



The “Myth” of Christmas

O holy Child of Bethlehem! Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin and enter in; Be born in us, today.

Those words we just sang in that great hymn “O Little Town of Bethlehem” were penned by Phillips Brooks in the 19th Century. During a trip to the Holy Land in 1865, Brooks went to the historic Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and worshiped there. He was deeply moved. Three years later, while pastor of Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia, Brooks was looking for a special carol the children could sing in their Christmas program. His mind went back to his own peaceful experience of worship in Bethlehem and he penned this great hymn in just one evening. He gave the words to his organist who came up with a melody easy for the children to sing. “O Little Town of Bethlehem” has been a favorite with children and adults since that time.ⁱ

One thing I appreciate about this great hymn is that there is no confusing of myth with reality. After all, this is easy to do when it comes to Christmas. With all the traditions that have developed around the Christmas story, we can easily fail to distinguish between what is tradition and what is biblical fact. Take a look at this.

If such confusion between myth and reality happens among Christians, it certainly happens in the world around us. The myth becomes the reality and the reality becomes the myth! I’ve seen this even as I walk around our neighborhood. I saw one house with an oversize Santa Claus, his foot stuck in the chimney; another house had an inflatable musical carrousel with reindeer in their front yard. (By the way, I wouldn’t recommend that. The next day the inflatable was deflated, apparently shot by teenagers with BB guns!). But maybe this is a picture of what we need to do – deflate our myths and reinstate reality as to the true meaning of Christmas.

I asked myself the other day: If I were an alien, and came to earth for the first time during the month of December, what would I conclude about this celebration called Christmas? I believe the answer to that question is found in this all-too-true parody of Luke’s Christmas narrative:

And there were in the same country children keeping watch over their stockings by the fireplace. And, Lo! Santa Claus came upon them; and they were sore afraid. And Santa said unto them: “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which be to all people who can afford them. For unto you will be given great feasts of turkey, dressing and cake; and many presents; and this shall be a sign unto you, ye shall find the presents, wrapped in bright paper, lying beneath a tree adorned with tinsel, colored balls and lights. And suddenly, there will be with you a multitude of relatives and friends, praising you and saying, ‘Thank you so much, it was just what I wanted.’ And it shall come to pass as the friends and relatives have gone away into their own homes, the parents shall say to one another, ‘Darn it! What a mess to clean up! I’m tired, let’s go to bed and pick it up tomorrow. Thanks goodness, Christmas only come once a year!’ And they go with haste to their cold bed and find their desired rest.”ⁱⁱ

Strip off the date, the name, Santa Claus, the cards, the gifts, the tree and the food, and what have you got? Well, for many, not a whole lot! You see, for many, the myth (Santa, the elves, and the

much loved fables of Christmas) has nearly become reality. On the other hand, the reality – Jesus Christ, his birth, his life, his death for you and me – has become the myth.

The Christ of Christmas is the Jesus of History

Enough of the “myth,” what is the reality? The reality is this: The Christ of Christmas is the Jesus of history.

In a recent discussion that I had with two self-pronounced agnostics, they asked a very legitimate question: Is there any historical evidence other than the Bible to demonstrate that Jesus even existed? And the answer to that question is a resounding “yes!”

Take, for instance, Josephus, the well-known Jewish historian. He became a Pharisee as a young man. His greatest work, called *Antiquities of the Jews*, was written towards the end of the first century, i.e. about 80 AD. One of his statements reads this way:

And there arose about this time Jesus, a wise man, if indeed we should call him a man. For he was a doer of marvelous deeds (miracles), a teacher of men who receive the truth with pleasure...This man was the Christ. And when Pilate had condemned him to the cross...those who loved him at first did not cease; for he appeared to them on the third day alive again, the divine prophets having spoken these and thousands of other wonderful things about him; and even now, the tribe of Christians, so named after him, has not yet died out.ⁱⁱⁱ

And this is not the only reference to the historical Jesus in Josephus’ writings.

Beyond Jewish testimony, we also have Roman testimony. For example, Tacitus was a Roman historian. He writes

Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus...^{iv}

There are also two other Roman writers who refer to the historical Jesus: Pliny the Younger and Suetonius.^v

But certainly, the most direct and clear testimony to the Jesus of history is by the Gospel writers themselves. These men were historians in their own right. Right before Luke recounts for us the narrative of Jesus’ birth, he says this:

Most honorable Theophilus: Many people have written accounts about the events that took place among us. They used as their source material the reports circulating among us from the early disciples and other eyewitnesses of what God has done in fulfillment of his promises. Having carefully investigated all of these accounts from the beginning, I have decided to write a careful summary for you, to reassure you of the truth of all you were taught. Luke 1:1-4 NLT

