What Christmas Smells Like. And Us Too.

Sue Bohlin recently learned something new about biblical anointing oil, and why cinnamon is such a special fragrance.

When you walk into our Tom Thumb grocery store, there's a flower display right inside the door. For weeks, they have had bags of cinnamon-scented pine cones and it smells like Christmas. I love it! The last time I shopped I gave in and bought one of the bags and put in on the hearth in our living room.

I discovered that unfortunately, one little bag with a few pine cones does not a Christmas make. You need a bunch more.

Christmas MUSIC, on the other hand—now, that'll get you in the Christmas spirit! My husband's Christmas music playlist has been on full blast for weeks. Which includes Handel's Messiah.

We hear the word "Messiah" a lot more during the ramp-up to Christmas, but do you know what it means? It means "Anointed One."

In the Old Testament, in Exodus 30:22-33, God gave the formula for a perfumed anointing oil to be used ONLY for sacred things and sacred people. Moses smeared it on the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant, and all the pieces of furniture in the holy place. And Aaron and the other priests were anointed with this oil.

It was a fragrance set apart—that's what "holy" means—from all other fragrances. When people smelled it, they immediately thought of God. They thought, "Oh, that's what God smells like!"

If I were to ask you, "What does Christmas smell like?" I bet

the first thing to come to mind is cinnamon, right?

Well, that was one of the elements of the anointing oil as well.

For many hundreds of years, the people of God used this sacred anointing oil that wordlessly proclaimed, “This is what sacred smells like. This is what God smells like.”

At the same time, they looked for the promised Messiah to come, and Messiah meant “Anointed One.” So the sacred smells of the anointing oil were another signpost pointing to Jesus.

Every time you see or hear the term “Jesus Christ,” you can think “Jesus Messiah,” because “Christ” is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word for “Anointed One.”

When Jesus came, He showed us what the Father was. He smelled like the Father.

He smelled like God.

And here’s the interesting thing. After He went back up to heaven, people started calling His followers “Christ-ians,” which means “Little Christs.” Little ***anointed ones***.

2 Corinthians 2:15 says, “For we are to God the sweet aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.”

Just as Jesus smelled like God, so do believers in Jesus!

Not literally, but our lives are a fragrant aroma of Christ that point us to God.

We may not smell like Christmas, but smelling like God is even better, don’t you think?

(Major thanks to my favorite female theologian, Dr. Nika

Spaulding, who shared this insight connecting the dots about anointing, Jesus Messiah, and God-smelling Christians in her Substack teaching on the book of Exodus.)

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The Star of Bethlehem from a Christian View

Dr. Ray Bohlin looks at the familiar story of the star of Bethlehem and provides several possible ways that God created this sign announcing the birth of the Christ. From a Christian worldview perspective, we know a bright light in the sky was able to lead the magi to the Christ child. Dr. Bohlin considers several ways God may have chosen to announce the coming of the Christ.

The Magi and the Star of Bethlehem

O, Star of wonder, star of night
Star of royal beauty bright
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light.



This familiar and haunting chorus from the Christmas carol, “We Three Kings of Orient Are,” introduces us to what seems to be the only ubiquitous biblical symbol during the Christmas season, the star of Bethlehem.

This Christmas, as you look over the Christmas cards in the

stores or in your own burgeoning collection from family and friends, you will see one very constant element. Whether the scene depicts the nativity, a backyard nature scene, a Christmas tree, or just Santa making deliveries, if the nighttime sky is included, somewhere in the picture, eliciting warm and happy emotions, is a star. The star dominates the nighttime sky with its size and brightness and its long tail pointing to the earth. The star has almost become the signature which says, “This scene reflects a Christmas theme.”

At first, this may seem quite unusual for something which doesn’t even get mentioned in Luke 2, the more familiar account of our Lord’s birth. The star is featured only in Matthew’s brief description of the visit by the magi shortly after Jesus’ birth. I think the prevalence of the star stems from its mysteriousness. For example, what kind of star convinces a group of Gentile wise men to search for the new King of the Jews and actually leads them to Him? Before we explore this puzzle, let’s look at Matthew’s account beginning in Chapter 2 verse 1:

> Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him” (Matt. 2:1-2, NASB).

A couple of things to note: first, these events take place after Jesus’ birth; second, this was in the days of Herod the king; third, the magi arrived from an area east of Jerusalem (probably in the vicinity of Babylon or Persia); fourth, they already knew they were looking for the newborn King of the Jews, but the exact location eluded them; and fifth, it was viewing His star from their home in the east that led them on this journey.

After consulting with King Herod and finding out from chief priests and teachers that the Messiah was to be born in

Bethlehem, the magi set out for the 5 mile trip south to Bethlehem. We pick up Matthew's narrative in verse 9:

> And having heard the king, they went their way; and lo, the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was. And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And they came into the house and saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell down and worshiped Him; and opening their treasures they presented to Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh (Matt. 2:9-11, NASB).

Here we see that Matthew appears to describe the star as moving, as leading the magi to Jesus. There is clearly more than one magi, but only tradition holds that there were three—presumably because of the three gifts. These Gentile wise men worship the King whom the star has led them to. In the rest of this essay, we will explore the nature of this strange star and what it could have been.

What Was the Star of Bethlehem?

The Gospel of Matthew states that the star informed the magi of the birth of the King of the Jews and actually led them to Bethlehem once they had arrived in Jerusalem. The star of Bethlehem has been the subject of scholarly discussion ever since the first centuries after Jesus' birth. Some believed it was a supernova explosion, others a comet or a conjunction of planets associated with specific constellations that would herald the birth of a king in Israel. Some have suggested that none of these astronomical events can adequately account for all that Matthew tells us within the context of his worldview. In this discussion, I will be investigating the more common explanations to see if we can come to some understanding as to just what the magi saw 2,000 years ago.

When Matthew quotes the magi as telling Herod that they

observed the new King's star rising in the east, this can be interpreted as a new star, something never observed before. This has led some scholars to believe that the star of Bethlehem was a nova or supernova. A nova is a white dwarf star that literally explodes. The explosion may increase the brightness of the star a thousand to a million times its previous brightness, making a previously invisible star, visible. A nova, however, does not last very long. The initial blast of the explosion may only be observed for a few months before the star shrinks to a remnant of its previous brightness and disappears altogether.

There are numerous problems with this view. First, although there was a "new star" recorded by the Chinese in the constellation Capricorn in March-April of 5 B.C. that lasted only 70 days, there is nothing to connect this event with the birth of a King in Israel. Second, and perhaps most troublesome, nova do not move.

This leads to a discussion of a different astronomical event that may be associated with the "new star" (a comet) recorded by the Chinese in 5 B.C. The Chinese would not have distinguished a comet from a nova since all they recorded was something new in the sky that was temporary. A comet has the advantage of a tail that can appear to be pointing in a direction which may have guided the magi. In addition, a comet moves! A comet can even disappear as it moves behind the sun and reappear as it comes out from behind the sun. A major objection is that the Chinese make no mention of the "new star" moving. Another problem is that comets are cyclical with a predictable periodicity. For instance, Halley's comet appears every 76 years. If the star of Bethlehem were a comet, we would most likely have observed it again and been able to extrapolate back to the time of Christ to see if there is a match. Unfortunately, the only one to come close is Halley's comet which appeared in 12 B.C., a date that is impossibly early.

One could always claim that the comet was one with a very long periodicity or one that has since disappeared from our solar system. This is certainly possible, but it does not really help the discussion. One might as well appeal to a purely supernatural occurrence that cannot be verified scientifically. There is no difference. And though comets were usually interpreted as heralding sweeping changes, the changes were usually for the worse and there is no way, once again, to connect these events to the birth of a king in Israel. Next, I will look at planetary conjunction, the most popular suggestion at planetarium shows during the Christmas season.

Did the Star of Bethlehem Result from a Triple Conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter?

The bright star usually seen hovering over Nativity scenes depicted on numerous Christmas cards actually dominates nearly every nighttime Christmas panorama. As I stated earlier, the Star of Bethlehem is just about the only ubiquitous biblical symbol associated with Christmas. The reason probably has to do with the mystery surrounding what this star was. Earlier, I showed the unreasonableness of the star being a comet or supernova explosion. If you were to attend a planetarium show concerning the star of Bethlehem, they would most likely present the idea that the star was a triple conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn in the year 7 B.C. followed by a massing of Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars in 6 B.C. Realizing that planetarium shows view Scripture as something less than historically accurate, it is still necessary to ask if this indeed could have been the Star of Bethlehem.

In the early 17th century the great astronomer and Christian, Johannes Kepler, calculated that a triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn had occurred in 7 B.C. While Kepler did not believe this to be the actual Star of Bethlehem, it may have alerted the magi to the coming star. 7-4 B.C. have become the

usual dates for fixing the birth of Christ since Herod the Great's death, the Herod mentioned by both Matthew and Luke in their birth narratives, is well established in 4 B.C. Therefore, Jesus had to have been born in the few years prior to 4 B.C. since He started his three-year public ministry around the age of 30 (Luke 3:23) and His death is usually fixed between 27-30 A.D.

