

## So where does Jesus of Nazareth fit into all of this?

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.

Figure 4. Bruce David Forbes, *Christmas: A Candid History* (Los Angeles: University of California, 2007), 17.

- Only two of the four gospels (The Books of Matthew and Luke) speak of the nativity, and both give very little detail, as well as differing accounts. The Book of Mark – the earliest one – skips Jesus of Nazareth’s birth completely!.

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.

Figure 5. Bruce David Forbes, *Christmas: A Candid History* (Los Angeles: University of California, 2007), 19.