

A Modern Nativity

by Miguel Barker-Valdez | Jan 3, 2018 | Charity, Featured, Jesus, Jesus Christ, New Testament, Savior, scripture | 0 comments



Today is the tenth day of Christmas(1)

Most of the West is familiar with the story of Jesus of Nazareth's birth narrative (the *Nativity*) which is a mixture of the Gospels of Luke and Mathew. This narrative follows Joseph and the very pregnant Mary as they travel from Bethlehem to Nazareth. When they get there – perhaps because of poor planning, or the haste with which they had to leave Nazareth – they are told there is “*no room in the inn.*” Desperate for shelter, the family ends up lodging in a barn. It is here that Jesus is born. His crib is a feeding trough for animals. Shepherds visit. Wealthy sages from the East(2) follow a new star and visit Jesus as a boy. Not too long after, Joseph is instructed in a dream to flee for Egypt because Herod is looking to kill the boy Jesus. The family returns when Herod is dead and all is safe for the family's return.

Swaddling clothes. A barn. Shepherds. Wealthy sages. A long trip to Bethlehem. A quick flight to Egypt. A return to Nazareth.

The power of any tradition's holy writings is not in their historicity, but rather the meaning of the stories which are being told. Think of Jesus of Nazareth's “Parable of the Good Samaritan”: The Good Samaritan was not an historical figure, but that's not the point – it teaches several important lessons. One lesson being how people of faith sometimes use their religion as an excuse not to

help those who are suffering. Although these stories can be told within their historical context (wrapping a child in swaddling clothes; why a Levitical Priest would walk past a Jewish man who had been beaten while a despised Samaritan stops to help) to better understand them, the greatness of scripture is the flexibility with which these stories bring meaning throughout the centuries.

Sometimes the flexibility can be used by the powerful to justify the terrible treatment of others – such is the case in justification of Black slavery in the USA. But the stories are equally flexible and more powerful when viewed through the lens of the poor and marginalized. Think of Martin Luther King Jr. and his empowering reinterpretation of Biblical verses – verses usually used to subjugate Black people. Think of Nat Turner (a contemporary of the Mormon prophet, Joseph Smith) and Turner's subversive reinterpretations of the Bible verses traditionally used by whites to justify slavery(3). We also find subversive reinterpretations of the racist verses in Mormon scripture *The Book of Mormon* regarding the First Nation peoples of the Americas.

Before going further, the term *privilege* and specifically *white privilege* must be explained. The easiest way for me to understand it, and the most effective way I've found to explain privilege to religious people are the following:

1. Privilege is something that benefits you but is not something you worked for. Examples may include:

Being born with no mental disabilities; being born with complete use of physical capabilities; being white; being born Christian in the USA; being born into a wealthy family; growing up in a two-parent home.

2. Think of a track race where not everyone has the same starting line. Some runners are privileged, and their starting line is a yard ahead of those who don't have the same privileges. The race starts. Everyone is working really hard, but those who started behind the privileged must run a little bit harder to catch up with the privileged.

3. Replace the word *privilege* with the word *blessing(s)*. Ask yourself, "*What blessings do I have?*" Most likely what will come to mind are things which you have which have benefited you, but are not things you worked to receive(4).

4. It is not either/or. Just because you have benefited from your privilege does not mean you did not also work hard to get where you are. I was raised white in a two-parent home. I graduated from one of the top 10 Physician Assistant Schools in the country. I had to work hard. My hard work does not negate my white privilege, nor does my white privilege negate my hard work and sacrifice.

5. Privilege is not an evil thing in and of itself. The problem is when you don't acknowledge your privilege(s) and don't use it as leverage to help those who do not have the same privilege(s). This can be as simple as helping someone in a wheel chair and as difficult as acknowledging one's white privilege and leveraging that privilege to help those who have been racialized.

Privilege was taught to me quite explicitly and unexpectedly earlier this week. I was chatting with a friend of mine about his new brother-in-law who was born deaf. The brother would talk about how one time he tried to get his deaf brother-in-law's attention by increasing the volume of his

yelling. The sister (who is married to the deaf brother-in-law), simply looked at her brother and said, "He's deaf."

