

Scenes From The Alternative Nativity

by Steve Finan

Joseph seemed perplexed with his bride-to-be, "Tell me again how you got pregnant?" he said.

Mary sighed. She'd been dreading this conversation, but he had to be told, the bump was beginning to show. "As I keep saying, I haven't been unfaithful. Honestly, I haven't."

Joseph was, understandably, still a little sceptical. The "It's God's baby" argument had been a surprise. Most men with erectile dysfunction suffer crises of confidence and to learn that your prospective wife is pregnant, when you've not sewn the seeds yourself, is somewhat disconcerting to say the least.

The news that a charismatic, by all accounts, bloke called Gabriel had "appeared to" his new wife in the night and that she was then expecting a child . . . well, even an angel might be a little suspicious.

But, anyway, there wasn't much time to think about it all as he had to get ready for this ridiculous trip to Bethlehem. Joe was a Nazareth boy and like everyone else in town he was mystified as to why Herod, a man who died four years previously, had decreed that everyone had to travel to their 'ancestral home' for a census.

What good is a census that records where your 'ancestral home' was? Isn't the point of a census to find out where people are now, so they can be counted and, more importantly, taxed? And why did he wait for four years after his death to have this census announced. It was probably an oversight, dead people have other things to think about.

So Joe and Mary set out. On a donkey. It is 80 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, so waiting until a few days before her due date may have seemed reckless. However, with God's baby on board, Joe reckoned that God would provide.

God didn't. When they got to Bethlehem there was no room at the inn. Presumably other people refused to give up their own comfy beds as the concept of Christian charity hadn't been born yet.

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Meanwhile, on a nearby hill, an indeterminate number of shepherds are watching over their flocks of sheep (or goats) when a series of flying men, led by the talkative Gabriel (who may or not have been involved in the impregnation of Mary) appear in the sky.

Understandably impressed by these winged men, the indeterminate number of shepherds are told to get themselves awake because a messiah has been born. The indeterminate number of shepherds, with scant regard for their sheep (or goats), head for town where, seemingly, they tell people on the way they are going to look at a baby. They then look at the baby, then go back to discover what has happened to their sheep (or goats).

There they leave the story, but tea towel sales (for use as headdresses) in countries thousands of miles away and a couple of millennia in the future receive a welcome boost by this

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Meanwhile (or probably several months beforehand) three kings from unnamed Eastern nations see a light in the sky. This light should have, and probably did, give them cause to wonder. If it was a star, then to remain constantly shining in the east while all the other stars rotated around the sky, should have been their first clue that something was up. If it was a comet, again a celestial body not known for standing still in the sky, then they really should, as responsible rulers of nations, applied a somewhat more analytical eye.

However, what they decide to do is to leave their kingdoms, all on their own without family, retainers, armies or servants, and wander about the middle east carrying valuable items.

And what valuable items are these: Gold speaks for itself. Frankincense is smelly stuff and probably not a bad idea as babies can stink a bit. Myrrh, however, is an unguent and did not (to no-

one's surprise) start a rash of myrrh-giving at other births. If applied to the baby it may have started a different manner of rash though.

The kings were also not to know that roughly 1974 years after their trek a small boy in a Scottish school morning assembly would be singing a Christmas carol composed in their honour.

The carol's starting line was "We Three Kings Of Orient Are", which was faithfully uttered by the aforementioned Scottish boy. However, with a headmaster whose two mood settings were 'Angry' and 'Violently Angry', standing behind the unaware young pupil, it was probably unwise of him to sing the next line as "Selling ladies underwear" and the third as "How fantastic, no elastic".

This served, however, as an opportunity for the angry headmaster to introduce the now crestfallen boy to the delights of the tawse, a thick leather strap used for administering corporal punishment to upheld palms.

However, that was all in the future.

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Back in Bethlehem, the kings arrive, possibly after the shepherds because it seems they got lost along the way (the still-not-explained 'star' hanging over the birthing stable presumably having temporarily gone out) stopped off in Jerusalem to tell the authorities that a rival king of the surrounding tribes had been born. The Jerusalem city fathers, led by the incumbent king, a fellow named Herod, are displeased. Herod would be especially displeased as his date of death is stubbornly still recorded as having been four years previous to the birth of the new king.

Undeterred still by the small detail of having died, Herod declares all male children in Bethlehem are to be murdered. This is a particularly harsh decision (even for a man dead some four years) as Joe, Mary and the newborn, having fulfilled their duty to go to Bethlehem to be counted for no useful reason, would probably have quickly donkeyed themselves back to Nazareth, having been warned by the loose-mouthed and geographically confused three kings.

No doubt there were several complaints from Bethlehem new parents over this oversight.

But wait! It seems that the still suspicious Joe, the new mother Mary and the infant, known as Jesus (Jeezy to his friends) decide that their best course of action is instead to high-tail it to Egypt. The fate of the donkey isn't mentioned. This, again, seems an odd decision, although it is possible the angel chap, who seems big on the grand strategy of future overlordship of the human race, but somewhat weak on immediate practical planning, has again been giving advice. Joe would no doubt have been somewhat tired of his interventions by now.

So they emigrate to Egypt. Wait about a bit until the four-years-dead Herod dies again (presumably for good this time) and a new king, confusingly also named Herod, decides that he doesn't care about rivals for his title and everyone can come back, it was all just a big misunderstanding.

Misunderstanding of the whole thing has been going on ever since.

