

Malcolm's 'Christmas' Monday Musings : 18 December 2023

Greetings.

I begin with a question: What do the following six names have in common ... Abraham Lincoln, Eleazar Maccabeus, John Piper, King Edward VII of the United Kingdom, King Shapur II of Persia and King Alfonso XIII of Spain?

Before I give you the answer to that question, I want you to ponder the following selection of Christmas snippets from my notebook—a few of which you *may* recognise from earlier 'Musings':

1. The mystery of the incarnation: when *God's 'only-begotten Son'* (John 3. 16; 18; 1 John 4. 9) became *Mary's 'firstborn son'* (Luke 2. 7)—when He who ever stood on level ground with God stooped to stand on level ground with men.

2. It was a great thing when the One by whom all things were created *made man in His likeness* (Gen. 5. 1; cf. Gen. 1. 26), but it was a far greater thing when the One by whom all things were created was Himself *made in the likeness of man* (Phil. 2. 7).

3. When 'the Word became flesh' (John 1. 14), the One who was *'in the beginning'* (John 1. 1-2) became the One who was *'in the world'* (John 1. 10).

4. 'God sent forth His Son, born of a woman' (Gal. 4. 4). The description of God's Son as 'born of woman' signifies, *not His virgin birth* (for He Himself used that expression concerning John the Baptist (Matt. 11. 11; cf. Job 14. 1; 15.14; 25. 4), *but His veritable humanity*. He was *'born of woman'* that we might be *'born of God'* (1 John 3. 9; 4. 7; 5. 1, 4, 18).

5. The 'morning stars sang together and all the (angelic) sons of God shouted with *joy*' at the *time of creation* (Job 38. 7) but 'an angel of the Lord' announced, and 'a multitude of the heavenly host' celebrated, 'good news of *great joy*' at the *time of the incarnation* (Luke 2. 10).

Angels from the realms of glory,
Wing your flight o'er all the earth;
Ye who sang creation's story
Now proclaim Messiah's birth.
(James Montgomery)

6. 'The glory of the Lord shone round about' shepherds in a field near Bethlehem (Luke 2. 9) but not around 'Mary, Joseph, and the babe' in Bethlehem (Luke 2. 16).

7. 'That which was from the beginning, that which we have (i) heard, that which we have (ii) seen with our eyes, that which we (iii) beheld, and our (iv) hands handled, concerning the Word of life' (1 John 1. 1) ... In the incarnation, the life-giving 'Word' became (i) *audible*, (ii) *visible*, (iii) *contemplatable*, and (iv) *tangible*. He didn't use 'Zoom'; He came in Person!

8. Little did the shepherds, who 'came with haste' to Bethlehem to find the babe, with tiny limbs safely wrapped, 'lying in a manger' (Luke 2. 12, 16), imagine that, some thirty-three years later, those very limbs would be stretched out, with hands and feet nailed to a cross.

9. When Jesus was born, His body (i) was *wrapped* in swaddling cloths by the loving hands of a Mary while a Joseph looked on and (ii) was then *'laid'* down (Luke 2. 7). When Jesus died, His body (i) was *wrapped* in linen cloths by the loving hands of a Joseph (of Arimathea) while a Mary (of Magdala) looked on (Mark 15. 47) and (ii) was then *'laid'* down (Luke 23. 53).

10. The 'days of His flesh' (Heb. 5. 7) were framed between two impossibilities: (i) a *virgin's womb* and (ii) a *sealed tomb*. Metaphorically speaking, He entered through a *door clearly marked 'No entry'*, and He left through a *door clearly marked 'No exit'*.

11. His conception and birth were no more His *beginning* (His 'goings forth' were 'from everlasting', Mic. 5. 2) than His death and burial were His *end* ('I became dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore', Rev. 1. 18).

I note that Peter had 'followed Him afar off to the high priest's palace, and ... sat with the officers, to see the end' (Matt. 26. 58). But Peter was wrong! It was anything but 'the end'.

Well, what do the six names above have in common? The answer? Simple! Each of the names forms a heading in the following 'Christmas' Monday Musings!

(i) SCRIPTURE

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of His government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Isaiah 9. 6-7 (*English Standard Version*)

(ii) FOOD FOR THOUGHT

1. Eleazar Maccabaeus.

'You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins' (Matt. 1. 21).

Last Friday, 15th December, marked the close of the eight-day Jewish festival of 'Hannukah'.¹ This festival 'the Feast of Dedication' of John 10. 22) celebrates the rededication of the Second Temple² by Judas Maccabeus on the 25th of the Jewish month Kislev in 164 BC. This followed the pollution of the Temple by the Syrian king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes,³ who had invaded Judaea, had overrun Jerusalem and had polluted the Temple, setting up a pagan altar to displace the Lord's altar.

