



STATEMENT DC-337

## VIEWPOINT

### Playing the Christmas Game with a Marked Deck

by Robert H. Stein

Americans have traditionally been advocates of fair play. There is a sense of outrage when one learns that a race has been fixed, a ball game has been deliberately lost, or someone has used marked cards or loaded dice in a game. We want people to be treated fairly and honestly apart from issues of race, religion, sex, or nationality. Affirmative action is an emotionally charged issue today precisely because both parties in the debate believe their side stands for equal opportunity. We want "fairness," and we intensely dislike any kind of deception.

In recent Christmas seasons I have encountered a kind of deception that has been frustrating. In several articles concerning Christmas, scholars have come to the conclusion that the Christmas story is mostly "mythical" and "nonhistorical." These two terms tend to be used interchangeably, although they actually refer to two different things. The former refers to the judgment of a literary form; the latter to a judgment of whether or not something happened in history. Since the Christmas accounts in the Bible may or may not be historical, a historical judgment concerning these accounts is therefore appropriate. In fact, such judgment is necessary. The use of "myth," however, to describe these accounts is incorrect. As a literary form the Christmas stories are not myths; they are historical narratives. The use of the term "myth" to describe these stories confuses a judgment concerning literary form with a judgment concerning their historicity.

In these articles we are led to believe that scholars state their conclusions based on "objective historical" research involving careful and exacting historical, literary, archaeological, sociological, and anthropological investigation. The conclusions they have arrived at after such investigation are that there was no angelic visit to Mary, Jesus was not born of a virgin, no angelic host was present on the night of His birth, no wise men visited Him from the East, and so on.

What is never stated, however, is that this "objective historical" research involves a particular methodology. This methodology is technically called "the historical critical method" and is based on presuppositions, such as the principle of analogy, that predetermine certain results before the investigation ever begins.

The researcher has played with a marked deck of cards from the very beginning. As a result, many of his or her conclusions are not the result of historical, literary, sociological, or archaeological analysis at all. Rather, they were controlled and decided from the start. In fact, these conclusions were actually determined before the investigation ever began! Using the analogy of baseball, the researcher has already determined the final score before the game

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began and then manipulated the play to arrive at that score. He or she has decided the order of finish in a race and then told the participants they must finish in this order. In short, the presuppositions of the method predetermined the results that were "objectively" obtained.

To grasp how this can happen requires an understanding of what these scholars mean when they refer to the "historical critical method." Although some might define this expression differently, the basic definition of this method has traditionally been as follows:

We are firmly convinced that what happens in space and time is subject to the general laws of motion, and that in this sense, as an interruption of the order of Nature, there can be no such things as "miracles." (Adolf Harnack, *What Is Christianity?* [New York: Putnam, 1901], 28-29.)

Or

The historical method includes the presuppositions that history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect....This closedness means that the continuum of historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural, transcendent powers and that therefore there is no "miracle" in this sense of the word. Such a miracle would be an event whose cause did not lie with history....It is in accordance with such a method as this that the science of history goes to work on all historical documents. And there cannot be any exceptions in the case of biblical texts if the latter are at all to be understood historically. (Rudolf Bultman, *Existence and Faith* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1961], 191-92.)

Although there is a great deal of discussion today about the historical critical method, in practice miracles are still seen as antithetical to historical research. Therefore, it is evident that, if one works under this historical methodology, certain conclusions are predetermined before the investigation actually begins.

A discussion of the Christmas story with scholars using this methodology might go something like this:

*Questioner:* I hear that you are investigating the Christmas story in the Bible.

*Scholar:* Yes, I plan to investigate the biblical accounts using the latest tools available to us.

*Questioner:* Do you have any preconceived results in mind?

*Scholar:* No, I do not think one should predetermine the results of historical research. One should have an open mind. It is bad research to work with an agenda. I realize that we all have a tendency to have an agenda, but I personally believe that we should resist any attempt to make the results of historical critical research fit our own desires or beliefs.

*Questioner:* Then I assume that you are open to the possibility that Jesus was truly born of a virgin.

*Scholar:* No, I never said that.

*Questioner:* But I thought you said one should never predetermine the results of research.

*Scholar:* What I meant was that you should never predetermine the results of historical critical research

*Questioner:* What is the difference?

*Scholar:* Oh, the difference is very significant. Historical critical research assumes that we live in a closed continuum of space and time. This means that miracles are excluded as a possibility.

*Questioner:* Then you have already predetermined certain results. After all, you have excluded the possibility of Mary having conceived as a virgin.

*Scholar:* Yes, that's true.

*Questioner:* Then what are you seeking to investigate?

*Scholar:* Well, one of the big issues would be to seek to understand how the story of the Virgin Birth originated.

*Questioner:* But it could not have originated through an actual virgin birth?

*Scholar:* That's right. It couldn't have.

*Questioner:* Oh!

It is not surprising that those using this methodology conclude that Jesus was not born of a virgin. Their methodology has predetermined this. In the process, they often come up with interesting information about the time and place of Jesus' birth. But is it not deceitful, when the "results" of such investigations are published, that no thing is said about the fact that these results were predetermined long before the investigation ever began? Since most readers are not aware that the presuppositions brought to the investigation predetermined its outcome, there is deceitfulness at work in all this.

It is tragic that many people who read these articles believe the denial of the Virgin Birth and other miracles found in them is the result of careful investigation of the biblical accounts. In fact, the denial of this miracle has preceded any investigation and actually predetermined many of the results of the investigation.

I would like to suggest that henceforth at the very beginning of any such article that the author state his or her presuppositions concerning historical investigation. Is he or she open to the supernatural or closed? An author might state at the very beginning, "As a writer, I have taken a stand in which I believe that God, if he/she exists, cannot or does not intervene in the closed continuum of time and space in which we live. My method in studying the biblical texts does not allow room for the supernatural. Therefore, I presuppose before any investigation of the Christmas story that Jesus was not born of a virgin. Here, then, are the results of my investigation."

Needless to say, most readers would treat such an article about the Christmas "myth" quite differently.

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