Another time the same friend had forgotten something in his old bedroom, which was the room in which his brother-in-law and sister were staying. He knocked on the door, but his deaf brother-in-law was the only one in there. "I thought, what am I gonna do?" He knocked harder. Then his sister came by and said, "He's deaf." The lesson I learned here was how we don't see our privilege. Many of us who are privileged live in a world where we hold many assumptions about how the world works. Just like my friend would forget that his new brother-in-law could not hear, many of us do the same with the marginalized and those who don't have the same privileges we have.

How can the story of the Nativity be interpreted through the lens of the marginalized and oppressed? How can this story be seen through the eyes of the migrant farm worker, the documented and undocumented immigrant, Black Americans, and refugees?

The way I have seen most theologians interpret the visit from the Eastern Sages who come to visit the child Jesus and give him gifts of frankincense, gold and myrrh, is that those expensive gifts represented Jesus' Kingship and rightful place as King of the Jews, and the oils represented the anointing of Jesus' body after His eventual death for treason. The story tells us that The Sages first visit Herod and Herod is intrigued by the Sages' search for the young "*King of the Jews*," and Herod asks for the Sages to return and see him after they have found the boy. After the visit to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, the Sages are told in a dream to not return to Herod. Joseph is then told in a dream to flee to Egypt as Herod has declared genocide upon all children in Bethlehem and some of its surrounding areas.

How can the wealthy sages' visit, incongruous gifts, warning in a dream, and Joseph's dream be subversively reinterpreted through a very specific marginalized group of people in the USA? How can these details and others in the Nativity be interpreted specifically through the eyes of the *migrant farm worker*?

Bethlehem & Egypt

The Gospel of Luke tells us that due to a Roman governmental policy, Joseph and the pregnant Mary were to travel from their town of Nazareth to Bethlehem for a census. Joseph and Mary had no choice; they were compelled to leave home and family. What purpose do censuses serve? To monitor military service and taxation.

The gospel of Luke later writes that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus experienced a second mandated voyage. This time they were forced to flee to Egypt to avoid a king's infanticidal rampage. Driven first from their home, due to economical reasons, and then from their country, for their own safety, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus became immigrants by force, not by choice.

Like the holy family, most migrant farm workers aren't in the USA because they choose to be. They may have been driven out due to poverty, education, or government corruption. In Mexico there is a large disparity between the rich and the poor; the educated and the uneducated. There are many causes for this disparity; some have been created by the USA, and some have been created by corruption within Mexico's government. Regardless of the origin, the result is the same: government policies have caused many Mexicans to risk their lives to become immigrants, distancing themselves from family and from home.

"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered...He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child."(Luke 2:1, 5).

"Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph^W got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod...and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under,...When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph^W got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth." (Luke 2:13-16, 19-23)

The Barn

Luke records that Jesus was born in a barn with animals and his crib was a feeding trough for animals.

I live in the Rogue Valley of Southern Oregon. We have many pear orchards, many vineyards, and now a handful of large cannabis farms. Earlier this year I started contacting a group (UNETE) here in the Rogue Valley which advocates for the rights of migrant farm workers and immigrants. As UNETE taught me more and more, I was truly shocked at the treatment of those who pick our produce. Many families live in small houses; I would call them shacks. Many of the houses have no indoor plumbing but instead share a communal outhouse stationed in the middle of the plaza of houses. Many have cracks in the walls and poor ventilation. Some barns – literally barns – have been converted into large homes which house single male migrant workers. Once again, cracks in walls which are often sealed by the migrant workers with duck tape and cardboard, windows with out glass which present problems for the migrant farm worker and seasonal farm worker(5). I spoke with a friend from Kentucky who has been working with the migrant and seasonal farm workers in his state for years; the main crop being tobacco. It is dangerous work. He told me that many literally sleep in a barn. Not a barn converted into some terrible semblance of a house, but literally a barn.

