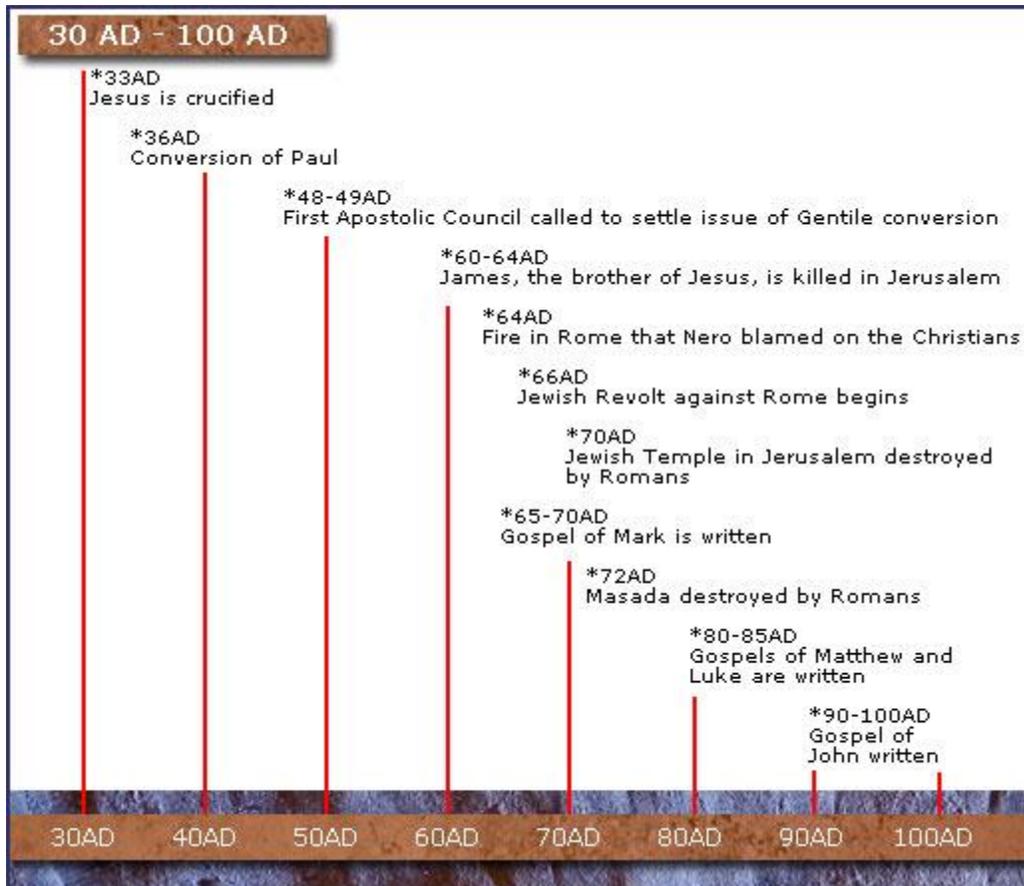


Timeless Transformations

Peel Back the Christian Belief System to Understand Its Own Message

Last week I was inspired to write about nones and dones as it relates to spiritual and religious beliefs. As a carry on with that subject, I would like to share with you some ideas that I've been studying and working on for years as a special concentration. I have told you about my interest in the [Westar Institute](#) and the Bible's New Testament religious literacy. Of specific interest is the Westar [voting's](#) and the research of the Christian tradition between 30 AD and 100 AD. I am captivated by the [timeline](#) of the Gospel writings. I am fascinated by the layers of interpretations that have covered up the sacred stories in the Bible's New Testament gospels.



Today I would like to peel back just one small story in the New Testament: the story of Jesus' birth. I pick this one because it is well known. Our most popular holiday, Christmas, is based on it. Plus we have a new birth in our family, right around the corner with Dahl!

For me in this story, everything is about the timeline. The birth of Jesus does not come into the Bible's New Testament until the 80s. The virgin birth is a late development in the Christian tradition. It is introduced for the first time in Matthew's Gospel around 82 - 85 AD. The virgin birth was never heard of until at least 50 years after the crucifixion. Most people don't know that. That alone is shocking! At that time, 20 years was a generation. So we are talking about two to three generations passing by before the virgin birth ever comes up.

