

THE REAL NATIVITY

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Christmas is all around us! There is no escape!

Most of us watch from a “safe distance” — trying not to get too involved! On occasions we may get asked “what are you doing for Xmas”? or “have you done all of your Xmas shopping yet”?

It seems that almost everybody in the Western World is keeping Christmas ... though the majority don't really keep it as a religious festival. Some try to ... but in most countries December 25 is a public holiday — a national holiday. Atheists ... agnostics ... witches and wizards — all are welcome!

Those few who keep Christmas for religious reasons do so in their minds to honour the birth of Jesus ... but usually have only a vague idea as to what the Bible teaches about Jesus' birth. And most don't really care if most of the Xmas customs have nothing to do with the Bible and more to do with customs borrowed from pagan winter festivals.

We will have a quick review of the history of Christmas ... the church festival. It is not a Bible festival.

There are 3 key things we will look at today.

1. The date
2. The Christmas Tree
3. Santa Claus

When was Christmas first observed?

It's not easy to tell for sure. Early “Christian” writers — Irenaeus (130-200 AD) ... Tertullian (160-225 AD) ... Origen (165-264 AD) — all of these men are very well known today as scholars ... theologians ... and they never mentioned a Christmas celebration!

Somewhere around 200-300 AD theologians and scholars speculated as to when Christ was born. (The Bible doesn't identify any date clearly). They came out with March ... May ... August.

Pope Julius I declared December 25 would be the officially accepted date — around 350 AD. In 529 AD Justinian declared it a Civic holiday.

Is it a coincidence that December 25 aligns with one of the most popular winter festivals in the ancient world? The Winter Solstice falls around December 21/22. The Romans had their Saturnalia Festival from December 17-23 ... and possibly “Dies Natalis Solis Invicti” (“Birthday of the Unconquered Sun”) on December 25. Some suggest the professing church probably “borrowed” that worldly/pagan tradition and “Christianised” it ... in honour of the Lord Jesus.

That may not be the case. It may indeed be just a coincidence ... as early writings show a belief that Jesus was conceived on March 25 — the same date as His death — and so ... 9 months later comes His birth on December 25.

What about the Christmas tree?

It was an imported German custom that had been popular in Germany since the 1500's. (Legend says the Christmas tree lights were invented by Martin Luther!).

It first appeared in Britain in 1800. Queen Charlotte ... the German-born wife of King George III introduced it at Windsor that year. That tradition was soon copied around England.

Round about 1848 ... Queen Victoria and her husband Albert ... with their children ... were pictured with their Christmas Tree ... on the front page of a popular magazine — the London Illustrated News.

About 1850 ... that picture of the British Royal Family was copied in a magazine in America and so that tradition was popularised there.

What about Santa Claus? (A well-known Bible character 😊)?

Comes from Sinterklaas — Dutch legend ... based on the story of a “Catholic” Bishop ... Saint Nicholas who (allegedly) gave gifts to the needy circa 300 AD — and became the patron saint of children.

Sinterklaas —> Santa Claus.

Early on ... Santa Claus was often represented by an austere ... skinny guy ... in green or brown. We owe today’s version of a big ... jolly gentleman in red with a big white beard to the USA. He developed slowly from the mid 1800’s — first from Thomas Nast ... the famous American cartoonist — who made him fatter with a beard. Then by the 1920’s by Haddon Sunblom from Michigan. Sunblom was then contracted to Coca Cola from 1931 and together they popularised the image that most people know today as Santa Claus.

You could go on with Christmas and its customs. But the date ... the presents ... the tree ... the wreaths ... the Yule log ... Santa Claus ... the mistletoe ... the parties ... the drunkenness — HAVE NO CONNECTION TO THE BIBLE.

IT’S ALL MAN-MADE — seemingly every aspect of it. None of this is in the Bible. And — not many people care about the religious background.

Today ... most people don’t have much regard for the religious connections of Christmas. In the United Kingdom ... approximately 5%-7% of people will go to church on December 25. However it is expected that on that day — about 25% of adults will be shopping online!! Bargains!!

Even those who try to keep Christmas as a religious festival don’t really know the true Biblical story of the Nativity — only the popular myths.

So let’s remind ourselves of what really happened at Jesus’ birth.

There are 4 Gospel accounts ... but Mark and John’s Gospels tell us nothing about Jesus’ birth.

Gabriel’s Announcement:

Luke 1:26-38 (NKJV)

26 Now in the sixth month (of Elizabeth’s pregnancy) the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth,

27 **to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.**

28 And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!"

29 But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was.

30 Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.

31 And **behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. (Saviour)**

32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David.

33 And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end."

34 Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?"

35 And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.

36 Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren.

37 For with God nothing will be impossible."

38 **Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word."** And the angel departed from her.

Matthew 1:18-25 (NKJV)

18 **Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit.**

19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.

20 But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, **do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife**, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. *(Betrothal was a legal contract)*

21 And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

22 So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying:

23 "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us."

24 Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife,
25 and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name Jesus.

Luke 2:1-5 (NKJV)

1 And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

2 This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria.

3 So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city.

4 Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David,

5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child.

Mary may have gone with Joseph possibly because it coincided with the Fall Feasts? Or — to escape the gossip!

Luke 2:6-7 (NKJV)

6 So it was, that *while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered.

7 And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

*Verse 6: “While they were there”! How long had they been there? A week ... longer? Not a last minute panic! They had been in Bethlehem for at least a few days? This was Joseph’s family home town. Maybe there was extended family nearby? Everything was comfortable and ready?

No little donkey arriving at midnight in December as Mary was about to give birth — and the only place available was a stable?!

