

The Two Messiahs

Mark 1:1-8

In a world that chronically complains about “fake news,” to utter the word, “myth,” isn’t likely to lend credibility to any sermon or topic of conversation. Myth, it would seem, is just a synonym for “fake” or “false.” To claim something is a myth, by definition, conveys the belief that it is made up, purely invented by someone, lacking proof or veracity. If a person or place is considered mythical, it is to say, the person or place never existed other than in fertile imaginations. It is a human creation which, for all intents and purposes, is nothing other than fake news.

But what if we are mistaken? What if myth isn’t unreal or untrue? Take, for example, our memories. Virtually everything we recall in our memories is in the form of myth. It’s not to say what we remember is false, but it is to say that any recollection we have is interpreted history—a story that takes shape over time due to the meaning we associate with it. Because of the importance of meaning, it’s possible we might even project something into a story that never occurred at the time, but makes sense because it has relevance to the memory.

The fact is, we rarely remember events as we initially experience them; there is a subjective view we own, where certain elements of the moment are included and other things left out or forgotten (this will be evident when more than one person shares the memory). Not every aspect of a given moment is retained, or significant to the memory. We can extrapolate this out to presume that recorded history, itself, is largely mythical. Historians tell their story about the past as they interpret it, and the fact that meaning of any type is derived and carried forth moves the story into the realm of myth.

The late existential psychologist and author, Rollo May, described the nature of myth in his book, *The Cry for Myth*:

A myth is a way of making sense in a senseless world. Myths are narrative patterns that give significance to our existence...

Memory depends mainly upon myth. Some event occurs in our minds, in actuality or in fantasy; we form it in memory, molding it like clay day after day—and soon we have made out of that event a myth. We then keep the myth in memory as a guide to future similar situations...

Myths are like the beams in a house: not exposed to outside view, they are the structure which holds the house together so people can live in it...

“Myth safeguards and enforces morality,” as Malinowski proclaimed, and if there are no myths there will be no morality.¹

So, as May points out, myth is not only the nature and structure of our memories, it is an integral description of how we derive and convey meaning as soulful human beings. Without myths, there would be no sense of meaning or morality.

When we view it in this light, it’s easier then to affirm that Christmas itself is based on myth—that the stories of Jesus’ birth are intentionally mythical in nature for the sake of meaning. This doesn’t make them untrue, only mythical. One could argue that the entire story of Jesus’ life and ministry is composed and conveyed as myth—not as something that wasn’t real or never occurred, but as a source of meaning based in memory. Certainly, there is a lot that went on in Jesus’ life that was never recorded or mentioned; so, what we do have is a life that is portrayed in mythical fashion for a particular reason and purpose.

Calling it myth, however, will not gain much traction with the devout. Why? Because it appears sacrilegious, especially to those who believe the Bible should be read literally as a factual record of history. But I think that

¹ Rollo May, *The Cry for Myth*, Norton, 1991.

view is mistaken. If we're talking about conveying meaning—even using symbolism to enhance the storytelling—then to recognize and embrace the story of Jesus' life as myth is truer to the intent of the Gospel writers.

One of the best examples of this is in the two accounts of Jesus' birth—one in Matthew, the other in Luke—two distinct stories that have little in common. Typically, Christians harmonize these narratives in an attempt to include all elements in the story. So, our Nativity scenes on Christmas Eve take the characters in Luke's version (shepherds with their flocks by night, angels singing "Glory to God in the Highest," with Jesus born in the manger of a stable), and combine them with Matthew's magi from Persia coming to King Herod and then on to Bethlehem to honor the newborn king with gifts of frankincense, myrrh, and gold. Together, that's how we portray the birth of Jesus. Yet, if we were limited to Luke, or if Matthew was our only source, the story would seem incomplete—but only in our minds. By harmonizing the two accounts, we actually do a disservice to each Gospel writer's intent, i.e., to symbolize in Jesus' birth the meaning of Jesus' life and mission, with the themes and emphases that each Gospel writer employed.