So just what is a triple conjunction, and why would it be significant to the birth of a King in Israel? A planetary conjunction is what happens when two planets come in close proximity to one another. A triple conjunction refers to when three separate conjunctions of the same two planets occur within a one year period. Triple conjunctions can be predicted, but they do not occur with regularity. There have been only 11 such triple conjunctions since 7 B.C. and the interval between them varies between 40 and 338 years.

The triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 B.C. was seen in the constellation Pisces in the months of May, September, and December. This provides sufficient time for the magi to see the first conjunction, begin their trip west to Judea, visit Herod by the second conjunction or at least soon afterwards, and perhaps not reach Bethlehem until the third conjunction when it is said to have appeared in the southern sky, and Bethlehem is just south of Jerusalem. Remember how the magi rejoiced to see the star again as they departed Jerusalem for Bethlehem. Ancient astrologers associated Jupiter with royalty or even a ruler of the universe. Saturn was associated with Palestine or even with the deity who protected Israel. And Pisces was associated with the nation of Israel. Later a massing of Jupiter, Mars, and Saturn occurred again in Pisces in 6 B.C. It seems feasible then that this triple conjunction followed by the massing of the three planets in Pisces could indicate to the magi that a King of Israel and a Ruler of the Universe was about to be born in Israel.

While this seems to wrap things up rather nicely, there are significant problems. First, Jupiter and Saturn never were close enough to be confused as a single object. Matthew definitely describes a singular star. Perhaps more importantly, the use of astrology is necessary to interpret these astronomical signs properly. The Old Testament, particularly, mocks astrologers in Isaiah 47:13-15 and several times in Daniel (1:20, 2:27, 4:7, and 5:7). Jeremiah 10:1-2 seems to forbid astrology outright. The use of astrology is clearly outside the worldview of Matthew as he penned his gospel. It seems woefully inconsistent for the Lord to use astrology to herald the incarnation and birth of His Son into the world.

Was the Star of Bethlehem the Planet Jupiter?

In this discussion, I have considered a nova, a comet, and a triple conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn as the Star of Bethlehem between 7 and 4 B.C., and none have seemed to be satisfactory. In 1991, Ernest Martin published a book titled, *The Star That Astonished the World*. His major thesis is that Herod died in 1 B.C. and not 4 B.C. If 4 B.C. is the wrong date for Herod's death, then everything must be reevaluated.

While there are many lines of evidence that Martin uses to make his point, a critical issue is a lunar eclipse that occurred just prior to Herod's death. According to the Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, on the night of a lunar eclipse, Herod executed two rabbis. Herod himself died soon afterwards, just before Passover. Martin points out that the lunar eclipse of March 13, 4 B.C., was only a 40% partial eclipse and barely visible. Also he reconstructs the events between the eclipse and Herod's death, about 4 weeks, and determines there was not enough time for all these things to take place. However,

Martin has located a total lunar eclipse on January 10, 1 B.C., twelve and a half weeks prior to Passover.

If we assume that Martin's date for the death of Herod is correct, then the years 3 and 2 B.C. can be added to the search parameters for the Star of Bethlehem. Martin points out that the planet Jupiter passes through a series of conjunctions over the course of these two years indicating that Jupiter is the star of Bethlehem.

Remember that Jupiter is considered the royal star. Well, in 3 B.C., Jupiter came into conjunction with Regulus, the star of kingship, the brightest star in the constellation of Leo, the first of several such conjunctions over the next year. Leo was the constellation of kings, and it was also closely associated by some with the Lion of Judah. This is beginning to look interesting. "The royal planet approached the royal star in the royal constellation representing Israel."(1) In addition, on September 11, 3 B.C., Jupiter was not only very close to Regulus, but the sun was in the constellation Virgo. Hmmm, the royal planet in conjunction with the royal star while the sun is in a virgin. September 11, 3 B.C., is also the beginning of the Jewish New Year. There seems to be an awful lot coming together here.

But what about the star appearing to stop over Bethlehem? Planets will actually appear to do just that as they reach the opposite point in the sky from the sun as they travel east across the sky. They will stop, reverse directions for a few weeks, stop again, and head east once again. It's called a retrograde loop. Jupiter performed a retrograde loop in 2 B.C. and was stationary on December 25, during Hanukkah, the season of giving presents.

Just in case you are ready to proclaim the mystery of the Star of Bethlehem solved, remember that this whole scenario rests on Herod dying in 1 B.C. rather than in 4 B.C. The majority of historians and biblical historians can't accept this critical

revision. If Herod indeed died in 4 B.C., all of these coincidences I just reviewed are just that, coincidences. Also, as I mentioned earlier, the use of astrological meanings is contrary to the worldview of Matthew. There is another option that has become very popular, and I'll discuss it next.

The Shekinah Glory as the Star of Bethlehem

So far in this essay, I have discussed several naturalistic explanations for the Star of Bethlehem: a nova or exploding star, a comet, a triple conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn in 7 B.C., and the planet Jupiter as it traveled in the constellation Leo in 3-2 B.C. Each of these astronomical events represents a natural occurrence that God used to announce the birth of His Son. One of the major problems has been that in order to interpret any of these signs, one would have to use astrological meanings for these events and their locations in the night sky to reach the conclusion that a new King of the Jews has been born—something that is foreign to the biblical worldview. Perhaps there was a physical "star" that gave off real light but indeed was new but not reflected by any astronomical event.

Remember that Jesus' birth was the ultimate coming of the presence of God in the midst of His people. How was God's presence manifested elsewhere in the Bible? Moses saw a burning bush that was not consumed and God spoke to him from the bush. Again in Exodus, Moses was allowed to see God's backside and afterwards his face shone with light so bright that the other Israelites could not look on his face. The Israelites were led through the desert by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. When Jesus was transfigured He shone with a light as bright as the sun. When Jesus appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus, Saul was blinded by the light which the others with him saw as well. When God was imminently

present, a bright light was associated with His presence.

The Shekinah Glory denotes the visible presence of God. This presence was real, and the physical manifestation was real. Remember that Saul was blinded by the light. The Lord often announces His presence by a very physical manifestation of bright light. What better way to announce the coming of Jesus, God's Son, the second Person of the Trinity than by a special light that is not some mere improbable astronomical event, rather an expression of the Shekinah glory, God's divine presence among men?

Astronomer Sherm Kanagy and theologian Ken Boa advance this thesis in their as yet unpublished manuscript, *Star of the Magi*. One of their strong emphases is the necessity to try to interpret the text of Matthew from first century Jewish perspective. They reject the idea that any astrological meaning could have been on Matthew's mind concerning this star. It is certainly fair to wonder, therefore, what this star was and how the magi interpreted it as a star signifying the birth of the King of the Jews. Kanagy and Boa reveal that Kepler concluded that the star was not some astronomical event and was a light that appeared in the lower atmosphere and therefore was not visible to everyone. But how did the magi interpret the star? This admittedly is the weakest part of the interpretation. The text gives no real hints. Magi were simply wise men of the east, not necessarily astrologers. They were Gentiles whose presence in the context of Matthew's Messianic gospel hints at the eventual spread of the gospel beyond the Jews. But how did they know what the star meant? We can only assume there was selective revelation. Only Paul understood the voice from the light, though all who were with him saw the light. Only Moses was allowed up on Mt. Sinai to receive the Law. Only Peter, James, and John were present at the transfiguration, and they were told to keep it to themselves until Jesus rose from the dead. Manifestations of God's presence with men often were accompanied by selective

revelation. Perhaps the meaning of the "star" was only revealed to the magi though others could actually see the "star."

Well, what was it, an astronomical event or the Shekinah Glory, manifesting God's presence among men? In my mind the mystery remains. Perhaps that is how God intends it to be.

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3 Points About Christmas: Evidence for Biblical Truth

Paul Rutherford suggests using three fulfilled biblical prophecies as an apologetic for biblical truth: Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, Jesus being taken to Egypt, and genocide surrounding His birth.

Pine scent inside my home, the quick defensive tightening of my skin as I walk outside into the cold brisk air, and then the reflexive opposite – the slow relaxation of my whole body as I stand in front of a fire warming myself.

These experiences during the holidays warm my heart.



As we look toward Christmas and hear the nativity story this season, I want to share with you one conversation starter I use to defend my faith.

Let me share it with you. It's rather simple. It's easy to remember because it comes entirely out of Matthew's second

chapter. It’s not long and involved either—just three points.

Skeptics ridicule the Bible for its many supposed “errors,” “holes,” and “inconsistencies.” They conclude that it’s unreliable. Sharing this quick three-point apologetic can assure them that the Bible is reliable and can be trusted.

If the Bible makes three prophecies and then records the fulfillments of those prophecies, don’t you think that makes the book at least a little bit credible? That’s what you can do citing just the Christmas story from Matthew 2.

You might be tempted to dismiss this, saying it doesn’t matter. But here’s why the reliability of Scripture matters. IF Scripture can be trusted, AND what it is says is true, then some of the recorded teachings of Jesus could radically alter your life.

In Matthew 10:39 Jesus said, “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” Or Luke 14:27, “Whoever does not carry his cross and follow Me cannot be My disciple.”

Does that mean the disciple of Jesus has to lose his life?!! In a sense, yes.

