

Christmas Creatures

“Hello, what are doing, Michael?” his father asked.

“Hi, Dad,” replied Michael. “Looking at all these Christmas cards. Or rather, looking at all the creatures on them. Half of them seem to be robins. They look jolly, I guess. But what've they got to do with Christmas?”

“Blame the Victorians,” said his dad with a laugh.

“The Victorians? Why?” asked Michael.

“Because,” said Dad, “they introduced postage stamps in 1840 and three years later we find the first commercial Christmas cards being sold and sent. The early postmen wore red uniforms and became nicknamed 'robins'. Some Christmas cards showed these 'robins' delivering cards and presents; but by the middle of the 19th century the bird itself appeared on cards and has never looked back ever since.”

“I see,” said Michael. “And reindeer must be a more recent addition to the Christmas creatures, as there weren't any of those around in the Bible lands two thousand years ago.”

“Nor are there now,” laughed Dad. “The reindeer are also 19th century additions to the Christmas menagerie; but this time from the other side of the Atlantic and came across with Santa Claus.”

“Santa Claus?” queried Michael. “I thought he'd been around for centuries. Weren't there medieval references to Old Father Christmas or Sire Christmas or some such?”

“Oh indeed,” said Dad. “Sire Christmas, King Christmas or Old Father Christmas was certainly known in the late middle ages; he's a character in mummers' plays and folklore. But he wasn't Santa Claus. He was more like Dickens' 'Ghost of Christmas Present'.”

“Oh,” said Michael, “So where did Santa Claus come from and how did Father Christmas get mixed up with him?”

“Blame the Americans,” chuckled Dad. “The different European immigrants that settled in the early USA brought with them their own traditions and these often got mixed together. The name Santa Claus is from the Dutch *Sinterklaas*, short for *Sint Nicolaas* or, as we say, 'Saint Nicholas.' He was a 4th century bishop of Myra (which is now in modern Turkey) and later became venerated as a saint; his feast day is the 6th December and in several countries, including Holland, he was said to bring children gifts on that day. This tradition was taken over by the Dutch settlers in New York and became mixed up with other traditions of Old Christmas, the Spirit of Christmas and so on taken over by settlers from Britain and other parts of Europe. By the 19th century they had coalesced into the Santa Claus figure, and this was given a boost by the poem *'Twas the Night before Christmas* which was published anonymously in 1823. There had been the odd reference to a reindeer pulling Santa's sleigh early in the 19th century but it was this poem that really established the reindeer, giving Santa not just one but *eight* reindeer and naming them: Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Dunder and Blixem.”

“I see,” said Michael, “and when Santa came over from the USA, our Father Christmas became identified with him.”

“That's right,” said Dad, “and with the reindeer. And because the Sami people, or Laplanders, are herders of reindeer, Santa is now generally said to live there. But, Michael, not all the cards have these 19th century creatures on them. Some of the cards actually have reference to the Bible stories!”

“I know,” replied Michael. “But practically every nativity scene seems to have an ox and an

ass in it. I've looked in the Gospels. Neither Mark nor John give an account of Jesus' birth. Matthew only tells of the wise men who seem to have arrived sometime later. Only Luke gives a more detailed account and he doesn't mention any ox or ass. He just says Mary wrapped Jesus in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. Even that sounds a bit odd."

"Well, yes," replied Dad. "The word translated as 'inn' is *katályma*; it's not the normal word for 'inn' in Greek, but a rather uncommon word meaning 'a lodging' or 'billet'. Joseph would almost certainly have had family there. It was common in this area for one or two rooms to be built in front of a cave, either natural or dug out, for housing animals. If, indeed, the house or lodging was full, then the seclusion of such a cavern might be thought a more suitable place for Mary to give birth in privacy."

"I see," said Michael. "But what about the ox and ass?"

"Ah, yes, there's no mention of them, is there?" said Dad. "But they do appear early in Christian iconography. We see them, for example, depicted on each side of the manger on a sarcophagus, dating from about 400 AD, in the Basilica of St. Ambrose in Milan. It's because of Isaiah 1, verse 3: 'The ox knows its owner, and the ass knows its master's manger.'"

