in his attempt to come to grips" with the Virgin Birth (p.59), which sounds a bit like advancing an argument that you know is not true, just to get the reader wondering.

Much of this material is good, and standard. The reader may be misled in one case, however: Philostratus wrote his fictional biography of Apollonius of Tyana in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, and at least some such biographies were not the product of independent paganism, as Vermes suggests, but were most certainly created for anti-Christian purposes. We learn this from Eusebius *Adversus Hieroclem*. But the only date mentioned in the text is that Apollonius lived in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, as indeed he probably did. The innocent reader is likely to suppose that Matthew might have copied Philostratus.

In chapter five a range of objections are raised, but most of them consist of an attempt to show that Jesus was illegitimate. We can only discuss a couple of these points.

The prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 says that, when the messiah is due, there will be a sign: a virgin shall conceive. Inevitably we get the clichéd statement that the word used in the Hebrew bible means “young woman”, rather than virgin, and the latter appears only in the Greek LXX. This is said to prove that Matthew made up his narrative based on the LXX. But of course it does nothing of the kind, even if we accept Vermes’ theory. Eusebius remarks that a young woman who is not a virgin getting pregnant is not a sign or portent, but a normal event; and that, therefore, the text must be understood to mean virgin. No doubt the translators of the LXX understood this too. However Vermes believes that Matthew copied the LXX. But elsewhere in the book Vermes reverses his position, and suggests that, since the LXX manuscripts are later than the New Testament, perhaps they were changed by the Christians to harmonise with Matthew. Neither of the mutually-contradictory suggestions have any merit.

When dealing with Luke, we are told that Luke does not mention that Mary was a virgin, and suggests that this shows Matthew and Luke contradict each other. Then (p.77-8), finding two places where Luke does indicate this, these are casually dismissed as “interpolations”. Here it feels as if Vermes is beginning to lose control of his material. Surely any theory which asks us to infer quite imaginary textual tampering, in order to create a silence, in order to make an argument from silence, is a very bad theory?

The chapter concludes with an appendix, discussing ancient testimonies where Jesus is called a bastard. This is one of the better bits of the book, as it is more based on data, and less on speculation. It is notable that the non-biblical texts seem to cause no “difficulties” in the author’s mind.

But as with chapter four, the argument in chapter five does not seem quite logical. How does this claim that Jesus is illegitimate mesh with his insistence in this chapter and the last that Jesus is really the son of Joseph?

Chapter 6 begins with the statement that everything so far is “legendary” material. This might suggest that the purpose of “demythologising” the nativity accounts is done, and that there is nothing further to do. But the chapter is filled up with yet more stock “bible difficulties”.

Matthew and Luke are compared, and the suggestion is made that they disagree on whether Jesus was from Bethlehem or Nazareth. But the texts do not in fact disagree – Luke is merely less explicit – and the author struggles to make his case.

Then we get into the complex question of when precisely Jesus was born. We know that this was at the end of Herod’s reign, and this is not disputed. The real target is to object to the census under Quirinius.

Many readers will groan at this point, for this is a very old “difficulty” indeed, and one about which endless books and papers have been written. Vermes has nothing original to offer. Only a few words can be spared here.

In brief, one ancient source (Josephus) says that Quirinius was governor of Syria in 6 AD. Another one (Luke) says that it was ca. 4 BC. If Quirinius was only governor once, as was normal, then someone has made a mistake.

Naturally in the book, the view is taken that Luke is wrong, and has got confused. After all, says Vermes, Luke lived so long after the events. But surely Josephus lived even later than Luke?

It is obviously possible that either source may be mistaken. But more likely they are both correct. They don't contradict, unless we assume that Quirinius was only in Syria the once. That would be the norm, but we actually don't know enough about the career of Quirinius to say that. Our knowledge of most ancient officials is slender, as a look at any prosopography will show.

In reality the narrative given by the gospels is fairly obvious, and fairly simple to reconcile, with the exception of the Quirinius question. In consequence the author's conclusions (97) look rather predetermined.

Chapter seven takes us first into the question of the star that appeared miraculously, and his object is "deconstruction" of this (109). The theory apparently requires the author to suppose that the star is an invention, although it is not quite clear why. So we are told so, along with some speculative explanations of how people were so silly as to invent it. The language of the discussion – "it is not unreasonable to surmise that..." (109) – will remind some readers strongly of the language in which Eric von Daniken suggested that the star was actually a UFO!

It is a surprise to learn that a star may not be visible overhead somewhere, or that a Persian stargazer might not be able to measure this – did Vermes never stand outside on a dark night and look up? More curious is the use of the apocryphal *Protevangelium of James* as an authority. If the gospels need to be demythologised, how is it that the *Protevangelium* does not and can be used without further discussion?