Under the leadership of Judas Maccabaeus, the Jews recaptured the Temple and reconsecrated it to God.⁴

This reminds me of an expression used to describe a daring exploit⁵ performed later by Eleazar, one of Judas's younger brothers.⁶ Eleazar died at a significant battle, when vastly superior Syrian forces set out to quell the Maccabean revolt.

During that battle,⁷ Eleazar identified one of the opposing war elephants, which (largely on account of the royal armour worn by the elephant) he believed was carrying the then Syrian king, Antiochus V.⁸

Eleazar rushed to certain death by killing the elephant that others might then slay the king. Courageously he broke through the enemy troop formation and managed to spear the elephant from beneath ... and he did succeed in killing it. But, tragically, the elephant fell on Eleazar, killing him. And, in the event, Eleazar's heroic action was totally wasted because, in spite of its royal armour, the elephant was not carrying the king.⁹

The historical account of the battle says of Eleazar that 'he gave his life to save his people'.¹⁰ And, in one sense, this is true—Eleazar did give 'his life to save his people' ... but Eleazar utterly failed to save them! Indeed, despite his valiant effort, the smaller Jewish army was defeated in the battle.

Yes, it would be true to say that Eleazar 'gave himself' to 'save his people' *from their human foes*, albeit unsuccessfully.

But you and I know that of our Lord Jesus alone could it ever be said that He 'gave Himself' to 'save His people *from their sins*'.¹¹ And we rejoice to know that, unlike Eleazar, *He did not fail*.

2. King Shapur II of Persia

3. King Alfonso XIII of Spain.

'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?' (Matt. 2. 2).

This is the question posed some time after our Lord's birth by the wise men from the East. Note that He was 'born King'—not 'born to be King'.

I have been able to trace only two others who could be described properly as 'born King', actually being 'King' at the time of birth.

(i) The first lived in the early fourth century, a Persian king known as Shapur the Second. His father died before he was born and it was written of him that, while 'he was still in his mother's womb, the Sasarian crown was placed on her womb, making Shapur II the king of the Sasanian Empire ... This child was therefore born king; the government was conducted by his mother and the magnates'.¹²

Shapur II was 'born king', that is, of the last Iranian empire before the rise of Islam.

(ii) The other lived more recently. This was King Alfonso XIII¹³ of Spain, whose reign straddled the closing years of the nineteenth century and the first thirty years or so of the twentieth.¹⁴

Alfonso's father (titled, surprise, surprise, 'Alfonso XII') died at the age of 27,¹⁵ six months before Alfonso XIII's birth, at which point Alfonso became King of Spain.¹⁶

But the Lord Jesus stands out as altogether unique, not only in that He was born first of the three, but because He did not inherit the title 'King' on account of the death of His Father—of whom He spoke as 'the *living* Father'.¹⁷

His right to the title 'King of the Jews' derives from the fact that He is descended directly from King David, a point which Matthew in his gospel is careful to establish.

In many ways, chapters 1 and 2 of Matthew's Gospel could be said to tell the story of 'Three Kings'—although these are not to be identified with the 'wise men from the East' whom Matthew mentions there.¹⁸ Before speaking of the Lord Jesus as 'King',¹⁹ he introduces two other 'kings': 'David the king'²⁰ and 'Herod the king'; hence the 'Three Kings'.²¹

But, as always, our Lord stands apart from all others! For, whereas (i) David was anointed king by the prophet Samuel, the men of Judah and the elders of Israel,²² and (ii) Herod was elected king by the Roman Senate,²³ Jesus was born king.²⁴ The point is that neither David nor Herod had been 'born' king.

Our Lord's status as 'King of the Jews' was not conferred on Him later in life. He was born with it. The preceding genealogy establishes His right to the title, for He is 'Jesus Christ, the son of David',²⁵ although I note that Matthew reserves the actual title 'King of the Jews' for the lips of Gentiles—whether the lips of the 'wise men from the east'²⁶ or, in the Passion narrative, the lips of a Roman governor and his soldiers.²⁷ In that sense, we can say that, *as Jesus was 'born King', so He died King!*

4. John Piper,

'Behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people' (Luke 2. 10).

The following are eight spiritual 'nuggets' from John Piper's book, *'Great News of Great Joy: 25 Devotional Readings for Advent'*:²⁸

(i) 'Mary sees clearly a most remarkable thing about God: He is about to change the course of all human history; the most important three decades in all of time are about to begin', page 25.