How’s that for radical?! If the Bible is reliable, then that means your life is at stake. Literally. That’s not exaggeration: your physical life and your spiritual life. Both.

So there’s a lot at stake then, if what the Bible says is true. Let’s take a look, then, shall we?

Matthew’s account of the Christmas story records three distinct fulfillments of prophecy: Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, Jesus being taken to Egypt, and genocide surrounding His birth. We’ll consider these one at a time.

Jesus Born in Bethlehem

Your life hangs in the balance of the Bible's reliability. That's why this discussion matters—whether or not the Bible is reliable. The Christmas story from Matthew 2 offers strong evidence that the Bible is true.

Today we get into the first of three instances in the Christmas story that point to the miraculous fulfillment of prophecy strictly surrounding Jesus' birth—namely the location of His birth, Bethlehem.

The gospel writer, Matthew, begins chapter two telling the story of the Magi—the fabled wise men from the East who came to worship the King of the Jews. They arrive in Jerusalem, the Jewish capital city, expecting to find the baby King. They are disappointed, but redirected to Bethlehem by King Herod's chief priests. Why? Because those priests had read the prophet Micah who foretold the Messiah, the coming King, would come out of Bethlehem.

In Matthew 2:6, the writer is quoting the prophet Micah 5:2.

You may have known Jesus was born in Bethlehem. That's a pretty widely known fact, which is also why it's a great place to start this conversation to make a case for the Bible's reliability. It might sound like this.

"You know Jesus was born in Bethlehem, right?" you could begin. "Well, did you know that was prophesied hundreds of years prior?" Don't worry about trying to remember the citation. Just focus on it being fulfilled prophecy. You can always look up the reference later if you want to. If you want extra credit, go for the prophet's name, Micah.

Some skeptics may grant that Jesus indeed fulfilled prophecy, but that he did so intentionally. That is, skeptics basically charge Jesus with reading the Hebrew prophets, and then deliberately fulfilling as many as he possibly could in order

to win favor, influence, and gain a following.

However, this is difficult to achieve when you haven't been born yet! How could he possibly have deliberately fulfilled anything when he wasn't deliberating anything at all? He wasn't conscious, and didn't even exist yet in the flesh.

So no, Jesus could not have fulfilled this prophecy by Himself in order to deceive and manipulate. What are the chances Jesus' birthplace would fulfill prophecy? Not likely!

Jesus' Flight to Egypt

The second fulfillment of prophecy recorded in Matthew 2 (the Christmas story), is Jesus' flight to Egypt. Practically overnight Jesus' father, Joseph, moves his family out of the country—out of Israel and into Egypt. Here's the text. Matthew 2:14-15.

"So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt. He remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON."

International travel back then was not what it is today. Modern conveniences ease travel today and increase comfort, yet it still remains difficult for us. Joseph and Mary, however, risked their very lives in order to relocate internationally. This effort was not undertaken lightly. Joseph was, after all, under orders from an angel.

Question: what do you think are the chances an ancient near-eastern middle-class laborer would embark upon world travel with only a moment's notice? He risked the life of his fiancée. He risked the life of his (adoptive) child, not to mention his own. This kind of journey was highly unusual. So it seems unlikely this scenario would have played out under other circumstances—that it was mere coincidence to fulfill

prophecy.

When compared to non-biblical prophecy, this one seems awfully specific. It names the country out of which he is called—Egypt—not something vague like "foreign country." No. The prophet Hosea mentions Egypt specifically in chapter 11:1. Further it mentions the gender of the child—a male child, a son.

The specificity of the prophecy and the unlikely nature of the event occurring on its own both point to divine orchestration. This was no accident. The fulfillment of prophecy in Jesus' birth make the Bible seem a lot more reliable.

Your life is in the balance of the Bible's reliability. The teachings recorded in this book can save your life. The bigger question is, will you believe them? Do you want to be saved? Do you believe Jesus is Lord and accept His sacrifice on the cross to save you from sin? (If so, please email me at paul@probe.org.) I want to hear from you.

Jesus, Genocide Survivor

Three fulfilled prophecies recorded by Matthew chapter two—in the Christmas story—underscore the reliability of this controversial ancient text. The Christmas story is evidence that the Bible is true.

Today we consider the third prophecy Jesus' birth story fulfills: namely, that there would be a genocide killing babies. Here's the text from Matthew 2:16-18.

"Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi. Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children; and she

refused to be comforted, because they were no more.’”

The gospel writer, Matthew, is quoting a prophecy of Jeremiah. To decode this passage, first keep in mind that Rachel, Jacob’s wife, was mother to Israel’s twelve tribes, and here she is a kind of symbolic mother for all of Israel. The second point to note is that Ramah is located in Bethlehem.

With that in mind, the prophecy foretells of Israel’s mothers crying in Bethlehem, mourning the loss of their children. The author draws our attention to the amazing accuracy of this prophecy. Not only does he get right the who and the what—the moms and their weeping because of the lost babies, but he also correctly prophesies the small village! Incredible.

What are the chances Jesus would fulfill this prophecy this specifically? And as we discussed before, if Jesus were no more than a charlatan attempting to self-fulfill these prophecies, how could a man orchestrate something as large-scale as the death of all the baby boys in a village? Plus the Bible records that was Herod’s idea. And remember, Herod didn’t want Jesus around. Herod was attempting to eliminate potential competition for his throne.

The genocide ordered by the Jewish king, an event that is part of the Christmas story of Jesus’ birth, fulfills prophecy. In so doing it shows the Bible is reliable. That’s a big deal because the Bible records the story of a very important man—one whom you need to know: Jesus.

Conclusion

We’ve been discussing how the Christmas story indicates the Bible is true. We’ve done that by considering three instances recorded in Matthew 2 that fulfill Old Testament prophecy.

First, the prophet Micah prophesied the coming Ruler would come out of Bethlehem. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Matthew 2:1 records that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Second, the prophet Hosea prophesied that the Messiah would be called out of Egypt. Jesus' father Joseph moved infant Jesus to Egypt to flee the coming baby genocide. When it was safe, Joseph was instructed in a dream to return. So Jesus was called out of Egypt. (Matthew 2:14)

Then thirdly, the prophet Jeremiah prophesied all the mothers in Bethlehem would mourn the loss of their children. Matthew 2:16 records that after King Herod learns the news of Jesus' birth, he orders all infant boys in Bethlehem killed.

What are the chances of one man fulfilling ALL of those prophecies? Not likely! If you want more, read Josh McDowell's book *The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict*. He records 61 prophecies fulfilled by Jesus. In it he quotes professor Peter Stoner who calculated the probability of Jesus fulfilling just eight prophecies. He illustrates the likelihood this way. Cover the state of Texas in two feet of silver dollars. Mark just one silver dollar. Now choose one silver dollar at random from anywhere in the state. The chances of picking up the marked silver dollar on the first try are the same as Jesus fulfilling just eight Old Testament prophecies. Not happening!

We have good evidence that what the Bible records is accurate. It will stand up to criticism that Jesus attempted to fulfill prophecy on his own, to position himself as a teacher with authority, influence, or to gain a following. But the fulfillments of Old Testament prophecy we discussed cannot be intentionally self-fulfilled. They either occurred before He was born, or were entirely out of His control.

Do you now believe in Jesus because you listened to this? Email me. I'd love to hear from you (paul@probe.org). Are you already His disciple? God has a unique purpose for your life, only you can fulfill. You are his ambassador. Share the good news. Your life is not the only one at stake. Your neighbor's is too. Have you shared with him or her yet? Take your next step of faithfulness today, whatever that is. I am praying you

do.

You now have a great conversation starter to help you get there. The Christmas story is tremendous evidence for biblical truth.

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Christmas Articles



Various articles about Christmas by Probe staff members.

Why the Stories of the Virgin Birth Fit Together [Tom Davis]
Tom Davis answers the charge that the two nativity accounts in the gospels contradict each other, showing how well they complement each other by contributing details from two different perspectives.

A Christmas Quiz [Dale Taliaferro]
A quiz concerning the Christmas story from a biblical perspective.

3 Points About Christmas: Evidence for Biblical Truth [Paul Rutherford]

Paul Rutherford suggests using three fulfilled biblical prophecies as an apologetic for biblical truth.

The Star of Bethlehem [Dr. Ray Bohlin]
What was the Star of Bethlehem? Some people suggest is was an astronomical conjunction of planets and stars. But it might have been the Shekinah Glory, a physical manifestation of God's presence on earth.

Christmas Film Favorites [Todd Kappelman]
Todd Kappelman highlights some favorite films of the Christmas season, encouraging Christians to enjoy the films while separating the sacred from the secular: *A Christmas Carol, Miracle on 34th Street, How the Grinch Stole Christmas, It's a Wonderful Life*, and *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.

Truth You Can Sing About: 5 Christmas Carols [Steven Davis]
Probe Radio producer Steven Davis wrote the scripts providing devotional insights into five Christmas carols, and his son and Mind Games Camp alumnus Jon Clive Davis wrote and performed the music underneath.

Truth You Can Sing About: Part 2 [Steven Davis]
Probe Radio producer Steven Davis wrote five more scripts providing devotional insights into five Christmas carols, and his son and Mind Games Camp alumnus Jon Clive Davis wrote and performed the music underneath.

