

SUNDAY SCHOOL MYTHS OF CHRISTMAS

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Introduction

I LOVE CHRISTMAS! I especially like reconnecting with family and friends via their Christmas letters to find out how their year has been. I also enjoy reading the Biblical account of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ and the events surrounding it; first, as presented in the Torah (Gen. 3:15; 49:10); second, as foretold by the Hebrew prophets (Isa. 7:14; 9:6; Daniel 7:13; Micah 5:2; Psalm 40:6-8; cf. Hebrews 10:5-9; Malachi 4:2); third, as recorded by the gospel writers (Matthew 1 and 2, Luke 1 and 2, and John 1:1-14); and finally, the exposition of these events and the truth of the Incarnation in the epistles (Rom. 1:1-4; Gal. 4:4-5; Phil. 2:5-11; 1 John 4:9).

A number of years ago I was teaching the physical-settings of the Bible in Israel. The half-day Bethlehem fieldtrip was one of my favorites. We visited an overview at Beit Jalah, one of the shepherd's fields, a threshing floor, Herod the Great's weekend retreat at the Herodium, and finally the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. At each stop we discussed the Biblical accounts connected with the birth of the Lord Jesus and how the history, geography, and culture impacted the Biblical text.

As one trip progressed, a 75 year-old gentleman was becoming visibly upset until he blurted out in the grotto of the Church of the Nativity, "Son, I perceive you are a false prophet!" Wow, I have been called a lot of names in my life, but I have never been called that before! The tour host saw I was caught by surprise and reassured me, "Gordon, this gentleman has been in, or seen his children, and grandchildren, in our typical un-Biblical Sunday School Christmas play for over seventy years and in one afternoon you blew away all his cherished memories and misconceptions about the Christmas story!" I'm sorry if I hurt his feelings. We do need, however, to always go back to the Word of God and evaluate our Christmas plays in light of the Scriptures.

The Typical Sunday School Christmas Play

Most Sunday Schools' Christmas plays present the birth of the Lord Jesus in the following manner: Mary and Joseph enter Bethlehem on the night of December 24, 1 B.C. They hitch their donkey to the hitching-post of the Bethlehem Hilton or the Christmas Holiday Inn at 11:30 PM only to discover the "No Vacancy" sign on the marquee. In desperation, Joseph takes the only available accommodation, a stable located in the back of the hotel with a crude wooden manger. Late that night the angels announced the birth of the baby Jesus to the shepherds. The three wise men, after visiting Herod the Great in Jerusalem, joined the shepherds and show up in time for late afternoon tea. There are at least seven things wrong with this play, yet we do it every year!

Here is one person's perspective of the birth of the Lord Jesus informed by some archaeological discoveries, and also geographical and chronological considerations. This could be a great conversation opener around the office water-cooler, in the school lounge, or just talking with family, friends, and neighbors. Not only is the when, where, and how the Lord Jesus was born important, but especially why He came to earth. He came to die on the Cross and be raised from the dead three days later in order pay for

all our sins so He could offer us the free gift of eternal life and the forgiveness of sins by faith alone in Himself alone. Salvation is not of any efforts, works, merits, or good deeds of our own, but faith in Him (John 3:16; Rom. 4:5; Eph. 2:8-9; 1 John 5:13).

De-Mythologizing the Sunday School Christmas Play

First, the Bible does not give a specific date as to when the Lord Jesus was born. It is known He was born during the reign of Herod the Great who died in the spring of 4 B.C. (Matt. 2:1). So he had to be born before 4 B.C. Herod had an indication from the wise men when Jesus was born because he had all the male children of Bethlehem, two years old and under, killed (Matt. 2:16). To make sure all his bases were covered, the birth of the Lord Jesus took place almost two years before the “slaughter of the innocents.” The shepherds were with their flocks in the fields (Luke 2:8). In the winter months, the farmers want the shepherds out in the Judean Desert so their sheep do not eat the grain in the fields around Bethlehem, so the birth could not be in the winter months. In the late spring, however, there is a nice symbiosis between the farmers and shepherds. The farmers want the shepherds to bring their sheep into their harvested barley fields around Bethlehem to eat the stubble off the ground and leave their “blessings” on the field in the form of excrement for fertilizer. The earliest recorded date for the birth of the Lord Jesus in Church History is by Clement of Alexandria, Egypt (2nd century AD) who gives the date of Pachon 25 on the Egyptian calendar which is May 14, 6 B.C on the Gregorian calendar (*Stromata* 1:21; 1994: 333b). On the Hebrew calendar that date was *Shavuot* (Pentecost), at the beginning of the wheat harvest in late spring (Faulstich 1989: 3-14).

Second, Mary and Joseph probably arrived in Bethlehem a few weeks prior to the birth of the Lord Jesus. Luke 2:4 assumes their arrival earlier, because verse 6 says, “While they were there ...”

Third, the “inn” was part of a private house (Luke 2:7). The word “inn” is not the best translation. The word is used only one other time in the New Testament (Luke 22:11-12) and there it is translated “guest chamber.” It is used to describe a large, furnished upper room (Bailey 1979: 33-44; 2008: 25-37). A different Greek word for “inn”, like a caravan station, is used in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:44). Apparently what had happened, the elderly “Uncle Benjamin” and “Aunt Batya,” the honored guests of the family, had already arrived and were given the guest chamber. Joseph decided to go to the stable.

Fourth, the stable was in the house. Typical houses, like in Bethlehem, would be one room houses with a guest chamber (cf. Matthew 5:15). The one room would be used for domestic affairs - cooking and eating - during the day and sleeping at night. Underneath the room was a cave that was used as the stable where the animals were kept at night (cf. Luke 13:15). In the winter months they provided warmth for the house and they were also the burglar alarm if somebody tried to break into the house.

Fifth, when Mary laid the baby Jesus in a manger, it was most likely made of stone and not wood. In the 1960’s a stone manger from the Early Roman period (First-century) was excavated at Gibeah of Saul, nine miles north of Bethlehem (Sinclair 1964: 64).

Sixth, the Bible does not say how many wise men there were. We assume there were three because there were three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but no

number is given. I was pleasantly amused to visit Trinity Church Wall Street in New York City one year and to see five wise men in their life-size manger scene!

Seventh, the wise men arrived at least two months to a year after the birth of the Lord Jesus. Matthew 2:1 says “after the birth” but does not say how long after the birth. In Matthew’s gospel Jesus is called a “young child” (2:8-15) six times, but in Luke’s gospel He is called a babe. These are two different accounts, separated by almost two years. When Mary goes to the Temple for the ritual of purification after the birth of her firstborn, Jesus, she offers two turtle doves (Luke 2:22-24). This is the offering of the poor (Leviticus 12:8). If the wise men had arrived at the birth of the Lord Jesus, Mary would have been obligated to offer a lamb and a turtledove (Leviticus 12:6) because she would have been well-to-do with the gold from the wise men. So their arrival in Bethlehem was at least two months to a year and a half after the birth of the Lord Jesus.

Life Lessons to be Learned

The most important message of Christmas is this, and the easiest to present with clear, Biblical accuracy: a Savior was born in Bethlehem (Luke 2:11). Later He died on the Cross of Calvary and rose from the dead three days later. He was called Jesus, because He saved His people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). Have you received God’s Christmas gift to you, the gift of His Son, the Lord Jesus, and trusted Him as your Savior?

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