(ii) 'God put it in the heart of Caesar Augustus that all the Roman world should be enrolled each in his own town. A decree for the entire world in order to move two people seventy miles!', page 33.

(iii) 'Jesus could have been born into a wealthy family. He could have turned stones into bread in the wilderness. He could have called ten thousand angels to His aid in Gethsemane. He could have come down from the cross and saved Himself ... God's will was that though Christ was rich, yet for your sake He became poor. The "No Vacancy" signs²⁹ over all the motels in Bethlehem were for your sake', page 37.

(iv) 'Matthew portrays Jesus at the beginning and ending of his Gospel as a universal Messiah for all the nations, not just for Jews', page 45.

(v) 'Luke shows God influencing the entire Roman Empire so that the census comes at the exact time to get an insignificant virgin to Bethlehem to fulfil prophecy with her delivery. Matthew shows God influencing the stars in the sky to get a little handful of foreigners to Bethlehem so that they can worship the Son', page 51.

(vi) 'Jesus became man because what was needed was the death of a man who was more than man ... Christ did not risk death; He chose death ... The cross has run Satan through', pages 97-98.

(vii) 'His birth was not a coming into being of a new person, but a coming into the world of an infinitely old person ("whose coming forth is from of old, from everlasting")', page 105.

(viii) 'You can read every fairy tale that was ever written, every mystery thriller, every ghost story, and you will never find anything so shocking, so strange, so ... spellbinding as the story of the incarnation of the Son of God', page 109.

5. Abraham Lincoln.³⁰

'Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord' (Luke 2. 11).

Little did the inhabitants of Bethlehem (Luke 2. 4), Jerusalem (Matt 2. 1) or Rome (Luke 2. 1) suspect that anything particularly momentous had taken place at the time of our Lord's birth.

I have read that there is a plaque that marks Abraham Lincoln's birthplace near Hodgenville in Kentucky. The plaque records a scrap of conversation which, it is said, took place there in February 1809:

'Any news down't the village, Ezry?'

'Well, Squire McLain's gone t' Washington t' see Madison swore in, and ol' Spellman tells me this Bonaparte fella has captured most o' Spain. What's new out here, neighbour?'

'Nuthin' ... nuthin' a'tall, 'cept fer a new baby born t' Tom Lincoln's. Nothin' ever happens out here'.³¹

'Nothin' ever happens out here', the Kentuchian said. Ah, but little did he know! Little did he know that the baby born in Tom Lincoln's log cabin was destined to be President of the United States and the emancipator of countless black slaves.

And little did the so-called great men of earth at the turn of the era know that 'the babe ... lying in the manger' was destined to be the Saviour of the world.

6. King Edward VIII of the United Kingdom.³²

'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor' (2 Cor. 8. 9).

It is less than a week since the anniversary of the date in 1936 when the former King Edward VIII left England, having just renounced the throne.³³

It was on 10th December 1936 that Edward VIII signed an Instrument of Abdication. The next day, Parliament approved the Abdication Instrument, and Edward VIII's reign came to an end.³⁴ Edward had chosen this course that he might marry an American divorcée, Mrs Wallis Simpson. The former king was subsequently made a royal duke, 'the Duke of Windsor', by his younger brother, Albert ('Bertie'), when he succeeded to the throne as King George VI.

The reason I have given you this particular short history lesson is that I want to draw your attention to the more-or-less closing words of the Duke of Windsor's published memoirs, '*A King's Story*':

'And so it came to pass that at two o'clock on the morning of December 12 1936, H.M.S. Fury slid silently and unescorted out of Portsmouth harbour. Watching the shore of England recede, I was swept by many emotions ... it had been hard to give up the throne ... But of one thing I was certain: so far as I was concerned love had triumphed'.³⁵

I do not doubt that, as he said, 'it had been *hard*' for King Edward VIII '*to give up the throne*'.

But you and I know Someone who, out of far greater love—both for His Father³⁶ and for you and me³⁷—gave up a far grander throne, exchanging the lofty throne of heaven³⁸ for an animal's rough feeding trough.³⁹

(iii) GO ON, SMILE.



Endnotes

¹ The festival began on Thursday evening, 7th December 2023 and continued through Friday, 15th December 2023.

² The title, 'Second Temple', is used to describe the Temple built in the days of Zerubbabel on the site of the earlier temple built in the reign of Solomon and destroyed by the Babylonians.

³ Antiochus IV reigned from 175 BC until his death in 164 BC.

