

## “Jesus Ahatonnia”

### Reflections on *The Huron Carol*

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Luke 2.1-20; Matthew 2.1-12

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From Baghdad to Bangkok, Manilla to Moscow, Dusseldorf to Djibouti, Buenos Ares to Boston, Lagos to London . . . in hundreds of languages and dialects, in all types of buildings and all sorts of styles . . . people are celebrating Christmas. We are joining sisters and brothers around the world and in many, many cultures, rejoicing in the birth of the Saviour Jesus.

Which is quite remarkable. Astonishing, really. If you dip into the Christmas stories in the Gospels, just a bit, you quickly realize how foreign they are to us. Still, we celebrate! They tell of events long ago, in a places far from us and a culture much different from what we know. Nonetheless, we celebrate!

I

How different? It says these events unfolded “*In those days*” . . . the days of Caesar Augustus. We’re two millennia ago different!

Then the names. People like Yôsēph. He’s named after the great Yôsēph, who was a son of Ya’akov, son of Yitzak, son of Avra’ham. And Yôsēph’s soon-to-be bride, Miryam. She’s named after the great Miryam. The same Miryam who watched over her baby brother Moshé, floating him in a basket in the Nile river, hiding him from Pharaoh’s genocide. Miryam who, years later, sang God’s praises when the LORD delivered all Yisrael from slavery through the Red Sea.

The places are so far away: Nats’rath in Galilee. Bet Lehem near Jerusalem.

In other words, the events of Yeshua’s birth are Jewish events, deeply rooted in the culture and place of first-century Yisrael. All the details in this story fit. An occupation by the Roman empire. A census, forced on the people for taxation. As was the Jewish custom, Miryam and Yôsēph were legally bound but not yet married. Their baby was born in a Jewish peasant home where they would bring the animals in at night for safety, and feed-mangers adjoined the main living area. Deeply Jewish, strangely foreign, faraway and long ago.

Yet still, we known it as our story, a story we fit right into. Better, a story that fits right into us.

## II

As my European ancestors began telling this story, and singing it in their carols, and painting it in their artwork, Miryam became “Mary,” and Yôseph, “Joseph.” The exotic magi from ancient Iraq or Persia became “three kings,” with crowns replacing their turbans in our imaginations. In Europe, animals were kept in stables out back and, quite naturally, that’s where we pictured Jesus being born. Paintings depicted Bethlehem very much like a medieval Italian town, which makes sense; that’s what people knew.

Were they messing with the story? Sure. Yet as they retold it to fit their own culture, they were realizing something important. Jesus’ birth was not just for one place, time and culture. It was for them too, in their time and place.

## III

Father Jean de Brébeuf knew this when he wrote Canada’s first Christmas Carol. It was 1642. Father Jean was a Jesuit priest. He was serving with the Wyandot First Nation; the French called them the “Huron.” They lived in the area between Lake Simcoe and Georgian Bay. And Father Jean wrote a song in their Wendat language about Jesus’ birth.

Before going further, let’s sing the version we know, composed by J. Edgar Middleton in 1926. [*Sing “Twas in the Moon of Wintertime” (Voices United #71)*]

Writing the words for that carol, Middleton was drawing on his own understandings and stereotypes of Aboriginal culture. He created some beautiful images that are part of my cherished Christmas. So I was a bit surprised to learn, quite recently, that Middleton’s words are very different from what Jean de Brébeuf first wrote for the Wyandot. I’ve printed Father Jean’s words for you on your bulletin insert, along with a translation.<sup>1</sup>

## IV

I notice that Father Jean turned the original magi from Persia into “three men of great authority” who “have left for the place of his birth.” Instead of “gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, he said they “oiled his scalp many times” with “the oil of the sunflower.”

Was Father Jean messing with the story? Sure. But he was also getting at the deeper meaning of the magi’s adoration of Jesus. These bearers of foreign wisdom were paying homage to Israel’s Messiah-King. Their gold, frankincense and myrrh gifts symbolized this. Just as, in Wyandot culture, anointing with sunflower oil seems to have symbolized divine favour and authority.

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<sup>1</sup> The translation is by John Steckley the (Department of Native Studies, University of Sudbury, Ontario. The lyrics and Steckley’s translation can be found at <http://cockburnproject.net/songs&music/ia.html>.

I also notice what Father Jean said about why Jesus' birth is so important. He did not mention "the Messiah" or "Christ," nor "the King of the Jews," nor prophecies about Bethlehem in the Hebrew prophets. Nothing about "the house and lineage of David," nor "Caesar Augustus." Father Jean could have sung about these, and explained them all to the Wyandot. Maybe he did some other time. But in this song, he explained Jesus in ways that made perfect sense in their culture, place and time.

He sang about the "okie spirit" who has enslaved us, who has corrupted our spirits. Perfectly Christian. We see Evil holding us in bondage to sin, and twisting the ways we act and think.

But Good news! Jesus is born! And that evil spirit has fled. Again, perfectly Christian. Jesus is God's decisive invasion into creation, which Evil has occupied and enslaved. Jesus sets us free!

V

So, as Father Jean sang, we can be adopted into Jesus' family. No matter our culture, our time, our place; Jewish, Wyandot, French, English, Canadian, African, Arab, Chinese, American, whatever. Jesus' family casts a whole new vision, a new reality, about what it means to belong. We belong to him because he loves us, and calls us, and welcomes us. We belong to him because we hear his call and follow.

Yes, we must remember and celebrate that Jesus was born a first-century Jew, in the Roman province of Palestine. That stuff matters. When God became human, God did so in that place and time, as that person. Forgetting that would make Jesus less-than-human, someone different from who he actually was and is.

Yet must also remember and celebrate that Jesus comes today into every people and race, every nation and place. Jesus calls us in our own language, speaks to us in our own tongue. Jesus is born!

Jesus Ahatonnia! Christos Gennatai! Jésus est né! Yisura janma haa!  
Yesu jiàngsheng! Yesu amezaliwa! Jesus is born!<sup>2</sup>

Let's finish by listening to the original words to "The Huron Carol," sung by Bruce Cockburn.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Jesus is born" in Wendat, Greek, French, Bengali, Chinese, Maori, Swahili, and English. (Using Google translate; <https://translate.google.ca>)

<sup>3</sup> From Cockburn's album *Christmas* (1993).