In Oregon, the living conditions of migrant farm workers present particular problems. Problems that no white person would tolerate if this was occurring next to their homes or their children's schools. There is only a very small buffer zone between the spraying of pesticides and herbicides and where the migrant farm workers live. The EPA has rules which will increase this buffer zone, but Oregon OSHA so far is refusing to adopt them, putting migrant families at risk. These workers and their families are to be in their homes when the sprayings occur. Homes lacking windows

which cannot be closed; homes with cracks; homes that don't protect these families very well from the elements, let alone pesticides and herbicides which are sprayed closely to their houses.

"And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." (Luke 2:7)

Shepherds

The first to see Jesus were the social outcasts, the shepherds. It was not the rich, powerful and privileged. Aristotle said this of shepherds:

"the laziest are shepherds, who lead an idle life, and get their subsistence without trouble from tame animals; their flocks wandering from place to place in search of pasture, they are compelled to follow them, cultivating a sort of living farm."

Like the shepherds of old, Mexicans and other Latinos have often been cast as lazy and troublesome. It has been said that *"stereotypically, Mexicans were viewed as lazy compared to European or American workers (6)."* Lazy and having no power.

Subversively, In Mary's Song of Praise, called the Magnificat, the following is recorded:

*He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:51-53)*

Jesus was for all, but especially for the marginalized, the poor, the hungry, the despised. His life was one of social and religious subversiveness. A subversiveness that ended in Jesus' death as a traitor of Rome.

"So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them." (Luke 2:16-18)

The Rich Sages of the East

Luke records that after the poor and marginalized shepherds had visited, Jesus' family was then visited by men of privilege. They were not Jews, but were from the East. They had an education which allowed them to understand the stars and constellations. They had material wealth. Because of these privileges, they are out of place in the Nativity. Most understand Luke's placement of the non-Jewish peoples in his narrative as showing the universality of Jesus of Nazareth's message. Most scholars have focused on the symbolism of the three gifts presented to Jesus – gifts of the rich and for the rich. Gifts that are useless for the poor. Not gifts for a family who lives in the small insignificant town of Nazareth.

But for our story, the significance of the gold, myrrh, and frankincense is not symbolic of Jesus as King of the Jews and the later embalment of his dead body. For our reading, these gifts represented wealth and privilege. They signify the distance, economically, socially, and at times geographically between the privileged and the marginalized. What working class person would have the kind of privilege which would allow for the time to follow a star from a distant place? Not the poor, but the privileged. But there is more to be told by the social subversiveness of the text.

The Sages had access to Herod. They had access to powerful people. And at the moment which could have ended in the infanticide of Jesus, they chose not to follow Herod's request. They did not return to Herod to tell him of Jesus.

They leveraged their privilege. They risked possible social status and power to keep Jesus and his family safe. They used their wealth, education, and status to protect those who could not protect themselves.

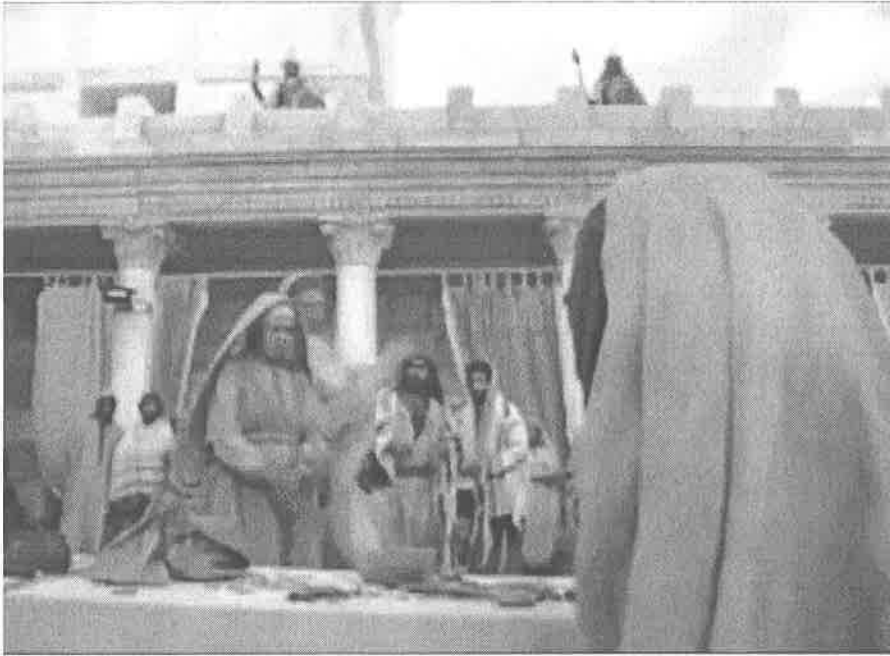
Migrant farm workers do not have their own voice within the realm of the politically connected and the wealthy and powerful. They do not need anglo-Americans who carry a *White Savior Complex*. Their voices need to be lifted. Their stories need to be told. Their living conditions need to be brought to the attention of the privileged. Spaces which are not usually occupied by the migrant farm worker need to be made safe by the privileged. In rare cases where the migrant farm worker can not occupy a specific space, such as the seats of government, the privileged must speak up for the marginalized, the radicalized, the poor, the migrant farm worker.

