

Problems With The Christmas Story



Discovering God's Word
Bible Study Series

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Written by Eric Krieg

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Introduction

A. Christmas is one of two major religious holidays for many who believe Jesus is the Son of God (with Easter being the other), as a day that celebrates Jesus's birth.

B. During the Christmas season, it is common to see manger scenes, hear songs, get Christmas cards, see Christmas pageants, etc. depicting Jesus's birth.

C. In addition to this, we commonly hear people refer to Jesus as the "reason for the season" and appealing for people to "keep Christ in Christmas."

D. While it is encouraging to see and hear so many people talk about Jesus at this time of year, there are many problems with the Christmas story. So, what many people do to remember Jesus, practice their faith, and hope to share Jesus's story with others is actually riddled with much that is Biblically inaccurate.

E. Purpose: To learn about the birth of Jesus from the Bible, compare the Biblical record with the traditional Christmas story, and consider how Christians ought to remember Jesus today.

1. The Birth Of Jesus According To Scripture

A. Jesus's birth foretold to Mary and Joseph (Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 1:18-25)

1. The angel Gabriel was sent by God to Mary in Nazareth. She had found favor with God and would conceive and give birth to a Son she was to name Jesus.

- Mary did not understand how this could happen since she was a virgin. However, it was revealed that the Holy Spirit would come on her and she would conceive miraculously.

2. An angel of the Lord also revealed what was going on to Joseph. This was all in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Joseph married Mary after this was revealed to him but did not have sexual relations with her until after Jesus was born.

B. Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-5)

1. Caesar Augustus decreed that the whole empire should be registered. Each had to travel to his own town.

2. This resulted in Joseph and Mary traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

C. Jesus is born (Luke 2:6-7)

1. During their stay in Bethlehem, the time came for Mary to give birth.

2. She gave birth to her firstborn Son, wrapped him tightly in cloth, and laid him in a manger (feeding trough). She did this because there was no guest room available for them.

D. Jesus's birth announced to shepherds (Luke 2:8-14)

1. An angel of the Lord stood before some shepherds and told them good news of great joy for all the people concerning the birth of a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord, in the city of David.

2. They would identify this baby by finding Him wrapped tightly in cloth and lying in a manger.

E. The shepherds travel to see Jesus (Luke 2:15-20)

1. The shepherds determined to go directly to Bethlehem to see what had happened. When they arrived, they found the baby lying in the manger and reported what they had been told, amazing all who heard it.

2. The shepherds then returned, glorifying God for all they had seen and heard, as it was exactly as they had been told.

F. Wise men visit Jesus (Matthew 2:1-12)

1. After Jesus was born, wise men from the east arrived in Jerusalem, seeking the King of the Jews.

- The text records their conclusion that Jesus had been born was based on seeing His star. It is uncertain whether they knew to identify Jesus's birth in this way through prophecy (possibly Numbers 24:17 or Joel 2:30) or direct revelation from God.

2. King Herod was greatly disturbed by this, as well as all Jerusalem. So, he called the chief priests and scribes to ask where Christ was to be born. They concluded He was to be born in Bethlehem, based on Old Testament prophecy.

3. Herod asked the wise men concerning the exact time the star appeared and he sent them to Bethlehem to search for the Child and then report back to him (claiming he would then go worship Him). They then traveled and saw the star they had previously seen, which led them to the place the Child was. When they saw it, they were overwhelmed with joy.

4. They found the Child in a house with Mary and worshiped Him, opening the treasures they had brought and presented to Him – gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

2. Observing Some Discrepancies In Christmas Traditions

A. No mention of the word “Christmas”

1. “Christmas” means “Christ’s mass.” The word “mass” is a Catholic term that refers to the celebration of the Eucharist (a term referring to communion). Never once do we read about “Christmas” in the Bible.

2. It is noteworthy that we never read about Christians in the New Testament partaking of the Lord’s Supper in connection with Jesus’s birth (see Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34).