⁴ 'Judas celebrated the festival of the restoration of the sacrifices of the temple for eight days, and omitted no sort of pleasures thereon; but he feasted them upon very rich and splendid sacrifices; and he honoured God, and delighted them by hymns and psalms. Nay, they were so very glad at the revival of their customs, when, after a long time of intermission, they unexpectedly had regained the freedom of their worship, that they made it a law for their posterity, that they should keep a festival, on account of the restoration of their temple worship, for eight days. And from that time to this we celebrate this festival', Flavius Josephus, *'The Antiquities of the Jews'*, Book XII, Chapter 7, Paragraph 7.

For further background, see <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/9034-judas-maccabeus>.

⁵ Compare the inspired words written of the days of the Maccabees: 'the people that know their God shall be strong, and *do exploits*', Dan. 11. 32.

⁶ 1 Macc. 6. 40-47.

⁷ The Battle of Beth-Zechariah, fought around May 162 BC.

⁸ Then nine years of age.

⁹ See, for example, <https://www.geni.com/people/Elazar-Avaran-Maccabeus-br-4/6000000012127639504>.

¹⁰ 1 Macc. 6. 44.

¹¹ Matt. 1. 21.

¹² See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shapur_II.

¹³ His full name was 'Alfonso León Fernando María Jaime Isidro Pascual Antonio de Borbón y Habsburgo-Lorena'! Small wonder people called him 'Alfonso'.

¹⁴ Alfonso XIII was born in Madrid on 17 May 1886, reigned until 1931, and lived until 1941.

¹⁵ Alfonso XII was born on 27 November 1857 and died on 25 November 1885, just three days short of his twenty-eighth birthday,

¹⁶ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfonso_XIII_of_Spain.

Interestingly, Henry VII of England was *born* 28th January 1457 (at Pembroke Castle in Wales) *after his father* (Edmond Tudor) *died* in captivity. But Richard III (not Edmond) then reigned and so Henry did not become king at that time. Henry later won the throne and crown from Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth Field on 22nd August 1485.

¹⁷ John 6. 57.

¹⁸ Matt. 2. 1.

¹⁹ Matt. 2. 2.

²⁰ Matt. 1. 6.

²¹ Matt. 2. 1.

²² 1 Sam. 16. 1 ('a king'), 13; 2 Samuel 2. 4; 5. 3.

²³ Mark Antony 'called the senate together, wherein Messalas, and after him Atratinus, produced Herod before them, and gave a full account of the merits of his father, and his own good-will to the Romans. At the same time, they demonstrated that Antigonus was their enemy, not only because he soon quarrelled with them, but because he now overlooked the Romans, and took the government by the means of the Parthians. These reasons greatly moved the senate; at which juncture Antony came in, and told them that it was for their advantage in the Parthian war that Herod should be king; so they all gave their votes for it. And when the senate was separated, Antony and Caesar went out, with Herod between them; while the consul and the rest of the magistrates went before them, in order to offer sacrifices, and to lay the decree in the Capitol. Antony also made a feast for Herod on the first day of his reign'. Flavius Josephus, *'The Wars of the Jews'*, Book 1, Chapter 14, Paragraph 4.

²⁴ Matt. 2. 2. The participle (τεχθεις) in the construction ο τεχθεις βασιλευς is adjectival. In other words, the expression in Matthew 2. 2. is literally 'the born king'.

²⁵ Matt. 1. 1-16.

²⁶ Matt. 2. 1-2.

²⁷ Matt. 27. 11, 29, 37.

²⁸ Freely accessible at <https://document.desiringgod.org/good-news-of-great-joy-en.pdf?ts=1630438371>.

²⁹ We might say that the earthly life of Jesus begins with a '*We have no vacancy*' sign in Bethlehem (Luke 2. 7) and ends with a '*We have no King*' cry in Jerusalem (John 19. 15)!

³⁰ Adapted from the Monday 'Musings' of 26 December 2022.

³¹ Source: <https://bible.org/illustration/what%E2%80%99s-new>.

³² Adapted from the Monday 'Musings' of 13th December 2021.

³³ 12th December 1936.

³⁴ Edward reigned for less than eleven months, which makes him the shortest-reigning monarch of the United Kingdom. He is the only British sovereign voluntarily to resign the crown.

³⁵ HRH The Duke of Windsor, '*A King's Story*', page 378.

³⁶ John 14. 31.

³⁷ Eph. 5. 2, 25.

³⁸ 'I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up', Isa. 6. 1, taken together with Isa. 6. 9-10 and John 12. 40-41.

³⁹ Luke 2. 7.