Who was Luke? He never uses his own name in this gospel, but from Paul we know that he was “Luke, the beloved physician” (Colossians 4:14). He was a man with high academic training as a medical doctor. He was an historian of great intellect, writing in exquisite Greek style both in Luke and in Acts. I’ll never forget having to translate the New Testament while in seminary. Paul’s epistles were relatively easy, as was the gospel of John. Luke and Acts were some of the most difficult. Most believe that Luke wrote this gospel before Paul was martyred in 65 AD, within only 30 years of the events of Christ’s life. Luke tells us that he thoroughly researched what he wrote. He spoke to eyewitnesses that could have included Mary the mother of Jesus, his brothers, the seventy disciples and Mary Magdalene herself (Luke 10:1; Matthew 12:47-49). In all, Luke names thirty-two countries, fifty-four cities, and nine islands *without error*.

In the postmodern age in which we live, some want to believe that ultimate reality lies uniquely in the realm of thought with no necessary connection to historical events. For the average postmodern mind, it really doesn’t matter if the historical details of Christ’s birth are true or not. What matters is the larger narrative. The story itself (so they say) is valuable to the degree that it illustrates certain universal values helpful to humanity.

That’s why some can begin to dismiss the Gospel accounts as “a fable agreed upon.” This is the favorite expression of Dan Brown, the author of *The DaVinci Code*. He takes it from Napoleon who once said, “What is history, but a fable agreed upon?” According to Brown, for the last two thousands years Christians have believed a lie based on a massive cover-up, a wide-scale conspiracy by the Church (specifically the Catholic Church) to keep the truth under wraps. Essentially, they staged a “fable agreed upon.” This fable was the idea that Jesus was virgin born and that he rose from the dead. Leonardo Da Vinci, of course, knew all of this as the Grand Master of a secret society called the Priory of Sion (more on this next week). More than that, he secretly encoded this knowledge into his paintings, specifically the painting of the *Last Supper* (picture of Last Supper). And for many, Browns myth has become reality, and the gospel accounts have become myth.

But the Bible writers have quite a different take on this. Peter reminds us:

For we were not making up clever stories when we told you about the power of our Lord Jesus Christ and his coming again. We have seen his majestic splendor with our own eyes. 2 Peter 1:16 NLT

The Christ of Christmas is the long-expected Messiah.

The Christ of Christmas is the Jesus of history as recounted by the biblical writers. But there is more. The Christ of Christmas is also the long-expected Messiah. The Apostles constantly appealed to two things in support of Jesus being the long awaited Messiah: his resurrection from the dead and the fact that he fulfilled so many Old Testament prophecies. Amazingly, the Old Testament contains over 300 references to the coming of Christ. It’s been said that, by the law of chance, it would require 200 billion earths, populated with four billion people each, to come up with just one person who could achieve 100 accurate prophecies without any errors in sequence. But the Bible records not 100, but over 300 fulfilled prophecies of Christ’s first coming

A study of the top ten psychics whose prophecies were published during a three year period showed only a 2% success rate. Six out of the ten psychics were wrong 100% of the time.^{vi} And yet millions of people religiously follow the predictions of such charlatans. But when we examine the prophecies of the Bible we are confronted with a different phenomenon of staggering mathematical proportions. For example, take just 8 prophecies of the OT concerning Christ:

1. Born at Bethlehem (Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:1)
2. Preceded by a messenger (Malachi 3:1; Matthew 3:1,2)
3. Entered Jerusalem on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9; Luke 19:35-37)
4. Betrayed by a friend (Psalm 41:9; Matthew 10:4)
5. Sold for 30 pieces of silver (Zechariah 11:12; Matthew 26:15)
6. Betrayal money to be thrown in the house of the Lord (Zechariah 11:13; Matthew 27:5)
7. Jesus did not speak before his accusers (Isaiah 53:7; Matthew 27:12-19)
8. Jesus was crucified (Isaiah 53:12; Matthew 27:38)

Using the science of probability, the chance that any one person might have fulfilled all eight prophecies – some of which are outside human control (i.e. his birth, betrayal and death), – is 1 in 10¹⁷. What is that? It looks like this: 1 in 100,000,000,000,000,000. If you take that many silver dollars and lay them on the state of Texas, they will cover the entire state two feet deep. Now mark one of those silver dollars, throw it back in the pile and stir it up. Then blindfold someone and tell them to pick up the silver dollar that had been marked. What chance do they have of getting the right one? The same chance the prophets had of writing 8 prophecies in their own wisdom and having them all come true in one person.^{vii}

The Christ of Christmas is the virgin-born incarnation of God

Not only is the Christ of Christmas the Jesus of history and the literal fulfillment of so much Old Testament prophecy, he is more importantly the virgin-born incarnation of God. Of course, this two was prophesied in the Old Testament. Look at Isaiah 7:14:

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14 NIV

First, notice the wording of this prophecy: “*The virgin will be with a child and will give birth to a son...*” A more literal translation is this: “*Look at this! I see a virgin pregnant and bearing a son...*” Though the fulfillment is yet future to Isaiah’s time, he words the prophecy so as to stress the historical certainty and reality of this child’s birth. Isaiah, standing before King Ahaz, envisions the birth of this child as if it were a live telecast, in full color, three dimensional, and as if it were happening at that very moment!