B. No mention of Mary riding into Bethlehem on a donkey

1. Many depict Mary as traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem, with Joseph leading her on a donkey.

2. The Bible is silent about how they made this journey, while Mary was pregnant. Luke 2:4-5 only said they made this trip.

C. No mention of whether Jesus was born the same day they arrived in Bethlehem

1. Some suggest Jesus as being born the same day they arrived in Bethlehem.

2. The Bible simply says that while they were there (Bethlehem), the time came for her to give birth (Luke 2:6).

D. No mention of an inn keeper

1. Many suggest that Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem and tried to stay at an inn (motel). However, because of the large number of people traveling there for the registration, the inn keeper had to turn them away because there was no vacancy.

2. The Greek word used in Luke 2:7 that is sometimes translated “inn” may better be translated as “guest room.” It is not the typical word used for a traditional motel (such as is used concerning the good Samaritan in Luke 10:34). Furthermore, there is no mention of an inn keeper in the Biblical record. It may simply have been that none of their relatives had any guest room available for them.

E. No mention of Jesus being born in a barn/stable

1. Many believe that Jesus was born in some kind of barn/stable, surrounded by all kinds of animals.

2. All that the Bible says is that He was laid in a manger (feeding trough, Luke 2:7). Some have suggested that it would have been likely that Jesus was born in a cave (as it was common to keep animals in a cave at this time). But, you should note that the Bible also does not say anything about animals being around when Jesus was born. And, there is no mention of hay being used for Jesus’s bed.

F. No mention of whether Jesus cried

1. The song “Away In A Manger” says that the cattle were lowing, the Baby woke up, but “no crying He makes.”

2. The Bible is silent as to whether Jesus cried as a baby (though it does say He cried on multiple other occasions). However, as we recognize that Jesus was fully human, it would be reasonable to think that He probably did cry – as all babies do!

G. No mention of three kings

1. A Christmas song makes reference to “three kings” (“We Three Kings”) who brought presents to see Jesus (gold, frankincense, and myrrh).

2. The Bible never refers to three kings visiting Jesus with these gifts. Rather, they are called “wise men” or “magi” (Matthew 2:1).

H. No mention of when the wise men visited Jesus

1. It is common for people to picture Jesus in the manger, with the shepherds and the wise men visiting Him at the same time.

2. The Bible does not say when the wise men arrived to see Jesus (Matthew 2:1-12). In fact, it is reasonable to conclude that some time elapsed between Jesus's birth and their visit. After they saw the star, they arrived in Jerusalem from the east. Then, Herod and all Jerusalem became disturbed, inquired into prophecy that had been made, Herod commissioned the wise men, and they traveled from Jerusalem to Bethlehem (about 5 miles). Their visit may well have been after all the events of Luke 2:21-38. Furthermore, Jesus was said to be a child who was found by the wise men in a house (Matthew 2:9-11).

I. No mention of the number of wise men (or their names)

1. Many who speak of the wise men and Jesus's birth speak with certainty about there being three wise men – and some even refer to them by the names Gaspar, Balthasar, Melchior.

2. The Bible is silent about their number and their names (Matthew 2:1-12). While they did carry three gifts, there could have been any number of wise men involved (three or otherwise). And, the names of the wise men are a matter of human tradition.

J. No mention of when Jesus was born

1. Many treat December 25 as if it is a firm date concerning when Jesus was born.

2. The Bible neither reveals the month, day, or year when Jesus was born. Liberius (bishop of Rome) ordered December 25 to be observed as Jesus's birthday in 354 A.D. However, the Scriptures never indicate Christians were concerned with establishing what day Jesus was born. It should be noted, though, that significant travel could be expected during that time (Luke 2:1) and that the shepherds were keeping watch over their flocks at night in the fields (Luke 2:8). These things make December 25 highly unlikely as Jesus's birthday.

3. How Christians Should Remember Jesus's Birth

A. We must not blindly follow human traditions and teachings

1. Notice how many things about the Christmas story is based on human tradition and teaching!

- Many have inserted conclusions that cannot be supported by the Bible. While some of them are not as great a leap as others, they all distort what the Bible actually says.