"Um," said Michael. "That's a bit vague, isn't it?"

"Ah," replied Dad, "but the word translated as 'master' in the Greek is *kyrios* which is also the word we translate as Lord when referring to God. So we could translate: 'The ox knows its owner, and the ass its Lord's manger'. It was helped also by the Greek version of Habbakuk 3, verse 2: 'Between two living creatures you will be known'. So on the sarcophagus we see an ox on one side of the manger and an ass on the other. The 3rd century theologian, Origen, explains that the ox, a clean animal according to the Jews, symbolizes the people of Israel, while the unclean ass symbolizes the gentiles, who nevertheless know the manger of their Lord. Ever since the 3rd century, depictions of the nativity, both in western and eastern Christianity, have almost always included those two creatures adoring the Christ-child in the manger."

"I see," said Michael. "Interesting. Christina Rossetti added a third creature that I see on some of our cards. In the carol, *In the Bleak Midwinter*, she wrote:

*Enough for Him, whom angels
Fall down before,
The ox and ass and camel
Which adore.*

I suppose she meant a camel that came with the wise men. But wouldn't there have been three camels at least? And the wise men weren't there at the time of Jesus' birth, were they?"

"No, they weren't," agreed Dad. "But the closeness of the traditional dates of the birth on the 25th of December and the visit of the Magi on the 6th of January, as well as the common artistic *convention* of showing the adoration of the shepherds and the adoration of the Magi in the same scene for convenience has led to a popular assumption that the two events happened at about the same time."

"But," said Michael, "why would Herod have ordered the death of all boys of *two* years and under, if that were so?"

"Quite so," Dad replied. "Matthew states quite clearly that 'going into the *house*, they saw the child with Mary his mother' - no mention of any manger or cave or stable; and when the Magi speak with Herod it's implied they set out, probably from Persia, when the child was born. They must have arrived more than a year later."

"Why Persia? Matthew doesn't say so," asked Michael. "And why do you call them magi? And did they come by camel? There's no mention of camels in Matthew."

“OK,” said Dad. “Let's start with *magi*. That is what Matthew actually calls them, μάγοι or, in English, *magi*. The 1611 King James' Authorized version of the Bible translated it as 'wise men' and that has generally been used by subsequent translations, although some 20th century ones have 'astrologers.' But *magi* they were - astrologer priests of Zoroastrianism, the dominant religion of Persia at that time. Although Matthew simply says the *magi* came from the East, there is no reason to suspect it was not from Persia; one of the earliest depictions of the *magi*, on a 3rd century sarcophagus, now in the Vatican Museum, shows them in Persian costume; and they are shown in a similar way in the famous mosaics of the Basilica of St Apollinaris in Ravenna. As for the camels, it is likely the *magi* would have travelled in a caravan or camel train.”

“Thanks, Dad. I knew you'd know,” said Michael, and added, with a laugh, “There's a card here with cats and dogs on them, all wearing Santa hats. I don't think they've really got much to do with Christmas!”

“No,” agreed Dad, “only the Santa hats - and Santa, as we've seen, was a 19th century invention. But Christmas has become so commercialized that any creature can get itself onto a Christmas card if it has a Santa hat or bit of holly attached to it or snow on its feet.”

“A bit meaningless then,” said Michael. “At least the ox and ass and camels have some meaning.”

“Yes, they do,” agreed Dad. “But the most meaningful creature is the baby in the manger.”

“I guess so,” said Michael. “If he hadn't been born, then none of the rest wouldn't have happened.”

“Not only that,” said Dad, “but think who the baby was. Remember what St John wrote: that the Word, who was with God and, indeed, was God and through whom all things were made, took flesh and dwelt among us.”

“You mean,” said Michel, “the One, through whom all creation came into being, took flesh from Mary ...”

“And,” Dad interrupted, “entered creation as a creature just like us in order to reconcile creation with its Creator.”

“Gosh,” said Michael. “That's a bit deep. We've come a long way from those Christmas robins, haven't we?”

“We have indeed,” said Dad. “And there's Mum coming back now. Time for a cuppa, I think.”

“Yes,” said Michael. “I'll go and put the kettle on.”