But then the prophet uses this controversial word “virgin.” In the OT the word means simply a “young girl of marriageable age.” The word itself does not *demand* virginity, but it *allows* for virginity. I believe that the Holy Spirit, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, was very precise in

his choice of words, choosing a word that allows for both an *immediate* fulfillment (cf. Isaiah 8:3) and a *far* fulfillment of this prophecy.

We also find the clear, unmistakable statement of Matthew 1:22, 23 (NIV) where this prophecy is applied to Jesus himself –

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The *virgin* will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”-which means, “God with us.”

When Matthew cites Isaiah 7:14 into the Greek language, he carefully chooses a word in his own language which *always* and *unmistakably* means “virgin.” By the way, just as an aside. Several years ago I saw the Greek Parthenon in Athens, the ruins of which still stand. Why is it called the “*parthenon*?” Because it was dedicated to the Greek goddess, Athena – a *virgin* goddess. And that’s the word used here – *parthenos* – meaning “virgin.” This is emphasized twice earlier in this same chapter:

“... before they came together, she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.”
Matthew 1:18

“...what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” Matthew 1:20

The virgin birth is an unfathomable mystery. But without it, nothing else in the New Testament makes sense. Of all the ways God could have come to earth why did He come as a baby? I’ll tell you why. Because He came to save us not to scare us and nobody’s afraid of a baby. God could have come to earth in a lot of ways that would have freaked us all out and scared us to death and made us run in terror. But He didn’t do that. He came in a way that we could all relate to because we all had that experience ourselves. We’ve all been born. He came in a way that we could relate to Him. Someone has said, “Jesus is God spelling Himself out in language that man can understand.” (S.D. Gordon)

In the months ahead (in fact, all the way to Easter of 2010!), we’ll be taking an in-depth look at this “one solitary life” – the life of Christ. And as we do, I’m sure that some of the caricatures that shape our view of Jesus will be challenged, evaluated and politely dismissed.

Our goal will be to see the real Jesus, the Jesus of the gospels. But we want to do more than “see” him. We desire that *his* life – who he is, what he taught and how he lived – might radically transform *our* way of life. This is *the Jesus way*.

We’ll be following the life of Christ both thematically and chronologically. From his birth in the winter of 5/4 B.C. to the opening events of his ministry in A.D. 29 to his death and resurrection in A.D. 33, we’ll trace the key events highlighted by the gospel writers. But at the same time, we’ll also approach Jesus’ life *thematically*, i.e. touching on the main themes that will enable you and me to embark more fully on “the Jesus way.”

Many have never had the opportunity to literally walk where Jesus walked by visiting the Holy Land. And while that is a great privilege, each of us *does* have the opportunity to walk along

with Jesus those same dusty paths through the eyes of the inspired Gospel writers. And so during this Advent season, we'll be exploring *The Hymns of the Humble*: traditionally called the "Magnificat" (Luke 1:46-55), the "Benedictus" (Luke 1:68-80), and the "Nunc Demittis" (Luke 2:29-32). Here, we'll get a penetrating and poetic picture of the humility that marks those who follow in His steps. As we progress in our study, other themes will include "Freedom for the Oppressed" (Jesus' Miracles), "Jesus Christ Disciplemaker" (Jesus' training of his disciples) and "Fatal Flaws of Religion" (a series on the Sermon on the Mount). Through it all, we'll be confronted by the One who leaves no room for neutrality or complacency.

As one unknown author has put it:

More light than we can learn,
More wealth than we can treasure,
More love than we can earn,
More peace than we can measure,
Because one Child is born.

ⁱ Kenneth W. Osbeck, *Amazing Grace* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1990), 370.

ⁱⁱ *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, ed. Michael P. Green (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1982), 58-59.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Antiquities*, xviii.3.3

^{iv} *Annals* xv.44.

^v Everett F. Harrison, *A Short Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1968), 18-19.

^{vi} [www. geocities.com](http://www.geocities.com)

^{vii} Peter Stoner, *Science Speaks*, Moody Press, 1963 as cited in *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* by Josh McDowell, p 175.