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Hark! The Herald Angels Didn't Sing

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We are in Advent, but over the transom has come the sobering news that Image Books has just published a book written by the pope, “Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives,” in which he observes that there was neither an ox nor a donkey in the stable where Jesus was born. Nor did a host of angels sing. They spoke.

Is “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing” doomed?

In fact, the news is not so grim. This is not an encyclical; the pope is writing as Joseph Ratzinger. It turns out that he tolerates, even encourages, the presence of lowing animals in the manger. He writes: “In the Gospel there is no reference to animals at this point. But prayerful reflection, reading Old and New Testaments in the light of one another, filled this lacuna at a very early state by pointing to Isaiah 1:3: ‘The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master’s crib, but Israel does not know.’” A few pages later, the pope explains that “Christianity has always understood that the speech of angels is actually song.”

But the clear point of the book — and of the biographical trilogy that this volume completes — is that Roman Catholics should know what the Gospels say about Jesus and stick to it. They should not be distracted by popular myth, or even by historical scholarship.

Evangelical Christianity is supposed to cleave to the text even more exactly. Most evangelicals describe the Bible as literally true. Yet for many, “literally” often means “keep what’s there and add details to make it vivid.”

I am an anthropologist, and in recent years I have been exploring a kind of American evangelical Christianity that seeks to enable its followers to know God intimately. These evangelicals talk about the Bible as if it is literally true, but they also use their imagination to experience the Bible as personally as possible. They talk about getting to know God by having coffee with God, or asking God what shirt they should wear in the morning. A man from Horizon Christian Fellowship in San Diego told me that “the Bible is a love story, and it is written to me.” It is a style of evangelical Christianity with many followers: perhaps a quarter of all Americans.

This freedom to elaborate with your own imagination appalls many other evangelicals. They say

that the Gospels demand that you know who God actually is. As [Albert Mohler](#), president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, explained to me on his radio show, “My first concern is not with the God we are looking for, but the God who is.” He thinks that the imagination drifts quickly away from what he would call truth.

I am no theologian and I do not think that social science can weigh in on the question of who God is or whether God is real. But I think that anthropology offers some insight into why imaginatively enriching a text taken as literally true helps some Christians to hang on to God when they are surrounded by a secular world.

First, this way of knowing God involves what social scientists would call “active learning.” These evangelical churches invite worshipers to enter Scripture with all their senses. Here, for example, Richard Foster, a popular theologian, explains how to “live the experience” of Scripture: “Smell the sea. Hear the lap of water against the shore. See the crowd. Feel the sun on your head and the hunger in your stomach. Taste the salt in the air. Touch the hem of his garment.” To Christian critics of these practices, they are a distortion of the Scripture, because they add to the text more than is actually there — your own memories of a summer by the seaside, the feel of heavy robes. To a social scientist, these practices ask that the learner engage in the most effective kind of learning: hands on and engaged.

Second, these practices make the experience of God personally specific. Vivid, concrete details help people to get caught up in a world that is not the one they see before them — and the more particular the details, the more powerful the involvement. Richly described settings — Narnia, Middle-earth, Hogwarts — become places that people can imagine on their own. Of course someone like J. K. Rowling might be horrified that readers have written tens of thousands of stories that carry on the lives of her characters, just as some evangelicals are horrified by other evangelicals who cozy up to God over a beer and chat with him in their minds. But social science suggests that details like these do make what must be imagined feel more real.

Which position you take depends on whether you are more worried about heresy or atheism. The pope and Albert Mohler are concerned that Christians get God right. They fear that congregants in these experientially oriented churches will imagine God in a way that inadvertently violates Scripture and leads them astray (God might become wholly loving, for example, and not at all judgmental).

The pastors of the more experiential churches are worried that people will not get God — period. They see more people unaffiliated with churches than ever: one-fifth of American adults, a third of all American adults under 30. They use these techniques to help to make God more compelling to people.

The nonobvious point for secular readers is that a commitment to the literal truth of the Bible can be an intensely creative process. It captures your attention. It demands that you work to make the text come alive. For people who want to keep their faith but harbor doubts, or even for people who are merely aware of the doubts of others, that can make all the difference.

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