(Today we might hear from some religious people: “Remember the homeless at this time of the year — after all ... Jesus was born a homeless person”).

Verse 7: Greek: “Topos” — No room = no space. Not talking of a specific room in a house or motel.

We might talk of trying to squeeze into a packed car ... where there's "no room" for any more passengers.

Verse 7: Greek: Kataluma — "in the inn" = guest room in a house.

Kataluma is used on 2 other occasions ... about where Jesus would keep His final Passover.

Luke 22:7-13 (NKJV)

7 Then came the Day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover must be killed.

8 And He sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat."

9 So they said to Him, "Where do You want us to prepare?"

10 And He said to them, "Behold, when you have entered the city, a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him into the house which he enters.

11 Then you shall say to the master of the house, 'The Teacher says to you, "Where is **the guest room (Kataluma)** where I may eat the Passover with My disciples?"'

12 Then he will show you a large, furnished upper room; there make ready."

13 So they went and found it just as He had said to them, and they prepared the Passover.

All we can tell from Luke's account is that the GUEST ROOM they had available wasn't big enough to accommodate Mary ... the midwife ... some female relatives — so the ladies may have used other parts of the living quarters.

So Jesus' birth was in a house ... with extended "family" and relatives. Not "out back" in a smelly stable.

CEB: "She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped Him snugly, and laid Him in a manger, because there was **no place for them in the guest room**"

CJB: "She wrapped Him in a cloth, and laid Him down in a feeding trough, because there was **no space for them in the living quarters**".

The common Greek word for "Inn" (as in motel etc) is Pandocheion (where the Good Samaritan brought the injured man to recover). It means lodging place for travellers.

Later —Justin Martyr proclaimed in 150 AD that Jesus was born in a cave in Bethlehem. Emperor Constantine erected a great church over the cave circa 330 AD — the “Church of The Nativity”. There is still a Church of the Nativity there today ... with a dark and gloomy grotto. NO WAY WAS JESUS BORN THERE!

So ... the major part of the traditional Christmas story is wrong. The Nativity scene didn't happen.

Luke 2:8-20 (NKJV)

8 Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. *(This pokes a big hole in December 25 ... being the date of Jesus birth. It is extremely unlikely that shepherds would be living in fields ... at night. It's not going to happen. It could have been more around the time of the Feast of Tabernacles)*

9 And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid.

10 Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.

11 For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. ***(Messiah the Lord)***

12 And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.”

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying:

14 “Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”

15 **So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.”** *(And ... note ... no mention of any wise men? They just weren't there)*

16 And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.

17 Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. ***(They spread the word)***

18 And all those who heard it marvelled at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

19 But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.

20 Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

NB: No mention of any wise men in the story?

Luke 2:21-23 (NKJV)

21 And **when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His name was called Jesus**, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.

22 Now when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord.

23 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the LORD"),

Jesus was circumcised. Then we have the testimonies of Simeon and Anna.

Let's pick up the end of the story.

Luke 2:39-40 (NKJV)

39 **So when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth.**

40 And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him.

Did they go off to Nazareth immediately? No. What about Herod ... what about the wise men ... the slaughter of the innocents?

We can pick up that part of the story in Matthew.

Matthew 2:1-2 (NKJV)

1 **Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,**

2 saying, "Where is He **who has been born** King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

"Who has been born" —after Jesus' birth — Weeks? Months?

Wise men – Magi in Greek = wise counsellors — likely skilled in astronomy.
(Note: it doesn't say 3 wise men!)

Matthew 2:3-12 (NKJV)

3 When **Herod the king** heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, **he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.**

5 So they said to him, "**In Bethlehem of Judea**, for thus it is written by the prophet:

6 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
Are not the least among the rulers of Judah;

For out of you shall come a Ruler

Who will shepherd My people Israel.' "

7 **Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared.**

8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."

9 When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. (*Star ...a particular constellation ... a comet ... an angel?*)

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.

11 **And when they had come into the house**, they saw the young Child (*Paidion — young child ... not baby*) with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, **they presented gifts to Him**: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. (*THEY GAVE GIFTS TO A KING ... TO JESUS ... NOT TO EACH OTHER*)

12 **Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.** (*They had sought wisdom from God ... and received a response from God*)

Matthew 2:13-15 (NKJV)

13 Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "**Arise, take the young Child (not baby) and His mother, flee to Egypt**, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him."

14 **When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt,**

15 and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, "**Out of Egypt I called My Son.**" (*Herod's death: about February 4 BC as per Fred Coulter*).

The flight to Egypt — there was a large Jewish community there.

Matthew 2:16-23 (NKJV)

16 **Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men.**

17 Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying:

18 "A voice was heard in Ramah,
Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children,
Refusing to be comforted,
Because they are no more."

19 Now when Herod was dead, behold, **an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,**

20 **saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead."**

21 **Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel.**

22 But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee.

23 **And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, "He shall be called a Nazarene."**

Now off to Nazareth where Jesus grew up.

So. Jesus' birth was important — a key event in all history. God became man ... to redeem us from sin and death. Something to recognise and be grateful for.

However ... very few people this Christmas will really understand the importance of Jesus' birth. They will be too busy shopping online or getting drunk or watching endless TV Christmas specials.

And even those few that do ponder Jesus' birth will be misled by many of the myths — Jesus born in a stable ... surrounded by kings and shepherds and donkeys and cows — due to His incompetent mother and guardian not preparing properly.

The New Testament Church never celebrated the day —though they surely appreciated it? So can we!

Of more importance now is Jesus' present-day ministry as our living High Priest — not a perpetual little baby!