Next up for "deconstruction" are the magi. There is nothing supernatural about some Persian magian astrologers turning up at the birth of Jesus; but Vermes won't have it. It is simply assumed without evidence that this is not true, and Vermes offers an imaginary account of his own invention instead. This, of course, is pure speculation. Once we know that an account is wrong, we may reasonably offer suggestions as to why it is wrong. But Vermes has forgotten to show that it is.

As may be seen, at this point the book starts to fall apart entirely. The object was to write a non-supernatural account. Instead the author is reduced to random rewrites of the text, made with no obvious necessity, and indeed speculatively.

These failings continue into chapter eight. The story of how Herod sought to massacre all the children is entirely consonant with his character, and this is admitted. But Vermes scoffs that it is far more likely that Herod would have simply enquired of a village policeman and killed the right child. Perhaps he could. Perhaps he didn't care, since he was dying hideously at the time. Perhaps ... many things; but speculation is no reason to reject ancient testimony. History must be written by a narrative driven from the data. Instead we get speculation that Matthew really just made it all up, based on some contrived ideas derived from Moses. This won't do.

A final gem is to be found in his “appendix 2”, where Vermes offers an extract from a Hebrew text of the 11-12<sup>th</sup> century, containing a legend that Abraham’s birth was signalled by a star. Of course it is probably derived from the New Testament, given its date; but Vermes shyly fails to mention that, preferring the reader to suppose – he does not dare to say so – that this is evidence of Matthew’s imagination.

Chapter nine wraps up the coverage of the nativity stories. Apart from the odd “bible difficulty” like “‘He shall be called a Nazarene’ is not in our modern bibles!”, it is largely content-free.

Chapter ten calls itself “Luke’s supplements to the Infancy Gospel”. What is actually meant is “material found in Luke but not in Matthew”. The chapter consists of assertions of copying or influence. But no evidence is offered.

The book then concludes with an epilogue, which is largely a reiteration of the claims made earlier. However also it returns to the question of whether the nativity narratives of Matthew and Luke must have been composed independently. The reason given is that they are not referred to again within the remainder of those gospels. The texts look forward; but not back. However it is hard to see why any writers should be obliged to repeat themselves at intervals. In fact we can test this claim very easily: for isn’t Vermes’ own prologue rather different to the rest of his book? The material in it is not referred to again in his book. If we follow Vermes’ logic, is that not proof that Vermes did not write the opening portion of his own book? This sort of howler is characteristic of the method of Bultmann, as treated in “Fernseed and Elephants”.

Here the book concludes, and so must we with a few general remarks.

The book seems to be a failure, even in its own terms. The starting requirement to omit the supernatural turns into a parade of old-fashioned bible difficulties, whether supernatural or not. There is a clear impression that creating a “historical narrative” was not that important to the author. What was important was “deconstructing” the biblical text. To this end, any old biblical difficulty could be trotted out. By the end, the author is content to reject the statements of the ancient text based on nothing more than speculation. It is difficult not to conclude that the real aim of the book is to rubbish the gospels, not to give the reader a demythologised account of the nativity of Jesus.

This means that the book becomes an example of the “Real Jesus” type of popular writing. There are an awful lot of these.

All books of this type rely on three things. Firstly, the author must start with a theory. Secondly, that theory must be advanced by manipulation of the primary sources, under one pretext or another. Finally the gaps are filled up with speculation. Each author then claims to be revealing “the real Jesus”; Jesus the freedom fighter, Jesus the Aryan hero, Jesus the liberal social worker, even Jesus who is really King Arthur. Any one book of this type can seem convincing to the reader, until he or she becomes aware of the others, which use the same methods to reach wildly different conclusions.

In the end the data says what it says, and cannot be made to say anything else. We were not there. We have no time-machine. We can detect errors in ancient sources; but only from evidence provided by other ancient sources, or archaeology or the like. This can be done in a rigorous,

objective manner, which is not dependent upon the religious or other opinions of the person doing it. The main source of distortion, in our picture of historical events, comes from ourselves. It comes from the biases that all of us have, the unconscious assumptions that we don't even realise we have. Descoping this bias is the first task of all real scholarship. The kind of approach that Vermes brings to the question involves the opposite.

But even if we accept the assumption that miracles do not happen, it is necessary to be far more conservative with the sources than this book is. Too often the statements of our ancient authors are rejected on frivolous grounds, or no grounds at all. The work is stuffed with speculation, as even its author accepts. In fact the author seems to care little about the resulting "history". The focus of the book is debunking the narrative of the text, and, incidentally, the celebration of Christmas in the world at large.

This book, then, is not a success, even in its own terms. It is quite possible that there is a market for a book giving the story of Jesus on the assumption that miracles can never occur. But anyone wanting one will need to make their own.