Let's say, you never heard the birth stories; in which case, you would likely read each one and conclude: these are the births of two different people—certainly, two different religious traditions—because they share little in common. Matthew's account looks like the legendary birth of a Davidic king, with royal motifs and significance. He was born in Bethlehem, as was David, and living in a house with his parents, much like Samuel found young David in his father Jesse's house. They were from Bethlehem—the city of David—according to Matthew.

Luke's account reads quite differently. It is not about one at the apex of the Judean world, but about one born in poverty and humility, if not hardship and degradation. Yes, there is a Davidic overtone with the presence of Bethlehem shepherds, but these shepherds were not exalted heroes; they represented the lowest of classes in Judea—uneducated, coarse, and wholly untrustworthy. The ironic twist was that the heavenly host would proclaim the divine message of messianic hope to lowly shepherds—an aspect of the story bordering on absurdity. These were not the ones through whom divine messages were told, unless one liked to parlay “fake news!”

Luke wasn't just making this startling reversal of public expectation by symbolically employing the witness of shepherds. He also did it politically. Messiah-figures of this period in Judean history were notoriously militant and violent. It started with the Maccabean revolt (167-164 BCE) and continued into the first century CE with the Zealots and Sicarii. Luke symbolized this history of militant Jewish resistance in Joseph and Mary being forced by the Roman census to leave Nazareth to journey to Bethlehem, for this alluded to an actual historical event, namely, when Judas the Galilean, a militant messianic figure, led a revolt and his rebel army headed to Jerusalem in response to the Roman census in 6 CE. With this background reference, Luke began his story of Jesus of Nazareth as not only the true messianic figure for Israel, he was one whose divine rage against imperial occupation, insurrectionist violence, and social injustice in general would occur without resorting to violent militancy, as did others. The realm of God would not arrive by force!

Finally, another theme of Luke's Gospel is expressed in his portrayal of Mary giving birth to her firstborn in the rustic setting of a manger. This

was to reflect Jesus' proclamation of God's reversal of the fortunes of the poor and disenfranchised, eloquently captured in Mary's Magnificat. Jesus was to be a savior for the poor and forgotten—a mythic theme of Jesus' life echoed throughout Luke's Gospel.

Returning to Matthew's portrayal, his messianic image stood in dramatic contrast to Luke's. Jesus' birth wasn't one characterized by poverty or social humility, but rather glory and honor, as the long-promised one arising from the house of David, a lineage which was the Jewish criterion for authenticity. Matthew went to great length to demonstrate how Jesus's birth was the fulfillment of ancient messianic dreams and prophecies. Even the role of Persian astrologers (the Magi) in Matthew's account symbolized Israel's own story returning from exile in Babylon, made possible when they were freed by the Persian King, Cyrus. For Matthew, Jesus was the long-awaited king of Israel—the messiah who would claim the throne of David.

So, what we have are two different messiahs, portrayed by each Gospel writer according to the meaning they associated with Jesus' life. What we have here is myth-making—memories of Jesus shaped around certain themes—a literary pattern found in each Gospel.

Yet, even more significant than these two messiahs of the Gospels, was another messianic expectation existing throughout the culture and Judean region in the time of Jesus. To explain it, I will quote extensively from a book by biblical scholar, James Tabor, where he writes about an intriguing myth of two messiahs alluded to in the prophets and later in the Dead Sea Scrolls—two messiahs who would herald the end of the age:

Christians and Jews have come to focus on the appearance of a single Messiah. Such was decidedly not the case in the time of Jesus as we have already seen in the Dead Sea Scrolls. In text after text we read about not one but two Messiahs

who are to usher in the Kingdom of God. One is to be a kingly figure of the royal line of David, but at his side will be a priestly figure, also a Messiah, of the lineage of Aaron from the tribe of Levi.

