

# Jesus of Nazareth and the birth of Christmas

Early Christians had no **Christmas**. The first written evidence of an annual celebration on December 25 commemorating the birth of Jesus comes from the fourth century. Epiphany developed a little earlier, in the eastern portion of the Christian church, but it was not quite the same as what we now call **Christmas**. Compared with many other aspects of early Christianity, **Christmas** was a later development.

This comes as a surprise for many of us, because we usually think of **Christmas** and Easter as the two most special times of the Christian year. It was not always that way. Early Christianity was, instead, an Easter-centered religion. The death and resurrection of Jesus were the center of the early Christian message. An expectation that Jesus would return soon, at any time, and the examples of Christians who endured martyrdom rather than honor Roman gods, caused early Christians to focus on death and resurrection themes. As an illustration, when martyrs and saints became recognized within the church, Christians noted the dates of their death, not of their birth. In a sense, the death dates had become their real birthdays, into eternal life.

Bruce David Forbes, *Christmas: A Candid History* (Los Angeles: University of California, 2007), 17.

- ❖ The 25<sup>th</sup> of December was known in ancient Rome as *Dies natalis solis invicti*: “the birthday of the invincible Sun.” It is also the birthday of the Indo-Iranian god of light Mithras (brought to Europe by Alexander the Great). Worshiped by the soldiers of the Roman Empire, some of things claimed about Mithras:
  - He was a saviour sent to Earth to live as a mortal and through whom it was possible for sinners to be reborn into immortal life.
  - Born from a rock.
  - He died for our sins but came back the following Sunday.
  - He was known as the light of the world.
  - Because he was a sun god he was worshipped on Sundays.
  - He was often depicted with a halo around his head.
  - Worshippers of Mithras gave each other gifts on 25 December.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> QI XL Series D Christmas Special: December & Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2022, October 7). Mithra. Encyclopaedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mithra>.

That leaves us with two gospels, Matthew and Luke, and they do provide nativity stories, but they are quite different from each other. In Matthew, an angel announces to Joseph the forthcoming birth of Jesus, and Matthew's narrative also includes wise men, the moving star, and the family's escape to Egypt to avoid Herod's persecution. None of that is in Luke's gospel. Instead, Luke tells of an angel appearing to Mary rather than to Joseph, and the gospel of Luke is the one that includes shepherds and a multitude of angels appearing to them in the fields. None of that is in Matthew's gospel. The two gospels agree on a few basic things, such as the names of Jesus' parents and Mary's virginity. Overall, each gospel provides only a minimal account of the birth of Jesus, with different details. When Christians eventually got around to organizing a special annual celebration of the birth of Jesus, they had to take the few crumbs provided by Matthew and Luke, put them together, and then add some additional traditions, in order to get much of a story to work with.

If you examine the rest of the Christian New Testament, there is nothing more to amplify the birth story of Jesus. Out of twenty-seven total books in the New Testament, only two tell about Jesus' nativity, and their accounts are quite brief. The overall point is that, for the early Christians, the Christmas story was not a primary focus, and the Christian scriptures are evidence of that.

*Bruce David Forbes, Christmas: A Candid History (Los Angeles: University of California, 2007), 19.*

- ❖ The kind of room that Jesus was born in was a communal room. There was no mention of Jesus being born in a stable, and the idea of there being no room at the inn appears to be wrong. The Greek word that is traditionally translated as "inn" is *kataluma*, but it more actually means something like "guest room". We know that Joseph had relatives in Bethlehem, and it seems that there was no space in the guest room at his relatives' house. We know Jesus was born in a manger, that this probably means he was born on the ground floor of a communal living area, into which animals were brought in to keep it warm. Thus, Jesus was most likely born in a crowded family house. Genuine inns mentioned in the Bible are referred to by a different Greek word: *pandocheion*, a place where strangers are welcome. Only Matthew and Luke's Gospels refer to the birth of Christ, and both are completely different, with Matthew mentioning the wise men visiting and Luke mentioning the shepherds.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> QI XL Series R E12 Rejoice! A Christmas Special.

- ❖ There were no animals present at the birth of Jesus. The only reference to animals in the Nativity is Jesus being born in a manger in Luke's Gospel. St. Francis of Assisi created the idea of having model nativity sets with animals in 1223.<sup>3</sup>
- ❖ Islam claims that Jesus of Nazareth was born in the summer. Jehovah's Witnesses celebrate his birthday as October 1<sup>st</sup>.<sup>4</sup> Early Byzantine Christians thought Jesus was born on January 6<sup>th</sup>.
- ❖ Jesus is the Greek version of a Hebrew name. The name that Mary gave him was actually *Yehoshua*, or Joshua in English.<sup>5</sup>
- ❖ The year before 1 A.D. was 1 B.C. It went from 31st December 1 B.C. to 1st January 1 A.D. We have never had a Year Zero. According to a book by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI called *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*, Jesus of Nazareth was born in the year 6 BC (or BCE).<sup>6</sup>
- ❖ Early depictions of Jesus of Nazareth depict him as beardless and short-haired. The familiar image of Jesus (long-haired, bearded and white) actually comes from the Byzantine era (400 CE onwards) and were meant to be symbolic.<sup>7</sup>
- ❖ While never claiming the image as being Jesus of Nazareth, in 2001 Richard Neave, a retired forensic anthropologist from The University of Manchester, led a team that recreated the face of a typical Galilean man from the region using a skull from the time period.



*Richard Neave's Galilean man.*

<sup>3</sup> QI XL Series B Christmas Special: Birth.

<sup>4</sup> QI XL Series D Christmas Special: December.

<sup>5</sup> QI XL Series 10 Christmas Special - Jingle Bells.

<sup>6</sup> QI XL K E14 - Kris Kringle.

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, J. (2015, December 24). What did Jesus really look like? BBC News. Retrieved December 4, 2022, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35120965>.

- ❖ The Bible does not state there were three wise men or kings. They were priests who just brought three gifts along. It does not say that there were three, or even if they were men.<sup>8</sup>
  - The three gifts that were presented were symbolic: Gold (kingship on earth), Frankincense (deity) and Myrrh (death – myrrh was used in embalming).<sup>9</sup>
- ❖ The church in Rome began formally celebrating Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup> in 336 CE (decreed by Pope Julius I). Christmas did not become a major Christian festival until the 9th century.<sup>10</sup>
- ❖ Angels have either four or six wings, depending on what type of angel they are. According to the Bible, seraphim have six wings and cherubim have four. No angel in the Bible is described as having two wings. The seraphim, the highest in the angel hierarchy are describes as: "Each one had six wings. With twain he covered his face and with twain he covered his feet and with twain he did fly." As well as having four wings, the cherubim have four faces: those of man, lion, ox and eagle.<sup>11</sup>
- ❖ Nativity scenes in Catalonia feature a defecating man (a traditional symbol of fertility).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Taylor, J.

<sup>9</sup> QI XL Series T Special: Toys Tinsel & Turkeys.

<sup>10</sup> Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2018, December 14). Why Is Christmas in December?. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/story/why-is-christmas-in-december>.

<sup>11</sup> QI XL Series P Special: Pubs.

<sup>12</sup> QI XL Series O E09 - O Christmas.