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Most religious people read the Bible literally without regard to the timeline. They will say, how do you know the virgin birth isn't true? Well, there are writers in the New Testament that wrote before Matthew. The first is Paul. He's the first writer of anything that appears in the New Testament. He started writing his epistles in the 60s, which is 31-34 years after Jesus died. About 2/3 of the New Testament was written by Paul and he never even met Jesus. He is a secondary resource. However, Paul's writings are the closest we can get to the actual history of what happened in those times, especially in the earliest of years. In his writings, Paul never says anything about the virgin birth. Isn't that amazing? He talks about Jesus' birth on two occasions. He states Jesus was "born of a woman" (Galatians 4:4) and was "descended from David, according to the flesh" (Romans 1:3), thereby implying Jesus had a normal birth. It was thought in those times that descendants were only through the male. They didn't know that women were co-creators. They thought women were incubators. They thought women were nurtures for the seed of life for the male. Scholars believe that Paul never heard of the virgin birth.

Then in the timeline, the first gospel written in the New Testament is Mark. Mark is dated by most scholars around the 70th year. That means 40+ years after the crucifixion. Mark is the product of the second generation of Christians. Would you think that Mark would say anything about Jesus having a virgin birth? When reading Mark, it is discovered that Jesus is a normal human being that comes to be baptized by John the Baptist. In Mark 1:9-11 it says only through the baptism "the heavens open up and the spirit descended on him." God enters him at baptism not at conception.

Go on in Mark and it says, in chapter 6:21-35, his mother and brothers say Jesus is "beside himself." This is another way of saying he is out of his mind. It is as if he had become an embarrassment to the family. We might draw the conclusion that Jesus' mother had no idea about the angel that told her at the moment of her conception that she was going to be the virgin mother to the son of God. It is doubted in the Gospel story of Mark, he had ever heard of the virgin birth.

The virgin birth is introduced into the Christian tradition in the 80s only in Matthew's gospel. So you have to ask, why would Matthew build it into his gospel? Matthew takes a non-Jewish idea of the virgin birth and incorporates it into the very beginning of his story. He tries to ground it in the Old Testament scriptures. He finds a reference in Isaiah 7:14, "Behold a virgin will conceive and break forth a child and his name will be called Emanuel." He quotes the Old Testament in Greek, not Hebrew. According to Westar, if you check the Hebrew translation, the word virgin is not in it. The Hebrew word for virgin is *almah*, which is a young woman or maiden. It doesn't say behold a woman will conceive. It says behold a woman is with child. It doesn't say she is a virgin. So Matthew misquotes the Isaiah text. The question is did he do it deliberately, or was it just lost in the translation? Or did he find a biblical text that supported his story. No one knows. The bottom line is the story is vague and built on a text that could have been a mistranslation based on centuries before Jesus was born.

So in the Gospel of Matthew, why would he introduce the virgin birth? Scholars say the Jesus movement was under attack during that time. Critics were scrutinizing the movement with all kinds of innuendos about Jesus and his origins. For example in the Gospel of Mark, in Chapter 6:3, when Jesus preached at a synagogue in Nazareth. It must have been impressive because others asked where does this man get all of this learning? It is cited that someone in the crowd said, is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary? At the time Mark was written, Jesus' father Joseph had never been written into the Gospel. Jesus is the carpenter. So if you were to call a man the son of a woman, it is a way of casting doubts on his maternity. It is a way of saying, on one knows who the father is. It was inferred that he was probably ill

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legitimate. Maybe that is why Matthew wrote that an angel spoke to Joseph and said this child is holy, take Mary to be your wife.

You may be saying, why is she rambling on about this? What is her point? Who cares about New Testament bible quotes? I believe it is important because religious literacy is important. As far as I know we aren't moving. We live right here, smack dab in the Bible belt. Most of the people we know take the bible literally, out of context, and without any awareness of the historical timing or translations. The virgin birth is a great example of a story that can't be taken literally and the New Testament is filled with contradictions, errors, and stories, just like this one. Traditional Christianity shapes who we are and the culture we are defined by. I want you three to take this research further – maybe not today or the next 10 years but way out in your future, 25-30 years from now when you are my age. I don't want you to lose it. That is my point.

I believe the purpose of the Christian faith or any spiritual belief system is to call us into the fullness of life: to be all that we can be. It is to give life and have it more abundantly. I believe a worthy purpose is to **peel back the Christian belief system to understand its own message** - a message of love, acceptance, non-judgment, and peace. I believe we can develop our message of inspiration based on where we are with our spiritual evolution. We can inspire others to be accepting of all belief systems not just Christianity. Only with that message, will there be more tolerance, more hope, and more peace in the world! That is the most worthy cause we can have for future generations.

I love you more than all the inspirational messages that I can construct in my mind from here until my eternity - Love Mom!