Truth You Can Sing About: Part 3 [Steven Davis]
For the third year in a row, Steven Davis and his son Jon Clive Davis collaborated on a new look at five Christmas carols, accompanied throughout each day's broadcast by new compositions of each carol.

The Theology of Christmas Carols [Dr. Robert Pyne]
A look at the theology behind five Christmas carols: Come Thou Long Expected Jesus, Hark the Herald Angels Sing, Joy to the World, O Little Town of Bethlehem, and O Holy Night.

Christmas SHINY! [Sue Bohlin]
The visible presence of God in the Old Testament—the Shekinah glory—shows up again at Christmas. No wonder we like shiny, sparkly things that remind us of the glory of heaven!

Is Christmas Necessary? [Jerry Solomon]
Christians have had to respond to the customs of the surrounding culture since the beginning of the church. In the end, though, Christmas is necessary only in terms of its historical and theological content.

Reincarnation: The Christmas Counterfeit [Sue Bohlin]
Sue blogs that Jesus is the only person who had a life before His birth, which we celebrate at Christmas.

Celebrating Christmas Wrongly? [Sue Bohlin]
Sue suggests that our motives are what determines whether we're celebrating Christmas right or not.

Loving God Through Xmas Music? [Sue Bohlin]
Sue Bohlin suggests that believers practice discernment as we listen to Christmas music, putting each song in the right category and allowing each category to point us to Christ.

Why I Won't Apologize For Watching Hallmark Christmas Movies [Sue Bohlin]
Cultivating a biblical worldview, seeing everything through the lens of creation|fall|redemption, has led Sue to see how the happy endings of Hallmark movies point to the Ultimate Happy Ending in the book of Revelation.

The Christmas Story: Does It Still Matter? [Rusty Wright]
Christmas often means time with family, hectic shopping, parties, cards and gifts. But what about the first Christmas? Why is the original story the baby in a manger, shepherds, wise men, angels important, if at all? The answer may surprise you.

The First Christmas Wreath [Jimmy Williams]

The founder of Probe Ministries examines the role of the wreath in Christmas.

The Great Light [Jimmy Williams]
A short essay on the role of light at Christmas.

The Stable [Jimmy Williams]
Jimmy Williams examines the symbolic and prophetic role of the stable in Christmas.

Are You Listening? Do You Hear What I Hear? [Rusty Wright]
Have you ever missed a great opportunity because you weren't listening carefully? Twenty centuries ago some clues to impending good news of monumental import eluded most folks. Fascinating prophecies of Jesus' birth and life bring revealing insights into your own life today.

A Christmas Quiz

Dr. Dale Taliaferro's 38-question quiz concerning the Christmas story from a biblical perspective.

Take the quiz yourself: click here for a format with the questions and answers separated.

1. Can you name the parents of Jesus?
a. Mary (Matt. 1:16; Luke 1:31, 2:6-7).
b. God (Luke 1:32, 35).
c. Joseph (by adoption) (Matt 1:16, 19-20, 24-25).

2. Where did Joseph and Mary live before they were married?



a. Mary—In Nazareth (Luke 1:26-27).
b. Joseph—In Nazareth, presumably (Luke 2:4).

3. What was the name of the angel who appeared to Mary?
Gabriel (Luke 1:26).

4. Where did Joseph and Mary live after their marriage?
Nazareth (Luke 2:4-5, 39).

5. Where was Mary when the angel appeared to her?
In Nazareth, inside some structure or building (Luke 1:26, 28).

6. Whom did Mary visit immediately after Gabriel appeared to her?
Elizabeth, her relative (Luke 1:36).

7. How far along in her pregnancy was Elizabeth when Gabriel appeared to Mary?
Six months (Luke 1:26, 36).

8. How long did Mary stay with Elizabeth?
About three months (Luke 1:56).

9. Why didn't Mary stay to celebrate the birth of John?
Probably fear of stoning, since she was pregnant and beginning "to show."

10. How far along in her pregnancy was Mary when she broke the news to Joseph?
At least three months (Luke 1:38-39, 56).

11. Why were Joseph and Mary going to Bethlehem?
To be enrolled for the taxes (Luke 2:1-3).

12. Why did Mary accompany Joseph?
a. A practical reason (she was well along in her pregnancy).
b. A biblical-prophetical reason (Micah 5:2).

13. What determined the city to which each Jew had to travel in order to be taxed?
Lineage. Joseph had to go to the city of David since he was of "the house and family of David." (Luke 2:3-4).

14. Who, then, would be in Bethlehem?
a. Joseph's relatives—descendants of David (Luke 2:3-4).
b. Possibly Mary's relatives also (Luke 3:31-32).

15. How did they travel?
Probably in a caravan (cf. Luke 10:30-37, esp. 30). The Scripture doesn't say anything about their journey to Bethlehem.

16. Why couldn't Joseph and Mary find space in the inn?
Probably because Joseph's relatives rejected them and wouldn't give up their space (Luke 2:5; cf. Luke 1:61, 2:5; John 8:41).

17. Who were the first people to come to see Jesus according to Scripture?
Shepherds (Luke 2:8, 15-16).

18. What chorus did the angels sing to the shepherds?
None. They said, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men of good will" (Luke 2:14).

19. What sign did the angels tell the shepherds to look for?
The baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger (Luke 2:12, 16-17).

20. What was the manger?
A feeding trough made of stone.

21. In what way do the meaning of the Hebrew term for Bethlehem and the sign given by the angels prepare us for Jesus' later ministry?
a. Bethlehem means "house of bread," which correlates with Jesus' Bread of Life discourse (John 6:22-65).
b. Jesus was wrapped in swaddling clothes—the same kind of

clothes He would be buried in (John 19:40).

22. What happened eight days after Jesus' birth?
His circumcision (Luke 2:21).

23. What happened 32 days after Jesus' circumcision (40 days after Jesus' birth)?
Mary's ceremonial purification and Jesus' redemption (Luke 2:22-24).

24. What are two reasons that Joseph and Mary took Jesus to Jerusalem?
a. To fulfill the Law—Jesus' redemption and Mary's purification (Luke 2:22-23).
b. To fulfill prophecy (the personal prophetic revelation given to Simeon) (Luke 2:25-32, esp. 26).

25. Where did Joseph and Mary go after the purification ceremony?
Nazareth (Luke 2:39).

26. What are magi?
Politically powerful scholars and astronomers ("king-makers").

27. How many wise men came to see Jesus?
Scripture does not say, but Augustine and Chrysostom say twelve. Another tradition names three: Melchior (Shem's descendant), Caspar (Hem's descendant), and Balthasar (Jopheth's descendant).

28. How many gifts did the wise men bring and to whom did they present their gifts?
At least one gift from each wise man. They presented the gifts—plural in number—to Jesus. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh designate appositionally the kinds of gifts, not the number (Matt 2:1-2, 11).

29. What was curious about the star?
It was not constant (Matt. 2:2, 10).

30. How did Herod use the star?
He calculated the age of the child by the length of time it had been appearing and reappearing (Matt 2:7, 16). The wise men did not discourage this thinking.

31. Where were Jesus, Mary, and Joseph when the wise men reached them?
a. In a house, not the stable (Matt 2:11).
b. In Nazareth. The impression given in Matthew 2 is that of a hurried, immediate escape for all (Luke 2:39). Thus there was no time to fulfill the law or the prophetic utterance (cf. no. 24).

32. How old was Jesus at this time?
Two months to two years.

33. In what year was Jesus born?
Five or four B.C. (Herod died in March or April of 4 B.C.)

34. How long was Jesus in Egypt with His parents?
From one month to over one year.

35. How did Joseph and Mary finance the trip to Egypt?
Probably with the gifts of the magi.

36. Where was Jesus raised upon His return to Israel?
Nazareth (Matt 2:23).

37. How old was Jesus when He *began* His ministry?
Thirty-three to thirty-four years old (born 5 to 4 B.C., began ministry A.D. 29). Luke 3:23 tells us he was “about thirty”; the Greek indicates a rough (rather than close) estimate.

38. How old was Jesus when He died?
Thirty-seven to thirty-eight years old, depending on whether His ministry was three or four years in length.

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Celebrating Christmas Wrongly?

Today is Christmas. Happy Jesus' Birthday!

But not everyone is on board with celebrating Christmas. I was recently in an online conversation with someone who asserts that "true" Christians would never celebrate the birth of the Savior because the scripture doesn't command us to remember it, as we are told to do with Christ's death. Luke 22:19 records Jesus' instructions to celebrate the Lord's supper: "Do this in remembrance of Me." But the Bible bears no such instruction concerning His birth. So it must be wrong . . . right?



I couldn't disagree more. One of the things I most love about being a Christ-follower and a student of the Bible is that Jesus taught that the Kingdom of Heaven was about celebrating! (See Luke 14 and Matthew 22.) Since one of my identities is "God's Party Girl," that certainly resonates with me. Jesus continually got in trouble with the religious snobs who didn't care for His habit of partying with sinners—who then turned into Christ-honoring disciples!

