

A Reflection on Jesus' Birth

The manger and everyone who came to it in the gospel stories were placed there with hindsight by the gospel writers.

At the birth of any child no one knows what will happen for or to this newly hatched person, how this little one will turn out.

Parents may hope, chance may bless,
many may care, or few, or very few, or none at all.
But no one knows what this child will become.

So the stories about Jesus' birth told in Matthew and Luke, were created by the writers of these texts with hindsight more than fifty years after his death.



Who did the writers of these stories know?
Fifty years too late to have met Jesus himself?
Too late, even, to have met those who knew him?

The writers are least likely to have met Jesus himself;
less likely to have met his friends;
most likely to have met those who knew others
who had been alive with him.
So any memories were third-hand at best,
coming from among the scattered survivors
of the Roman destruction of Galilee and Jerusalem from 66-74CE.

Everyone knew his origins, how he was born a poor peasant.
Yet he had made rich the lives of so many
even as they continued to live amidst poverty and defeat.

The details of his birth no one knew.
Yet still he had become known and was a blessing to those who knew him.



We may not even know his mother's birth-name for him.
For the name his friends called him described what had happened for him
and what he had become for them and for others.

The name we know, untranslated in the gospels,
is in its Latinised Greek form, 'Jesus' or 'Jesu'.

In Aramaic, his mother's native-tongue,
this name, 'Jeshuah' or 'Jehoshuah', has two roots
both meaning 'rescued', 'rescuing', 'rescuer',
but one root combines this with a hint of 'JHWH'
(an English approximation of the four Hebrew letters for the sacred name for God
that Jews, for reverence, never speak).

How might we translate this name 'Jesus' today?
That depends on how we think of him at this moment,
 on whether we understood how he experienced God,
 on whether we have experience of that God,
 on whether 'rescuing' is something we know and experience . . .

If we had happened upon Jesus or his friends before his death
and saw what they were making of their lives even in dire straights
under the routine brutality of Roman occupied Galilee
then we might think of him and his friends as 'Rescued' or 'Rescuing'
(or to reflect the divine hint in Aramaic, 'G[od]rescued' or 'G[od]rescuing'),
and his friends might sometimes have named him their 'Grescuer'.

We might come to know how his name describes what happened for him:
 rescued (by God perhaps) from a most unpromising start
 and continuing life situation.

Or we might come to know how his name describes what he did along with others:
 rescuing (with God perhaps).

Or we might appreciate how others may have regarded him as their
 rescuer (with God's help perhaps).



The gospel writers have Jesus ask his friends:
"Who am I? What is my name? Who do you say that I am?"
The writers have his male friends reply with names of prophets, and even Messiah!
But had we been there, the women may have told a different tale.

One woman who worked with Jesus before his death might say to him:
 "We know you as 'Rescued', 'Grescued', 'Godrescued'.
 For you were destitute like us, yet found richness in daily living;
 you lived in darkness, but discovered brightness;
 you were sleep, but were awakened;
 you were crippled, but learnt to stand, to walk, to leap, to dance.
 This happened for you,
 from a power within you that grew,
 a power that was an unexpected gift,
 a gift from the One you learned to call 'Abba',
 your Mother, your Father, the Parent of all the living,
 One as close to you as every breath you take."

Another woman friend might say from experience:

“We know you as ‘Rescuing’, ‘Grescuing’, ‘Godrescuing’.
For, like you, we existed in abject destitution
and you helped us find richness in daily living;
you brightened the surrounding darkness and we began to see;
we were fast asleep and you wakened us;
we were crippled and you taught us to stand, to walk, to leap, to dance.
This happened for you and for us together,
from a power within you and within each of us,
a power that emerged and grew within each and among us all,
a power we had not known, but which came as an unexpected gift,
a gift from the One you taught us to name ‘Abwoon’,
our Mother, our Father, the Parent of all the living,
One as close to us as every breath we take.”

And another woman, from among those who had not known Jesus
but had learnt of him from others after his cruel death might say:

“Though we never knew him, we think of him
as the first ‘Rescuer’, ‘Grescuer’, ‘Godrescuer’.
For like him and you, his friends, we existed in destitution.
And you, his friends, rescued and rescuing, Grescued and Grescuing,
Godrescued and Godrescuing, welcomed us into your homes as family.
You helped us find richness in being alive even in dire straits.
We were surrounded by darkness and you taught us to see.
We were fast asleep and you helped us awaken.
We were crippled and you taught us to stand, to walk, to leap, to dance.
This happened for us in the small communities of companions,
you, our new friends who remembered him
as ‘Rescued’, ‘Grescued’, ‘Godrescued’,
as ‘Rescuing’, ‘Grescuing’, ‘Godrescuing’;
and you yourselves had become these names,
from the power within each and within communities,
a power that emerges and grows and sustains,
a power once unknown, that came as unexpected unearned gift,
a gift from the One we now know and call ‘Emmanuel’, ‘God-with-us’,
‘our Father’, our Mother’, ‘the One Parent of all the living’.
who is as close to us as every breath we take.”



But even if his mother had named him ‘Grescued’ at his birth,
she could have so named him only in hope.

She could not have foretold the outcome of a life born into such poverty.

That is why scholars who have studied first century story patterns of the births of
emperors and kings and gods say that gospel writers used these patterns as templates
for the stories they created about Jesus’s birth . . .

