

## CHRISTMAS MYTHS

A common phrase heard among Christians this time of year is "Let's put Christ back in Christmas?" The question is "was he ever in Christmas?" How can we put him back if he were never there? How can we say he was never in Christmas? Simply because Christmas is not a Scriptural holiday. In fact there is perhaps only one day that is given any preeminence over another day in scripture and that is the first day of the week. However the Apostle Paul states: "One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind" (Rom. 14:5). There is no indication that the birth of Christ was intended to be celebrated by a special day. The problem with special days is they are too limited. Every day is a celebration for the Christian, a celebration of his birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension and present ministry on our behalf, and a celebration of who we are in him. Put Christ into Christmas? No, don't make him a part of the Santa and his reindeer myth, don't include him in the unwise and foolish spending which is rampant in our time, don't look upon him as a babe in a manger and neglect him as Lord of lords. Put Christ into every day of your life. Don't just celebrate his birth, celebrate the fact he is the Christ and is living today and don't just celebrate a day or a season, celebrate life, every day. As Coach Dave Daubenmire of *Pass the Salt Ministries* wrote: "Christmas is a yearly reminder of God's invasion of time and space and the gift of life He gave the world. But the yearly reminder of a "babe wrapped in swaddling clothes" seems to trap Jesus in the manger. For many in this nation they never get beyond the "Christ Child." His birth is meaningless without the Cross (and resurrection and ascension...HB). For many the recitation of the "Christmas Story" gives an almost-fairy-tale like feeling to those who are enamored by the season. If the only Jesus one hears about is the "Babe in a manger" is it any wonder that Christianity is so powerless to so many?"

Much modern church pageantry has strayed from the Biblical record and given some mistaken ideas concerning the birth of Jesus. We have the idea that Jesus was born the very night Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem. Luke simply says: "And it came about *while they were there*, the days were completed for her to give birth" (Lk. 2:6) And certainly the "wise" men or "magi" did not make the scene the night Jesus was born. "And they came into *the house* and saw the Child with Mary His mother ..." (Mt. 2:11). There is no record that says Jesus was born in December. Floyd Clark in his *Epistle #79* makes the point that "the weather was so hot the sheep could not graze in the day time. They had to graze at night. So the time would have been in early fall, late September, or early October, when the fall rains had brought out the grass." The stable in which Jesus was born is not mentioned. It is simply says he was laid in a manger. It is a misnomer to say "Jesus was born in a manger." Even the acclaimed Biblical historian, Kenneth Scott Latourette in his *History of Christianity* states Jesus was "born in a manger." The stables at that time were probably a sheep pen under the house. They were in the stable because "there was no room for them in the inn" (Lk. 2:7). In Christmas pageants there is always featured an "innkeeper" and the inn is portrayed as a Bible-times motel. The word "inn" (*katalumati*) is translated "guest room" in Mark 14:14 and Luke 22:11 referring to the upper room where

the last supper was held. The only other place in the New Testament where an inn is mentioned is in the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:34 and the word is *pandoxeion*. This passage is also the only time an "innkeeper" is mentioned. Howard Marshall in *The New Bible Commentary*: states: "the traditional picture of a surly innkeeper refusing admission to the needy couple is somewhat dubious." The stable was probably under a house, perhaps a relative of Joseph, because there was no guest room available in the house. This could well be the case because of the influx of strangers in the city for the taxation.

Giovanni Papini, an Italian writer, in his book *Life of Christ*, published in 1923, describes the manger scene: "Jesus was born in a stable, a real stable, not the bright airy portico which Christian painters have created for the Son of David, as if ashamed that their God should have him lain down in poverty and dirt. And not the modern Christmas-eve 'Holy Stable' either, made of plaster of Paris, with little candy-like statuettes, the Holy Stable, clean and prettily painted, with neat, tidy manger, an ecstatic ass, a contrite ox, and angels fluttering their wreaths on the roof—this is not the stable where Jesus was born. A real stable is the house, the prison of the animals who work for man. The poor, old stable of Christ's old poor country is only four rough walls, a dirty pavement, a roof of beams and slate. It is dark, reeking. The only clean thing in it is the manger where the owner piles the hay and fodder. This is the real stable where Jesus was born. The filthiest place in the world was the first room of the only pure Man ever born of woman. The Son of Man, who was to be devoured by wild beasts calling themselves men, had as his first cradle the manger. It was not by chance that Christ was born in a stable. What is the world but an immense stable where men produce filth and wallow in it? Do they not daily change the most beautiful, the purest, the most divine things into excrements? Then, stretching themselves at full length on the piles of manure, say they are 'enjoying life.' Upon this earthly pig-sty, where no decorations or perfumes can hide the odor of filth, Jesus appeared one night, born of a stainless Virgin armed only with innocence."

It was first to shepherds the birth of Jesus was announced. These men were not the elite of Israel. They could not attend to all the cleansing ceremonies demanded by the priests and religious leaders. They would have been condemned by the Pharisees for not ceremonially washing their hands and "cleaning the outside of the cup and dish". They would never be called "Rabbi" or sit in the chief seats of the synagogues and would eat their meals under the stars or blistering heat with "unwashed hands." They were grungy, dirty, unwashed, wearing work clothes that smelled like sheep, tired and probably sleepy. Being a shepherd was not an easy task. They would have been classified with the "common people" and thought of as "Nobodies." No one would, in their wildest imagination think these men would be visited by a heavenly host and be the first to hear the message that Christ the Lord had been born; born of poor people in poverty, born of common people, revealed to common people, to minister to such as themselves. It was not revealed to the rich and powerful, the self-important and self righteous religious leaders that this baby was the Savior. It was to the multitudes, like the shepherds, he came to minister.

