

**The Nativity of Jesus**  
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One of my favorite Christmas movies is “Love Actually”. If you haven’t seen it then the barebones outline is that the movie is set in London just before Christmas and delves into different aspects of love through ten separate stories which involve a wide variety of people, all of whom turn out to be connected to each other in some way. There’s humor, compassion, pathos, sadness, joy – it’s a rich mixture.

One of my favorite scenes is when the English Prime Minister, played by Hugh Grant, visits his sister, played by Emma Thompson, just before she takes her children to the local Christmas pageant. One of them comes out in a lobster costume, and is asked by Grant: “who are you playing in the pageant?” She replies “lobster #2”. And the Prime Minister muses “Gosh! I didn’t know there were lobsters present at the birth of Jesus!” And the young girl – who clearly knows everything – replies “Well DUH!”

So who WAS present at the birth of Jesus? Luke and Matthew are the principal storytellers in that regard, and they give us a fascinating list: Mary (“well, DUH!”), assorted animals, Joseph, Joseph’s family (remember that they went to Bethlehem because that’s where he was from?), shepherds, several (many?) wise figures from the East – how many? We don’t know – there were three gifts, but that doesn’t mean there were only (or even) three gift-bearers. And we should add angels (a Greek word meaning “Messengers”) and the heavenly host as a sort of “in-between” category – even if Luke doesn’t tell us that they were present their role is enough to include them in the list of those gathered around the manger.

Another interesting question is this: who WASN’T present at the birth of Jesus? No inn-keeper – because there was no inn. The word “inn” is actually a poor choice to translate the Greek word

*“Kataluma”*. A more accurate translation would be “guest room”, or “space for guests”. And most scholars believe that – like many in the Bethlehem area – this dwelling place was actually a cave – very early Christian tradition supports this. So the “stable” would have been either a lower area of the cave, or a separate ‘platform’ from the living area. For 1st Century peasants birth in a “stable” with the animals was actually the preferred place.

Who else wasn’t there? Matthew says “Herod” – Herod the Great, the King of Israel; Herod the Roman puppet-king– though he really, really wanted to be there! Nor was there any representative of Herod – no court member, no local official.

Nor was there any representative of the Empire, no local military official.

Those two lists – the “present” and the “absent” tell us a lot. First, the “present” list:

We have a family affair – this is a tight group, as were all 1st Century families. Then there were the shepherds – 1st Century night security. A shepherd’s role was to corral wayward sheep – which was most of them! Sheep can be very stubborn and require constant guidance and oversight or they “wander off the reservation”.

Then the wise figures from the east, AKA “the rest of the world.” They bring gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold is a gift made to a king; frankincense a gift that, when burned, was believed to carry one’s prayers up to heaven; and myrrh was, interestingly, used to as an embalming spice. It’s not difficult to see how these gifts prefigured Jesus’ role as the new metaphor for kingship, the new vehicle for prayer, and through his death and resurrection, the new metaphor for salvation.

Then there were the animals – let’s not forget them! There was a diversity of creation at Jesus’ birth!

Lastly, there was a star – from the east, remember?!

In other words, all creation is present at this moment – human and animal, Jewish and non-Jewish, local or distant. And specific parts of that creation are identified: the poor, the wise, the animals. And all of them led by a star – led by the light.

The exceptions – the ‘absent’ – are also notable for the parts of creation they represent: no members of the local elites: no politicians (!), no representatives of the occupiers, the Romans; no members of the military establishment. The simple message in their absence is that Jesus’ birth didn’t matter to those who thought they had everything, who didn’t worry – and probably didn’t care – about those who lived in poverty “beneath” them – unless, of course his birth threatened that lifestyle.

To everyone else, Matthew and Luke tell us, Jesus’ birth mattered – and matters – and especially to those who are poor, who are oppressed, who are used by others, who are peaceful, and those who through deep wisdom understand what such a presence meant for the world. Jesus’ birth mattered to them as a sign and symbol of an earth-centered, human-centered compassion that came from God: they were all in some way led by a star, by a light, to The Light which, the Gospel of John reminds us, was – and is – “[from] the beginning”. That “Beginning Light” is in all things, and it has birthed all things, and especially the One born in Bethlehem, who is “the light of all people. Th[at] light shines in the darkness, and the darkness [cannot] overcome it.” So the next/last question is this: who in our day, continues to come to that particular manger? Who is drawn by the Light, who is open to the meaning of the story – or, to put it more personally, are we present? Are we present and willing to enter into an exploration of the “true meaning of Christmas”?

As Marcus Borg has observed, the questions that some seem to obsess over aren't really all that important: "whether Jesus was born of a virgin, or whether there was an empire-wide census that took Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, or whether there was a special star leading wise men from the East."

They are all parts of a bigger story. In themselves they distract. But when they come together, they force us to see that bigger picture, and then our questions change, and we are drawn into the heart of the matter. Those new questions include these: "Is Jesus the light of the world? Is he the true Lord? Is what happened in him 'of God'?" Answering these questions lays claim to our whole lives.

Tonight that claim is made anew.

Amen.