

## The Politics of The Christmas Story

By James Carroll

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The single most important fact about the birth of Jesus, as recounted in the Gospels, is one that receives almost no emphasis in the American festival of Christmas. The child who was born in Bethlehem represented a drastic political challenge to the imperial power of Rome. The nativity story is told to make the point that Rome is the enemy of God, and in Jesus, Rome's day is over.

The Gospel of Matthew builds its nativity narrative around Herod's determination to kill the baby, whom he recognizes as a threat to his own political sway. The Romans were an occupation force in Palestine, and Herod was their puppet-king. To the people of Israel, the Roman occupation, which preceded the birth of Jesus by at least 50 years, was a defilement, and Jewish resistance was steady. (The historian Josephus says that after an uprising in Jerusalem around the time of the birth of Jesus, the Romans crucified 2,000 Jewish rebels.)

Herod was right to feel insecure on his throne. In order to preempt any challenge from the rumored newborn "king of the Jews," Herod murdered "all the male children who were 2 years old or younger." Joseph, warned in a dream, slipped out of Herod's reach with Mary and Jesus. Thus, right from his birth, the child was marked as a political fugitive.

The Gospel of Luke puts an even more political cast on the story. The narrative begins with the decree of Caesar Augustus calling for a world census -- a creation of tax rolls that will tighten the empire's grip on its subject peoples. It was Caesar Augustus who turned the Roman republic into a dictatorship, a power-grab he reinforced by proclaiming himself divine.

His census decree is what requires the journey of Joseph and the pregnant Mary to Bethlehem, but it also defines the context of their child's nativity as one of political resistance. When the angel announces to shepherds that a "savior has been born," as scholars like Richard Horsley point out, those hearing the story would immediately understand that the blasphemous claim by Caesar Augustus to be "savior of the world" was being repudiated.

When Jesus was murdered by Rome as a political criminal -- crucifixion was the way such rebels were executed -- the story's beginning was fulfilled in its end. But for contingent historical reasons (the savage Roman war

against the Jews in the late first century, the gradual domination of the Jesus movement by Gentiles, the conversion of Constantine in the early fourth century) the Christian memory deemphasized the anti-Roman character of the Jesus story. Eventually, Roman imperialism would be sanctified by the church, with Jews replacing Romans as the main antagonists of Jesus, as if he were not Jewish himself. (Thus, Herod is remembered more for being part-Jewish than for being a Roman puppet.) In modern times, religion and politics began to be understood as occupying separate spheres, and the nativity story became spiritualized and sentimentalized, losing its political edge altogether. "Peace" replaced resistance as the main motif. The baby Jesus was universalized, removed from his decidedly Jewish context, and the narrative's explicit critiques of imperial dominance and of wealth were blunted.

This is how it came to be that Christmas in America has turned the nativity of Jesus on its head. No surprise there, for if the story were told today with Roman imperialism at its center, questions might arise about America's new self-understanding as an imperial power. A story of Jesus born into a land oppressed by a hated military occupation might prompt an examination of the American occupation of Iraq. A story of Jesus come decidedly to the poor might cast a pall over the festival of consumption. A story of the Jewishness of Jesus might undercut the Christian theology of replacement.

Today the Roman empire is recalled mainly as a force for good -- those roads, language, laws, civic magnificence, "order" everywhere. The United States of America also understands itself as acting in the world with good intentions, aiming at order. "New world order," as George H.W. Bush put it.

That we have this in common with Rome is caught by the Latin motto that appears just below the engraved pyramid on each American dollar bill, "Novus Ordo Seclorum." But, as Iraq reminds us, such "order" comes at a cost, far more than a dollar. The price is always paid in blood and suffering by unseen "nobodies" at the bottom of the imperial pyramid. It is their story, for once, that is being told this week. James Carroll's column appears regularly in the Globe.