Zechariah, the 6th-century BCE Hebrew prophet, foretold a man called “the Branch” who would bear royal honor and sit on his throne, but Zechariah adds, “There shall be a priest by his throne with peaceful understanding between the two of them” (Zechariah 6:13). Here is a clear picture of the Davidic King and his counselor, the anointed Priest. Zechariah refers in another vision to “two sons of fresh oil” (i.e., “anointed ones” or “messiahs”) who “stand before the Lord of the whole earth.” He likens them in his vision to two “olive branches” that stand before the Menorah, the seven-branched oil lamp that symbolized God’s spirit and presence.

This ideal vision of Two Messiahs became a model for many Jewish groups that were oriented toward apocalyptic thinking in the 2nd to 1st centuries BCE...

Given these deeply rooted hopes and expectations among these messianic Jews, one can scarcely imagine the excitement and fervor that John the Baptizer and Jesus would have stirred as they prepared their next moves in the spring of CE 27. John as a priest from the tribe of Levi and Jesus as a descendent of David from the tribe of Judah must have stirred the hopes of thousands who had come to expect the arrival of the Two Messiahs as a sure sign of the end. Even Herod Antipas soon felt the sting of John the Baptizer’s blistering message of repentance. Christians are prone to imagine a “meek and lowly” Jesus who seldom raised his voice, but the evidence will show that he learned well from his teacher and that like John the Baptizer, Jesus’ radical message divided households and villages and shook the religious and political establishment.²

What we have is evidence that, instead of one messiah, two messiahs were expected to herald the end of the age and the beginning of the reign of God—a royal one from Davidic lineage and in the tribe of Judah, and a priestly one from the tribe of Levi. We also see it in later texts, such as Revelation, where “two witnesses,” “two olive branches,” and “two lampstands” are referenced in chapter 11, picking up on this theme of two messiahs who arise before the close of the age. Evidently, this was a prominent theme and expectation in Judea prior to and following the life of Jesus.

So, not only do we have two different messiahs mythically portrayed by Matthew and Luke—one associated with the poor and marginalized and

² James Tabor, *The Jesus Dynasty*, Simon & Schuster, 2006, pp. 144-145, 148.

one as a royal figure from the lineage of King David—it's quite likely that John the Baptizer and Jesus were inextricably linked as two distinct messiahs—John, as the priestly one hailing from the tribe of Levi and Jesus, as the kingly one, arising out of the Davidic lineage. This would make John more than just the opening act for Jesus; the people who responded to John more than likely followed Jesus as well—with both John and Jesus having equal roles and status as messiahs. Even then, their contemporaneous lives and legacies became intertwined with and shaped by the larger messianic myth within Judaism that provided a sense of hope and meaning for those who were living in the darkness of imperial occupation and the spiritual shadows of human sin. John and Jesus were calling Israel to repentance and to be transformed into the new Israel, who would usher in the realm of God. They lived into that myth and the meaning associated with it and the lasting legacies of their lives was shaped by this ancient messianic dream and hope.

So, what does this mean to us today? It means we reconsider what myth is and how it shapes the story of our own faith. We look to Jesus in all the various meanings and roles in the messianic myths of his time and ours (e.g., the savior of our souls, the healer of our hearts, the great deliverer of our lives, etc.). One myth may speak to us more than another. We take the meanings that we derive from our reading of Scripture and what we've been taught about who Jesus was and what he did, and we do exactly what everyone else has done down through the ages: we create our own myth of meaning associated with this one we call, Savior and Lord. Our own myths about Jesus will be similar in many ways, but different as well. Some of our beliefs will be based on familiar teachings, experiences, and anecdotes,

while others will be derived from remarkably divergent ones, resulting in distinct interpretations and opinions.

That's the nature of myth; that's how we tell the stories of our lives. It carries meaning far beyond our beliefs, dogmas, doctrines, experiences, and memories into a deep well of archetypal themes that shape the human soul more than we can grasp. In the words of Joseph Campbell:

Mythology is not a lie, mythology is poetry, it is metaphorical. It has been said that mythology is the penultimate truth—penultimate because the ultimate cannot be put into words. It is beyond words...Mythology pitches the mind beyond...to what can be known but not told. ³

And that is what makes myth the firstborn child of divine revelation and messianic truth.

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³ Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, Anchor, 1991.