And Christmas, at its core, is a holy celebration of the most

astounding thing that ever happened on Planet Earth—God becoming flesh and dwelling among us. Yes, there are parts of Christmas that are linked with pagan traditions. But God knows how to tell the difference, and by using our discernment skills, we can too. That's one way we can love Him with our minds (Luke 10:27), which is part of the greatest commandment.

In this past month of ramping up to Christmas, I have not failed to be blessed by the Christmas music that's everywhere, especially radio stations. Again, using discernment, I can dismiss (actually, in my mind I use the word "flush") the non-holy Christmas songs like "Santa Baby" and "Jingle Bells," and open up my spirit to glory in the gorgeous theology expressed in Christmas carols like no other songs. I still get chills when hearing my car radio proclaim, for example, the deep truths in "Hark the Herald Angels Sing":

> Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see;
> Hail, th'incarnate Deity:
> Pleased, as man, with men to dwell,
> Jesus, our Emmanuel!

The cheery Christmas lights in our neighborhood remind me that Jesus came as the light of the world, and I celebrate.

The Christmas gifts we give each other point to God's great gift of salvation through His Son, and I celebrate.

But can we celebrate Christmas wrongly? Is it even wrong to celebrate Christmas in the first place?

It always, always comes down to the heart, to our motives. Jesus continually pulled back the covers on people's masks and presentations to expose what was truly going on inside and allow them to see themselves in the light of truth.

Is God honored by how we celebrate His Son's birth in our hearts? When music or lights move us to a place of worship smack dab in the middle of our days, does that glorify Him? Of

course it does!

On the other hand, if we are stressed by the compulsion to make our families look picture perfect on social media . . . if we have to go into debt to buy Christmas gifts we can't afford . . . if we're continually snarling and complaining at all the holiday-related traffic and social demands, does that glorify Him? Nope. That's not celebrating Jesus' birthday and it's not honoring Him.

It all comes down to motive.

It's not wrong to celebrate Christmas, but it's possible to celebrate it wrongly. Here's hoping you stay focused on Jesus. Merry Christmas!

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/celebrating_christmas_wrongly
on December 25, 2018.

The Pagan Connection: Did Christianity Borrow from the Mystery Religions?

Dr. Pat Zukeran examines the myths from mystery religions which are sometimes argued to be the source of our Gospel accounts of Jesus. He finds that any such connection is extremely weak and does not detract from the reliability of the gospel message.

One of the popular ideas being promoted today especially on the internet is the idea that the miracle stories of Jesus were borrowed from ancient pagan myths. Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy write in their book *The Laughing Jesus*, "Each mystery religion taught its own version of the myth of the dying and resurrecting Godman, who was known by different names in different places. In Egypt, where the mysteries began, he was Osiris. In Greece he became Dionysus, in Asia Minor he is known as Attis, in Syria he is Adonis, in Persia he is Mithras, in Alexandria he is Serapis, to name a few."{1}



Proponents of this idea point out that there are several parallels between these pagan myths and the story of Jesus Christ. Parallels including a virgin birth, a divine Son of God, the god dying for mankind, resurrection from the dead, and others are cited. Skeptics allege that Christianity did not present any unique teaching, but borrowed the majority of its tenets from the mystery religions.

Indeed, some of the alleged parallels appear to be quite striking. One example is the god Mithras. This myth teaches that Mithras was born of a virgin in a cave, that he was a traveling teacher with twelve disciples, promised his disciples eternal life, and sacrificed himself for the world. The god Dionysius miraculously turns water into wine. The Egyptian god Osiris is killed and then resurrects from the dead.

This position was taught in the nineteenth century by the History of Religions School, but by the mid-twentieth century this view was shown to be false and it was abandoned even by those who believed Christianity was purely a natural religion.{2} Ron Nash wrote, "During a period of time running roughly from about 1890 to 1940, scholars often alleged that primitive Christianity had been heavily influenced by Platonism, Stoicism, the pagan religions, or other movements in the Hellenistic world. Largely as a result of a series of

scholarly books and articles written in rebuttal, allegations of early Christianity's dependence on its Hellenistic environment began to appear much less frequently in the publications of Bible scholars and classical scholars. Today most Bible scholars regard the question as a dead issue."{3}

Despite the fact that many of the arguments were rejected, this theory has once again emerged through the popular writings of skeptics.

What makes Christianity unique among the world religions is that it is a historical faith based on the historical person of Christ who lived a miraculous life. In what follows, we will examine Christianity to see if it teaches a unique Savior or if it is simply a copy of these pagan myths.

Fallacies of the Theory

There are several flaws with the theory that Christianity isn't unique. New Testament scholars Ed Komoszewski, James Sawyer, and Dan Wallace point out several fallacies. The first is the *composite* fallacy. Proponents of this view lump together pagan religions as if they are one religion when making comparisons to Christianity. An attempt is made to show strong parallels by combining features from various religions.{4} However, when the individual myths themselves are studied, the reader soon finds major differences and very little commonality.

A second fallacy is a fallacy of *terminology*. Christian terms are used to describe pagan beliefs, and then it is concluded that there are parallel origins and meanings. Although the terms used are the same, however, there are big differences between Christian and pagan practices and definitions.{5}

A third fallacy is the *chronological* fallacy. Supporters of the theory incorrectly assume that Christianity borrowed many of its ideas from the mystery religions, but the evidence

reveals it was actually the other way around. There is no archaeological evidence that mystery religions were in Palestine in the first century A.D. Jews and early Christians loathed syncretism with other religions. They were uncompromisingly monotheistic while Greeks were polytheistic. Christians also strongly defended the uniqueness of Christ (Acts 4:12). Although Christians encountered pagan religions, they opposed any adopting of foreign beliefs.{6} Ron Nash stated, "The uncompromising monotheism and the exclusiveness that the early church preached and practiced make the possibility of any pagan inroads . . . unlikely if not impossible."{7}

Fourth is the *intentional* fallacy. Christianity has a linear view of history. History is moving in a purposeful direction. There is a purpose for mankind's existence; history is moving in a direction to fulfill God's plan for the ages. The mystery religions have a cyclical view of history. History continues in a never ending cycle or repetition often linked with the vegetation cycle.{8}

Christianity gains its source from Judaism, not Greek mythology. Jesus, Paul, and the apostles appeal to the Old Testament, and you find direct teachings and fulfillments in the New Testament. Teachings such as one God, blood atonement for sin, salvation by grace, sinfulness of mankind, bodily resurrection, are sourced in Judaism and foreign to Greek mythology. The idea of resurrection was not taught in any Greek mythological work prior to the late second century A.D.{9}

Legends of the Mystery Religions

As noted above, critics of Christianity point to several parallels between Christianity and the myths of the mystery religions. However, a brief study of the legends reveals that there are few if any parallels to the life of Jesus Christ.

Historians acknowledge that there are several variations to many of these myths and that they also evolved and changed under the influence of Roman culture and, later, Christianity. Historical research indicates that it was not until the third century A.D. that Christianity and the mystery religions came into real contact with one another.{10} A brief overview of some of the most popular myths reveals the lack of resemblance with Christianity.

In the matter of death and resurrection, major differences are seen between Christianity and pagan myths. First, none of the resurrections in these myths involve the God of the universe dying a voluntary death for His creation. Only Jesus died for sins; the death of other gods was due to hunting accidents, emasculation, and other calamities. The gods in these stories die by compulsion, not by choice, sometimes in bitterness and despair, never in self-giving love.{11}

Second, Jesus died once for all (Heb. 7:27, 9:25-28), while pagan gods repeat the death and rebirth cycle yearly with the seasons.

Third, Jesus' death was not a defeat but a triumph. The New Testament's mood of victory and joy (1 Cor. 15:50-57 and Col. 2:13-15) stands in contrast to the mood of pagan myths which is dark and sorrowful over the fate of their gods.

Finally, Jesus' death was an actual event in history. Christianity insists on and defends the historical credibility of the Gospel accounts while the pagan cults make no such attempt.{12}

A popular myth that some believe parallels the resurrection of Christ is the story of Osiris. The cult of the gods Osiris and his wife Isis originated in Egypt. According to the legend, Osiris' wicked brother Set murdered him and sank his coffin to the bottom of the Nile. Isis recovered the coffin and returned it to Egypt. However, Set discovered the body, cut it into

fourteen pieces, and threw the pieces into the Nile. Isis collected thirteen of the body parts and bandaged the body, making the first mummy. Osiris was transformed and became the ruler of the underworld, and exists in a state of semi-consciousness.

This legend hardly parallels the resurrection of Christ. Osiris is not resurrected from death to life. Instead he is changed into another form and lives in the underworld in a zombie state. Christ rose physically from the grave, conquering sin and death. The body that was on the cross was raised in glory.

Resurrection Parallels

Two other popular myths compared to Christianity are those of Mithras and Attis.