"On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road." (Luke 2:11,12)

The stories we have of Jesus of Nazareth are not stories of maintaining political and religious order for the powerful and privileged; His life was one of subversiveness, of healing. His ministry was to the marginalized. Right before His execution we are told this of Jesus:

"And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables." (John 2:15)

How are we leveraging our privilege? What tables of privilege are we overturning?



Notes

Special thanks goes to my sister, Maygan, for helping with the editing of this essay and for being a critical sounding board, as I try to get my thoughts together. She is, by far, the smartest out of the five Barker siblings.

1. For those who are non-religious and for those who do not follow a liturgical calendar as part of their Christian worship, The Christmas Season is the time, starting with Black Friday, and ending on Christmas Day. However the liturgical calendar gives a different story. The season leading up to Christmas is actually The Season of Advent. Think of the Advent Calendars that many of us have. You open a door on each day leading up to Christmas, and sometimes there's even a chocolate behind the door; we had a Star Wars one last year. So now we all know why those are called Advent Calendars. The commercial companies, selling you all types of toys and jewelry, really don't push that idea, do they?

Now The Christmas Season actually starts at the end of Christmas Eve and it goes for 12 days.

Does *The Twelve Days of Christmas* now suddenly make sense? So today, according to the song (which by the way I find super annoying) our true loves are supposed to give us "ten lords a-leaping," which is just weird.

2. Traditionally, and in the Christian Bible, they have been called Wisemen and the traditional idea that there were three (and not two, or four or five...) has a long tradition.

3. *"Theology must answer theology. Speak you of liberty? Speak you of the yoke of bondage? How then, country magistrate, do you answer this? Ephesians Six, Five: Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ. Or this, my hayseed colleague, how answer you this? One Peter, Two, Eighteen: Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear: not only to the good and gentle, but also to the forward. There friend - there - is not that divine sanction for the bondage of which you rave and prattle?"* To read more about Nat Turner's religious views, click [here](#).

4. In the past, Mormonism has complicated this idea with the teaching that where one is in life is dependent upon one's valiancy in the pre-earth life. This is still believed by some. In fact, the other day, one of my tías told me I must have been valiant in my premarital life, based upon on all the privileges I have in life. At times this theology has been used to explain, in a positive way, why some have disabilities – *"The were so righteous that God knew they could live a life with this disability,"* or in very negative ways, *"Blacks' curse was do to their lack of valiancy in the premarital life."* One LDS scholar pointed out clearly the problem with such theology: *"Outsourcing such problems to the first and third acts is not necessarily the best theological option for Mormons."* [click hear to read more.](#)

5. There is a difference between a migrant farm worker and the seasonal farm worker. The migrant workers moves from place to place following crops. The seasonal worker stays put and works seasonally in an area as the crops dictate.

6. To read about the 2016 controversy regarding Mexican representation in a text book, [click here.](#)

Share This Post! Because Sharing Really is Caring!



Miguel Barker-Valdez

Miguel is a Guatemalan-American Mormon living in the Northwest with his family. He is one of the proprietors of the Rational Faiths blog.

All posts by Miguel Barker-Valdez

Search RationalFaiths

Make a monthly donation

Payment Options (Alma 11:1-19)

Senine : \$5.00 USD - monthly ▼