

The case for Christmas

Christmastime, Christ-mas and the birth
and infancy of Jesus

Is Christmas Jesus' historical Birthday?

- No it's not
- The 25th of December simply was and is a popular annual festival once celebrating the change of seasons or something like that, later celebrating Jesus birth and now signifying if not overtly celebrating the selling power of consumerism's media.

Is Christmas Jesus' Birthday Party?

- Does that mean it is invalid to celebrate Jesus' birthday in December? Of course not
- Is Christmas a Christ- reflecting party?

The more challenging issues

There are two:

1. Is it worth defending the date and thereby the cultural power invested in that date as a Christian celebration?

We can talk about that in our general discussion time but I focus on the second issue in this talk-

The Truth of the Christmas Story

2: Is the story associated with Christmas true:

What kind of writing are the narratives of Jesus' birth and how reliable are they?

Questions of truth and meaning

- The narratives beginning Matthew and Luke's Gospel not being referred to elsewhere in the NT (Horlsey, 1993: xii), as well as a few differences in what the two narratives tell us about Jesus' infancy;
- Mary's virginity and Jesus' conception by the Holy Spirit (Did it happen, how and what is that all about?);
- Problems with details about the Census
- The historicity (or otherwise) and significance of the Shepherds and Magi visiting Jesus, and, those who prophesied over Jesus in the Temple;
- What was meant by calling the baby Jesus Lord, Savior, son of God, King and the fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy and is it connected the titles of savior and son of God given Cesar and others.
- The alleged claim that the whole story reflects a common ancient mythological motif and is as such not true.

What is at stake?

- Scriptural ‘inspiration’ or ‘inerrancy’?
- The trust worthiness of Matthew and Luke as Evangelists?
- Key Christian doctrines?
- Lesser or denominational Christian doctrines?
- Loss of face or of faith

History and History writing

- We don't have the past only its effects
- We only have writing about history which includes some details and not others
- History writing always implies meaning for the present- and un-ashameably so in antiquity
- The Gospel Narratives are history writing according to ancient norms

Mythology/ Legends

- Myths are believed by their believers as true accounts of what happened in the remote past and concern origins- especially of the world and humanity
 - Thus both genesis one and evolutionary theory are myths but that does mean either is untrue.
- Legends are stories, true and/or embellished about heroic figures
 - So in a way we can call the infancy stories legends, so long as that is not used as a disparagement of their history.

Midrash

- Seeks the meaning for now from accounts of the past
- Sees a fulfillment of a 'type' from history in the present time
- Is related to allegory, but (unlike in a parable) the simple meaning of the story is historical

The conception according to Matthew

- **Matthew 1:18-25**
- ¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about^[a]: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, **but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.** ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet^[b] did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.
- ²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,^[c] because he will save his people from their sins.”
- ²² **All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”^[d] (which means “God with us”).**
- ²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ **But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.**

The conception according to Luke

- **Luke 1:26-38**
- New International Version (NIV)
- ²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."
- ²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."
- ³⁴ **"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"**
- ³⁵ **The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."**
- ³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Some observations

- They agree, she had not had sex, her conception was a miracle;
- The Isaiah 7:14 reference relates to Jesus being an even greater evidence of Immanuel than the child named in Isaiah's original context because he is in his person God with us.
- Saying Jesus is savior, lord and Son of God has both counter-cultural **and** transcendent meanings

Other historical details

- Some critics say Jesus was born at Nazareth not Bethlehem, some say Nazareth did not exist but we have evidence of Nazareth existing from 70ad and no real reason to suppose the little village did not exist prior
- The date of the census that Luke says took the family to Bethlehem is a more worthy challenge—many plausible solutions are offered, but none that presents itself as “the” answer

Differences between Matthew and Luke's accounts

- Matthew and Luke's accounts have much in common (and I'll give you a photocopy of Brown's detailing of those)
- Differences:
 - Only Luke says they traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem, that the Shepherds visited them, and that they went to the temple in Jerusalem
 - Only Matthew tells us the Magi visited them, that they fled to Egypt while Herod was in power
 - Matthew more than Luke spells out midrash interpretations (fulfillment of OT types) relating to the events he reports

A few comments

- Probably Luke had to keep his account short and he prioritized material other than the Magi and Egypt stories
- It was not 'wrong' in ancient writing to put words into the mouths of historical characters that expressed the essence of their message- (cf. the songs and angelic communications)
- Let's not get too hung up on the census date- the fact that Luke related so many historical details makes it clear he meant to convey history not wild legend, and, even if he were wrong on minor details the major events are very likely to be true even if we take the writings at face value as ancient history writing and do not grant special status to them as Scriptures. Since they are Scripture- it is likely that one of the many offered census explanations is right.

Jesus is Immanuel

- There is a stunning disconnect between the Christmastime stories and festival we know today and the message and meaning of Jesus- and maybe that is only fitting since 25th Dec has many prior meanings than a mas for Christ instituted by imperial Roman Christian religion.
- However, buried under all the hype is the opportunity to remember the birth of Jesus who is God with us.
- The challenge is upholding the credibility of the story when it is sunk under so many fictions of our own time and when honest research and analysis and cheap rumors in print are indistinguishable to so many.