There is a belief that the story of Mithras contains a death and resurrection. However, there is no teaching in early Mithraism of neither his death nor his resurrection. Ron Nash stated, "Mithraism had no concept of the death and resurrection of its god and no place for any concept of rebirth – at least during its early stages. . . . Moreover, Mithraism was basically a military cult. Therefore, one must be skeptical about suggestions that it appealed to nonmilitary people like the early Christians."{13}

Moreover, Mithraism flowered after Christianity, not before, so Christianity could not have copied from it. The timing is incorrect to have influenced the development of first-century Christianity. It is most likely the reverse: Christianity influenced Mithraism. Edwin Yamauchi, one of the foremost scholars on ancient Persia and Mithraism states, "The earnest mithraea are dated to the early second century. There are a handful of inscriptions that date to the early second century, but the vast majority of texts are dated after A.D. 140. Most

of what we have as evidence of Mithraism comes in the second, third, and fourth centuries AD. That's basically what's wrong with the theories about Mithraism influencing the beginnings of Christianity."{14}

The legend of Attis was popular in the Hellenistic world. According to this legend, Cybele, also known as the mother goddess, fell in love with a young Phrygian shepherd named Attis. However, he was unfaithful to her so she caused him to go mad. In his insanity, he castrated himself and died. Cybele mourned greatly (which caused death to enter into the world). She preserved Attis' dead body, allowing his hair to grow and little finger to move. In some versions, Attis returns to life in the form of an evergreen tree. However, there is no bodily resurrection to life. All versions teach that Attis remained dead. Any account of a resurrection of Attis does not appear till a hundred and fifty years after Christ.{15}

To sum up, the claim that Christianity adopted its resurrection account from the pagan mystery religions is false. There are very few parallels to the resurrection of Christ. The idea of a physical resurrection to glory is foreign to these religions, and the stories of dying a rising gods do not appear till well after Christianity.

Myths of a Virgin Birth

Let us now look-at the alleged parallels between virgin births in the mystery religions and the virgin birth of Christ. Parallels quickly break down when the facts are analyzed. In the pagan myths, the gods lust after women, take on human form, and enter into physical relationships. Also, the offspring that are produced are half human and half divine beings in contrast to Christ who is fully human and fully divine, the creator of the universe who existed from eternity past.

The alleged parallels to the virgin birth are found in the legends of Dionysus and Mithras. Dionysus is the god of wine. In this story, Zeus disguised as a man had relations with Semele and she became pregnant. In a jealous rage, Hera, Zeus' wife, attempted to burn Semele. Zeus rescued the fetus and sewed it into his thigh until the offspring, Dionysus, was born. The birth of Dionysus was the result of a sexual union of Zeus, in the form of a man, and Semele. This cannot be considered a virgin birth.

One of the popular cults of the later Roman Empire was the cult of Mithra which originated in Persia. Mithra was supposedly born when he emerged from a rock; he was carrying a knife and torch and wearing a Phrygian cap. He battled first with the sun and then with a primeval bull, thought to be the first act of creation. Mithra slew the bull, which then became the ground of life for the human race.{16} The birth of Mithra from a rock, born fully grown, hardly parallels the virgin birth of Christ.

New Testament scholar. Raymond Brown states that alleged virgin parallels "consistently involve a type of *hieros gamos* where a divine male, in human or other form, impregnates a woman, either through normal sexual intercourse or through some substitute form of penetration. They are not really similar to non-sexual virginal conception that is at the core of the infancy narratives, a conception where there is no male deity or element to impregnate Mary."{17}

The Gospel of Luke teaches that the Holy Spirit came upon Mary, and through the power of the Most High she became pregnant. Mary had no physical relationship with a man or a deity who became a man.

Our study of the mystery religions reveals very few parallels with Christianity. For this reason, the theory that Christianity copied its major tenets from the mystery religions should be rejected.

Notes

1. Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, *The Laughing Jesus* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2005), 55-56.
2. Ed Komoszewski, James Sawyer, and Daniel Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications: 2006), 221.
3. Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2007), 167.
4. Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus,* 223-4.
5. Ibid., 224-6.
6. Ibid., 231-234.

7. Ronald Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks* (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 168.
8. Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, 221.
9. Gary Habermas, *The Historical Jesus* (Joplin, MO.: College Press Publishing, 1997), 34.
10. Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 129.
11. Norman Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL :InterVarsity Press, 1984),53.
12. Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 171-172.
13. Ibid., 144.
14. Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus,* 169.
15. Ibid., 177.
16. Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 144.
17. Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 182.

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A Christmas Quiz: Separated

Version

Dr. Dale Taliaferro's 38-question quiz concerning the Christmas story from a biblical perspective.

The quiz with questions and answers together can be found here.

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Answer

2. Where did Joseph and Mary live before they were married?
Answer

3. What was the name of the angel who appeared to Mary?
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33. In what year was Jesus born?
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34. How long was Jesus in Egypt with His parents?
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35. How did Joseph and Mary finance the trip to Egypt?
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36. Where was Jesus raised upon His return to Israel?
Answer

37. How old was Jesus when He *began* His ministry?
Answer

38. How old was Jesus when He died?
Answer

Answers

1. a. Mary (Matt. 1:16; Luke 1:31, 2:6-7).

b. God (Luke 1:32, 35).
c. Joseph (by adoption) (Matt 1:16, 19-20, 24-25).
Back

2. a. Mary—In Nazareth (Luke 1:26-27).
b. Joseph—In Nazareth, presumably (Luke 2:4).
Back

3. Gabriel (Luke 1:26).
Back

4. Nazareth (Luke 2:4-5, 39).
Back

5. In Nazareth, inside some structure or building (Luke 1:26, 28).
Back

6. Elizabeth, her relative (Luke 1:36).
Back

7. Six months (Luke 1:26, 36).
Back

8. About three months (Luke 1:56).
Back

9. Probably fear of stoning, since she was pregnant and beginning to “show.”
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10. At least three months (Luke 1:38-39, 56).
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11. To be enrolled for the taxes (Luke 2:1-3).
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12. a. A practical reason (she was well along in her pregnancy).
b. A biblical-prophetical reason (Micah 5:2).

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13. Lineage. Joseph had to go to the city of David since he was of “the house and family of David.” (Luke 2:3-4).
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14. a. Joseph’s relatives—descendants of David (Luke 2:3-4).
b. Possibly Mary’s relatives also (Luke 3:31-32).
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15. Probably in a caravan (cf. Luke 10:30-37, esp. 30). The Scripture doesn’t say anything about their journey to Bethlehem.
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16. Probably because Joseph’s relatives rejected them and wouldn’t give up their space (Luke 2:5; cf. Luke 1:61, 2:5; John 8:41).
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17. Shepherds (Luke 2:8, 15-16).
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18. None. They said “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men of good will” (Luke 2:14).
Back

19. The baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger (Luke 2:12, 16-17).
Back

20. A feeding trough made of stone.
Back

21. a. Bethlehem means “house of bread,” which correlates with Jesus’ Bread of Life discourse (John 6:22-65).
b. Jesus was wrapped in swaddling clothes—the same kind of clothes He would be buried in (John 19:40).
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22. His circumcision (Luke 2:21).
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23. Mary’s ceremonial purification and Jesus’ redemption (Luke 2:22-24).
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24. a. To fulfill the Law—Jesus’ redemption and Mary’s purification (Luke 2:22-23).
b. To fulfill prophecy (the personal prophetic revelation given to Simeon) (Luke 2:25-32, esp. 26).
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25. Nazareth (Luke 2:39).
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37. 33 to 34 years old (born 5 to 4 B.C., began ministry A.D. 29). Luke 3:23 tells us he was “about thirty”; the Greek indicates a rough (rather than close) estimate.
Back

38. 37 to 38 years old, depending on whether His ministry was three or four years in length.
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Christmas SHINY!

I love shiny.

I love sparkly, glittery, light-filled, dazzling *anything*.



My motto is, “If it don’t shine, it ain’t mine.” And I’m not alone. When women visit Dallas, one of the most popular places for friends to take them is to a huge store that sells thousands of pieces of costume jewelry with more bling than you can imagine.

Why do so many of us like shiny? I think it’s because we are hard-wired for worship and we long for heaven where even the streets gleam with gold, and beautiful jewels and pearls abound. Heaven is a shiny, glorious place that radiates the beauty of a shiny, glorious Savior.

But our early “shiny” is a poor, sad imitation of the true glory of God. I especially love how God reveals Himself in the Bible through His *Shekinah glory*, where the invisible God makes His glory visible and weighty with importance and value.

We see more instances of the Shekinah glory in the book of Exodus than any other book in the Bible:

Moses and the Burning Bush: God appears to Moses as a fire within a bush that doesn’t consume the bush, revealing Himself as the great I AM, calling Moses to lead His people out of slavery into the Promised Land.

In the cloud by day, pillar of fire by night. God led His people for forty years in their wilderness wanderings by a

visible manifestation of His presence.

The cloud on Mt. Sinai where Moses met with God, and He gave Moses His rules for relationship in the Ten Commandments.

Moses asks God to show him His glory. While up on the mountain, Moses asks to see God's glory; God basically replies, "You can't see My face and live. While My glory passes by I will hide you in a cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand. Then I'll let you see My backside. That will be safe for you."

After seeing God's Shekinah glory, **Moses' face shone so brightly** that it hurt to look at him. It was reflected glory, the way the moon reflects the sun's light. Still, it was so powerful that his face literally shone when he came down off the mountain to speak to the people.

The cloud of Shekinah glory covered the Tent of Meeting and filled the Tabernacle when they dedicated it. The glory was so intense Moses couldn't go inside.