2. We must learn that there are many traditions and teachings in the world today that are not actually taught in the Bible – even many religious traditions and teachings!

- It has been said that if you repeat a lie often enough, people will believe it as the truth. Think, for example, how many have believed the traditions of the Christmas story without considering whether the Bible actually teaches them.

3. Christians must learn to diligently examine the Scriptures and evaluate what they are taught, holding on to the truth and avoiding the evil and error (Acts 17:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22)

- Adding to and subtracting from what the Bible says, unfortunately, is not limited to the Christmas story. Instead, there are many things people believe and do that are based solely in human teaching and tradition rather than in the Bible. But, we must not add to or subtract from God's words (Revelation 22:18-19)!

B. Nothing is said about observing Jesus's birth

1. You can search the entire New Testament and you will *never* find any command/statement, example, or necessary inference about Christians observing Jesus's birthday with some kind of special emphasis, celebration, or assembly!

- The religious observance of Christmas as we know it today is entirely manmade!

2. While Christmas was never observed in the Bible, this does *not* mean that Jesus's birth is insignificant!

- We have looked at the significance of Jesus's birth, as it was announced to Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. This was the arrival of the Savior, Messiah, Son of God, Lord, and King!

3. Since Jesus's birth is clearly a Bible subject and is a crucial component of God's plan for saving mankind, we do well to remember how God brought Jesus into this world, fulfilling His promises for a Savior!

C. The focus of Scripture is on Jesus's death, burial, and resurrection rather than His birth

1. While it is true that Jesus could not have died, been buried, or rose from the dead without being born, it is also true that the emphasis in Scripture and in the early church was on the death, burial, and resurrection rather than the birth of Jesus!

2. When Jesus instituted His memorial, He made no mention of His birth. Rather, it was focused on His sacrifice (Matthew 26:26-29)!

- Christians in the Bible were to be focused on partaking of the Lord's Supper in remembrance of Jesus's sacrifice (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)!

3. Early Christians shared the Lord's Supper on a weekly basis, taking it on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7).

- There is zero indication in the Bible of Christians ever assembling and taking the Lord's Supper on Jesus's birthday. Rather, they emphasized remembering Jesus's sacrifice every week! This is the true significance of Jesus's birth – that He would sacrifice Himself for the sins of mankind (Matthew 1:21; Luke 2:11)!

Conclusion

A. Without a doubt, Jesus's birth was a most important event in human history! Without it, we would still be waiting for God to send the Messiah and Savior.

B. It is sad, then, when so much about the story of Jesus's birth has been distorted from what the Scriptures say. And, it is sad whenever people create religious traditions for themselves that God has not approved!

C. We must learn these lessons so that we will only do that which is pleasing to God, as revealed in the pages of the Bible!

Study Questions

What is “Christmas”?

1. The Birth Of Jesus According To Scripture

How was Jesus’s birth foretold to Mary and Joseph?

Where did Mary and Joseph travel? Why did they travel there?

What happened when Jesus was born?

How was Jesus’s birth announced to shepherds?

What did the shepherds do after hearing the announcement?

Who else visited Jesus?

2. Observing Some Discrepancies In Christmas Traditions

Do the Scriptures mention “Christmas”?

Do the Scriptures mention Mary riding into Bethlehem on a donkey?

Do the Scriptures mention whether Jesus was born the same day they arrived in Bethlehem?

Do the Scriptures mention an inn keeper?

Do the Scriptures mention Jesus being born in a barn/stable?

Do the Scriptures mention whether Jesus cried?

Do the Scriptures mention three kings?

Do the Scriptures mention when the wise men visited Jesus?

Do the Scriptures mention the number of wise men or their names?

Do the Scriptures mention when Jesus was born?

3. How Christians Should Remember Jesus's Birth

Should Christians blindly follow human traditions and teachings?

Do the Scriptures make any reference to Christians observing Jesus's birth?

What is the focus of Scripture concerning Jesus rather than His birth?