We see the Shekinah glory one more time in the Old Testament, when Solomon's temple was dedicated, and God's glory fills the temple like it had filled the Tabernacle. Then we don't see it again for hundreds of years.

The next time in scripture we see the Shekinah glory is the night Jesus was born!

> And while Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem for the government's census, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.
>
> That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the

> Lord's glory [*the Shekinah glory*] surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."
>
> Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying,
>
> "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased." (Luke 2:6-18)

But wait! But that's not all!

Matthew 2 tells us about the magi, the wise men from the east, who traveled to Jerusalem in search of the baby King of the Jews. They followed a star that moved until it stopped right over the house where the toddler Jesus and his family were living.

My husband Ray says it wasn't a natural conjunction of planets or stars, since they don't move like that and certainly don't stop over a house. In his Probe article "The Star of Bethlehem," he suggests it was the Shekinah glory leading the Magi to Jesus.

The same Shekinah glory we see in Exodus appears in the Christmas story. So much of the Old Testament points to Jesus, and we get to see it start to unfold in the Christmas story.

God is all about connecting the dots so we understand how things fit together. Not so we can enjoy the intellectual satisfaction of puzzle pieces interlocking, but so we can truly grasp that He made us for Himself, He made us for relationship with Him.

The Shekinah glory in Exodus points to the glory revealed in

the Christmas story, where the Son leaves heaven and comes to earth as a perfect, sinless human, fully God and fully man. He lives a perfect, sinless life then dies on the cross to take the punishment for our sin onto Himself. Three days later He rises from the dead and He is alive today.

Little Baby Jesus isn't still in the manger: He is now seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven in glory!

Shiny, resplendent, luminous glory. And that is the *real* reason I love shiny. It reminds me of Jesus, of heaven, of what lies ahead for those of us who have trusted Christ.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/christmas_shiny on Dec. 15, 2015.

Is Christmas Necessary?

Christians have had to respond to the customs of the surrounding culture since the beginning of the church. In the end, though, Jerry Solomon wrote that Christmas is necessary only in terms of its historical and theological content.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

What do you think of when you hear the word "Christmas"? Frantic shopping? Family traditions? A commemoration of the birth of Jesus? Or a combination of all these responses and more? If you've been living in the United States long, you probably find it difficult to focus on just one without the others. And if you're a Christian you probably want to focus

on the birth of Jesus, but you spend a great deal of your December on shopping and traditions. Then you may finish "The Season," as it has come to be known, feeling guilty because you didn't focus on Jesus as the "Reason for the Season." You may even want to ask if the season is really necessary, because you're exhausted, broke, and relieved when it's over for another year.



So we want to ask, "Is Christmas necessary?"

In order to address this question we will focus first on a history of the celebration and its accompanying customs. Then we will concentrate on whether economics, traditions, or theology make it necessary.

A Brief History of Christmas

The very early church has not left us with any indication that Christmas was a part of their yearly calendar. Certainly the New Testament doesn't include such an emphasis. Philip Schaff, a church historian, offers three reasons for this.

> In the first place, no corresponding festival was presented by the Old Testament, as in the case of Easter and Pentecost. In the second place, the day and month of the birth of Christ are nowhere stated in the gospel history, and cannot be certainly determined. Again: the church lingered first of all about the death and resurrection of Christ, the completed fact of redemption, and made this the center of the weekly worship and the church year. Finally: the earlier feast of Epiphany…afforded a substitute. The artistic religious impulse, however, which produced the whole church year, must sooner or later have called into existence a festival which forms the groundwork of all other

annual festivals in honor of Christ.{1}

So the Christmas celebration appeared comparatively late in church history. And it appeared as the result of a change in the ways Christians dealt with their surrounding culture. In order to see the progression of this change, it will be helpful if we consider early pagan festivals that were eventually transformed by the church.

Some scholars assert that the earliest precursor of the Christmas celebration can be found within a Persian religion that influenced Roman life.

One of the great festivals of ancient Rome was related to the winter solstice, celebrated on December 25 as the Natal Day of the Unconquerable Sun and tied to the Persian religion of Mithraism, one of Christianity's early rivals. The church took over this day to turn the attention of Christians from the old heathen festival to the celebration of the "sun of righteousness."{2}

It is especially interesting to note that the mythological god Mithra, for whom Mithraism was named, "is described as being born from a rock, the birth being witnessed by shepherds on a day (December 25) that was later claimed by Christians as the nativity of Christ."{3}

Actually "the Christmas festival was probably the Christian transformation or regeneration of a series of kindred heathen festivals…which were kept in Rome in the month of December, in commemoration of the golden age of universal freedom and equality, and in honor of the unconquered sun, and which were great holidays, especially for slaves and children."{4} Our contemporary struggle with how to react to Halloween may be similar to the struggle the early church had with Christmas. In particular, they had to decide if they should and would celebrate the birth of Christ. Then the question was, when would this celebration take place? Their answers are

instructive for us today.

Schaff describes this regeneration of heathen festivals in light of the cultural changes that began to affect the church:

> Had the Christmas festival arisen in the period of the persecution, its derivation from these pagan festivals would be refuted by the then reigning abhorrence of everything heathen; but in the Nicene age this rigidness of opposition between the church and the world was in a great measure softened by the general conversion of the heathen. Besides, there lurked in those pagan festivals themselves, in spite of all their sensual abuses, a deep meaning and an adaptation to a real want; they might be called unconscious prophecies of the Christmas feast.{5}

Frank Gaebelein informs us that before Christmas was recognized in the West another festival was prominent among Christians in the East.

> The earliest reference to December 25 as the date for the Nativity occurs in the Philocalian calendar, which refers to its Roman observance in A.D. 336. But recognition of December 25 [in the West] had been preceded by that of another date—January 6 [in the East], when Epiphany was celebrated first in relation to the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan and later in relation to the coming of the wise men, or Magi, to worship the infant Jesus.{6}

When the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity he sanctioned the "Christianizing" of various pagan emphases. So he was probably influential "in the institution of a Christian feast of the birthday of the Sun of Righteousness' (Malachi 4:2) as a rival to the popular pagan festival of the Unconquered Sun (Sol Invictus) at the winter solstice."{7} But it is helpful to know that his understanding of Christian doctrine was such that he "was not aware of any mutual exclusiveness between Christianity and his faith in the

Unconquered Sun."{8}

So from the era of Constantine (306-337) onward, Christmas (from the Old English Cristes Maesse, "Christ's Mass") was gradually included in Western culture. By the time of the Reformation most leaders, including Martin Luther, "were for the abolition of all feast days, except Sunday; but the…long habits of the people were against such a radical reform."{9} "During Cromwell's time in seventeenth-century England [Christmas] was banned by Parliament, and in old New England the celebration of Christmas was officially forbidden."{10} Now, of course, almost a quarter of each year is devoted to the celebration of Christmas in American culture. And as we will see, a variety of customs emphasize many facets of the season.

Should this history make us uneasy? Should we consider disbanding the Christmas season? Obviously some have answered, "Yes!" to these questions in the past and present. But perhaps the wiser response is to give heed to the long traditions of the church and decide if those traditions have a legitimate end. Then we are challenged to decide if we are to isolate ourselves from our culture, become like our culture, or transform our culture. At the present time it appears that we should reevaluate what it may mean to transform the Christmas season for the glory of God.

Customs

The Christmas season includes many customs we take for granted. Where, when, and how did these customs come to have a place in the Christmas celebration? Their origination probably will surprise you.

Merriment and Gifts

"The merriment and giving of gifts, especially to children, may reflect the Roman Saturnalia."{11} During this festival

the Romans honored “the god of agriculture by engaging in much eating, drinking, visiting, masked reveling and notorious celebrations on the streets. Courts closed, and no one was convicted of a crime. Gambling was legal. Slaves dressed as their masters and were served by them. A mock king was chosen. Gifts were exchanged, at first simple wax candles or clay dolls.”{12}

Greenery and Lights

“As for the use of greenery and lights, this goes back to the celebration of the Kalends of January in ancient Rome.”{13} Kalends was a celebration of the Roman new year. People gave each other gifts of green boughs, “honeyed things,” lamps for light and warmth, and silver and gold objects. “Christians used candles symbolizing Christ as the Light of the World, seemingly a combination of Roman and Hebrew customs.”{14} Druids set lighted candles on tree branches. People in the Middle Ages put lighted candles in their windows on Christmas Eve to guide the Christ child on His way. No stranger was turned away, because it could have been Christ in disguise.

Christmas Trees

“Romans trimmed trees with trinkets and toys during the Saturnalia, and put candles on them to indicate the sun’s return to earth.”{15} “Druids honored Odin by tying golden apples and other offerings to tree branches.”{16} In the eighth century, St. Boniface purportedly dedicated the fir tree to the Holy Child as a counter to the sacred oak of Odin. However, Martin Luther gets credit for the tree we are more familiar with.”{17} The Germans placed fruit, gilded nuts, gingerbread, paper roses, and glass balls on their trees. The Poles placed stars and angels. The Czechs made ornaments of painted egg shells.

Manger Scene

During the Middle Ages the manger scene was used to tell the

story of Christ's birth. St. Francis of Assisi set up a nativity outside a cave with live animals and people. In France children gather moss, stones, and greens for a nativity scene which is called a creche.

Christmas Carols

"The first Christmas hymns were written in the fifth century. Originally composed in Latin, they contained primarily theological topics. Carols (noels), songs with more human personal subjects, appeared in the 1200s. During the Middle Ages people incorporated drama and plays into the celebration of Christmas. Carols became an integral part of these reenactments. After the plays, carolers strolled down the street singing thus the birth of street caroling."{18}

The Yule Log

The word yule refers to the feast of the nativity. Yule log refers to a large log formerly put on the hearth on Christmas eve as the foundation of the fire. Sometimes the Druids burned a Yule log to symbolically represent the removal of evil spirits and dissention in the family at Christmas.

Mistletoe

For the Norsemen mistletoe was sacred to Frigga, goddess of love and mother of the sun god. Balder, her son, was killed by an arrow tip dipped in mistletoe. Frigga shed tears which became the mistletoe berries. Frigga would kiss everyone who passed beneath the tree. The Druids' high priest used a golden sickle to cut sacred mistletoe.

Holly

The holly plant was sacred to the Roman god Saturn. Romans gave one another holly wreaths and decked images of Saturn with it. Christians decked their homes with it. Druids believed that holly remained green so the world would be beautiful when the sacred grove lost its leaves.

Poinsettia

The poinsettia was brought to this country over one hundred years ago by Dr. Joel Poinsett, the first U.S. minister to Mexico.

Christmas Cards

The first painted Christmas card was designed by John C. Horseley in 1846. The giving of cards became a tradition in Victorian England due to the queen and Charles Dickens' story "A Christmas Carol."

Santa Claus

"A popular medieval feast was that of St. Nicholas of Myra (c. 340) on December 6, when the saint was believed to visit children with admonitions and gifts, in preparation for the gift of the Christ child at Christmas. Through the Dutch, the tradition of St. Nicholas (Sinter Klass, hence 'Santa Claus') was brought to America in their colony of New Amsterdam, now New York."{19} "Over the years the American Santa developed many of the secular characteristics of the British Santa, 'Father Christmas,' including entering a house through the chimney and stuffing stockings hung near the chimney. This idea came from an old Norse (Scandinavian) legend. But the American Santa became better defined in the 1800s. Clement Moore in 1822 first described Santa in a fur- trimmed suit leading a sleigh pulled by reindeer in his poem, Twas the Night Before Christmas.'"{20}

Now that we have scanned the history and customs of Christmas, can we conclude that any of it is necessary in our time? We will consider economics, traditions, and history/theology as we attempt to answer this question.

Is Christmas Necessary Economically?

First, is Christmas necessary economically? C.S. Lewis, in his brusque, reasonable manner, gives us reasons to consider the question of the economic necessity of Christmas. He wrote:

> Three things go by the name of Christmas. One is a religious festival. This is important and obligatory for Christians; but as it can be of no interest to anyone else, I shall naturally say no more about it here. The second (it has complex historical connections with the first, but we needn't go into them) is a popular holiday, an occasion for merry-making and hospitality. But the third thing called Christmas is unfortunately everyone's business…I mean of course the commercial racket.

Lewis then goes on to make the following statements about the "commercial racket":

1. It gives on the whole much more pain than pleasure.
2. Most of it is involuntary.
3. Things are given as presents which no mortal ever bought for himself.
4. The nuisance.{21}

Such comments probably "ring true" for many of us. But is it realistic to attempt to eradicate what has become a major element of the economic system in this country? Helen Dunn Frame offers insights into this question:

> As to economics, we might not be "less in debt" without Christmas purchases, because…over one quarter of the year's retail business is transacted [during the Christmas season] in everything from department stores to grocery stores. Without this holiday volume, year-round prices could be higher, and fewer jobs might be available.{22}

Such reflection leaves us with a challenge. If we want to de-emphasize the commercial side of Christmas, how do we do it

without upsetting the economy? Perhaps the economic gain that comes from the Christmas season can be supplanted by some other holiday or emphasis. But what would it be? Perhaps it would be overtly pagan, which would not leave us content. There seems to be no immediate answer to the dilemma the Christian faces while living in this country. I'm reminded of the slow eradication of slavery from the early church. If slavery had been eliminated immediately, it would have created chaos in the social and economic fabric. Thus there was a patient change as the church influenced the culture around it. Maybe that process can serve as a model for us.

Is Christmas Necessary Traditionally?

Second, is Christmas necessary traditionally? Most of us live with traditions. There are national traditions, family traditions, religious traditions, sports traditions, military traditions, etc., that affect our lives. Some are good; others are not-so-good. Some are stifling; others provide stability and continuity. It seems that traditions are very much a part of what it means to be human.

The Christmas season is full of traditions. When we begin to focus on Christmas at the end of each year it usually means that we begin to give attention to the reestablishment of things passed from the previous generation to ours. A tree is put in the same place; the same decorations, most of which have a story of their own, are extracted from storage; cards are written; gifts are purchased; and we devote a great deal of energy to one particular day with the renewed hope that a sense of peace and joy will infuse us. Even if those feelings don't characterize us when the celebration is over, we still strive for them the following year. And of course it is sad that many dread Christmas because the traditions that were a part of their past cannot be restored since those who shared the traditions are no longer here to share them.

So is Christmas necessary traditionally? In order to answer

this, I want to offer three comments. First, Christmas traditions can be life-enhancing or stifling portions of our lives. It is up to us to decide which they will be. Second, traditions that bring family and friends together should be positive events. The positive nature of them is up to us. Third, traditions that point to the truth of the Incarnation are reminders of God's glorious provision for us. The way we construct our traditions will either lead us towards or away from this truth.

Is Christmas Necessary Historically or Theologically?

Third, is Christmas necessary historically or theologically? Of our three questions, this is the only one that has a definite affirmative answer. Without the Incarnation there is no hope, and Christmas would be given over completely to economics and traditions devoid of Christ. Malcolm Muggeridge has written poignant phrases to describe the importance of the birth of Christ:

> Thanks to the great mercy and marvel of the Incarnation, the cosmic scene is resolved into a human drama. A human drama in which God reached down to relate Himself to man and man reaches up to relate himself to God. Time looks into eternity and eternity into time, making now always and always now. Everything is transformed by this sublime drama of the Incarnation, God's special parable for man in a fallen world.{23}

These profound comments lead me to consider what probably is the major fallacy of the Christmas season when Christ is not considered. That is, we attempt to "concoct" happiness and meaning without substance. As Muggeridge states, "I find myself more and more strongly aware that this is the true situation: that the hope of man, that he can create through human agency either a happy life as an individual or a

satisfactory life as a collectivity, is the ultimate fantasy."{24} Christmas without the historical birth of Jesus in space and time and the theological implications of that birth leave us grasping for something that cannot be obtained.

But some level of the implications of that birth can be grasped. Let's reawaken to the awesome presence of God in human flesh! To pass through the Christmas season without thoughtful contemplation of the wonder that "God with us" is shameful. "The Eternal Being, who knows everything and who created the whole universe, became not only a man but (before that) a baby, and before that a fetus inside a Woman's body. If you want to get the hang of it, think how you would like to become a slug or a crab."{25} Consider these beautiful, penetrating phrases from the pen of Augustine:

> He it is by whom all things were made, and who was made one of all things; who is the revealer of the Father, the creator of the Mother; the Son of God by the Father without a mother, the Son of man by the Mother without a father; the Word who is God before all time, the Word made flesh at a fitting time, the maker of the sun, made under the sun; ordering all the ages from the bosom of the Father, hallowing a day of today from the womb of the Mother; remaining in the former, coming forth from the latter; author of the heaven and the earth, sprung under the heaven out of the earth; unutterably wise, in His wisdom a babe without utterance; filling the world, lying in a manger.{26}

C.S. Lewis contributes two memorable illustrations of the Incarnation as he considers what it means to assert that God descended to us:

> In the Christian story God descends to reascend. He comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity….But he goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with Him. One has the picture of a strong man stooping lower and lower to get

> himself underneath some great complicated burden. He must stoop in order to lift, he must almost disappear under the load before he incredibly straightens his back and marches off with the whole mass swaying on his shoulders. Or one may think of a diver, first reducing himself to nakedness, then glancing in midair, then gone with a splash, vanished, rushing down through green and warm water into black and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the deathlike region of ooze and slime and old decay; then up again, back to color and light, his lungs almost bursting, till suddenly he breaks surface again, holding in his hand the dripping, precious thing that he went down to recover. He and it are both colored now that they have come up into the light: down below, where it lay colorless in the dark, he lost his color too.{27}

May we "break the surface" of our views of Christmas so that we can recover the precious thing that truly is Christmas: celebration of the birth of Jesus the Savior.

Conclusion

No aspect of the contemporary celebration of Christmas is necessary in an absolute sense. But there is an economic necessity; this can be changed with great effort. Another economic emphasis could be devised at another time of the year for different reasons. There is a traditional necessity; but this can be met through other celebrations. Indeed, this need is met presently by many through other means. There is a historical/theological necessity that cannot be altered. If God had not become flesh, there would be no hope for mankind. There would be no birth of Christ, no death on our behalf, and no resurrection from death to life. Praise God He did humble Himself and become as a man!

Notes

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