Most Christmas pageants have the “wise men” coming to the stable the night Jesus was born. Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth states: “And they came into the *house* and saw the child with Mary his mother” ( Mt. 2:11). This could well be the house over the stable where Jesus was born. After eight days (according to the Law) Jesus was circumcised and he was named “Jesus” (Lk. 2:21). Sometime after this we have the visit of the Magi and the flight into Egypt. Upon their return from Egypt they settled in Nazareth (Matt. 2:19-23). The stay in Egypt must have been of short duration because “when the days of their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord” (Luke 2:22). According to Jewish custom after the circumcision the mother’s days of purification were thirty-three (Lev. 12:3). After his presentation in the temple “they returned to Galilee, to their own city of Nazareth” (Luke 2:39).

The Greek word “Wise men” is *magoi* and is translated “Wise men” in the KJV, RSV, ASV and the NKJV. It is translated “Magi” in the NIV and NASV, “Astrologers” in the Living Bible and Goodspeed, and “Magicians” by Moffatt. Chris Templar, a professor in a Christian College wrote a column in *The Christian Standard* in which she pictured the Magi as “scholars”. In a later issue there was a letter to the editor in rebuttal to her article which read: “I am writing to express my disappointment and disagreement with the writer, Professor Chris Templar, in her essay on *Coming of The Wise Men*” (December 19). The point of the article seems to try to establish the Magi as “scholars”. She calls them “scholars” 11 times in the article and has the audacity to say: “The Bible tells us that they were scholars, and they had studied the religious documents that were available to them.” Where does the Bible tell us this? “The word “*magos*” (translated wise men) is found only two other times in the New Testament. In Acts 8:9, 11 it refers to the practice of magical arts by Simon, who had the whole city under his spell and in Acts 13:6 it refers to a ‘certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus.’ If these men were ‘scholars’ they were scholars of the occult. She infers that they knew from Jeremiah 23:5 that God had promised the Jews would have a special king. If this was true and they were such great scholars, why did they not know Micah had stated Christ would be born in Bethlehem? If we are wrong in our facts the world will believe we are wrong in our faith. If we are going to say ‘the Bible tells us,’ we should be sure the Bible tells us.”

Regardless who these Magi were, God went outside the bounds of Judaism and brought Gentile pagans to acknowledge and worship the Messiah, something the Jewish Scriptures had predicted would happen as a result of this birth: “And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising (Isa. 60:3); “Let the kings of Tarshish and the islands bring presents, the kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts. And let all kings, bow down before him. All nations serve him” (Psalm 72:10). It took much debate for the Jews to accept that “God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name” (Acts 15: 7, 14).

We need to look beyond the legends and myths of Christmas, beyond the tinsel and trappings of decorations, beyond the cries of the Christian Right’s fight with City Hall about not placing the manger scene on the Court House lawn, and beyond all the complaints and objections to Xmas and “Happy Holidays” and grasp the real significance of the virgin birth. The remainder of this article is quotes from the Jan. 2012 issue of *Living Waters*

*Newsletter* entitled: “Round Yon Virgin Mother and Child.”

The real significance of the Virgin birth is a question usually left unanswered in pageants, songs and sermons characterizing the season and will be forgotten by most Christians until next December, and if remembered at all it will only be remembered as Jesus being a babe in the manger. The virgin birth has been denied, neglected, doubted and scorned second only to his resurrection, yet it is one of the most important events found in Scripture. This denial and neglect is not from the world (they could care less), but is characteristic of much thought in the religious world. So called reputable scholars who write books, teach in Seminaries and Universities and are popular lecturers in the religious circles are sowing the seeds of doubt and denial of the virgin birth. The problem here is that the fruit of their teaching is the preaching of their students and followers. Even if the virgin birth is believed, its significance and importance is neglected in our pulpits. When we note some of the writings of many theologians today we can readily see how their influence has brought about a disbelief and denial of the virgin birth. The following quotes are examples of this fact. In 1965 Hugh Schonfield ignited a controversy in the religious world when he published his book: *The Passover Plot* in which he denies every miraculous element in the New Testament even suggesting Jesus did not really die on the cross. On the virgin birth he wrote: “There was nothing peculiar about the birth of Jesus, no Virgin Mother bore him. The church in its ancient zeal fathered a myth and became bound to it as dogma...The account of the birth of Jesus is of course built on legends of the birth and infancy of the great figures of Israel, Abraham and Moses, current among the Jews. But in the Gospel they are brought into relation with the virgin birth legend typical of Greek heroes.” Amazon.com gave rave reviews of the book by many religious figures. Douglas Lockhart, a Scottish writer, states in his book *Jesus the Heretic* (a title showing his infidelity): “Taking his information from the now lost Nazarene gospel, Luke quite obviously reproduces Issa’s Christmas nativity story of the virgin birth.” Issa was an Egyptian goddess.

Jesus had to be born of God and a virgin in order to be sinless; otherwise he would have had the nature of Adam, a sinful nature. The wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). All mankind was under the curse of death and would have to pay the wages of sin with death because “without the shedding of blood there is no remission” (Heb. 9:22). By the virgin birth there was born a sinless man who could pay the debt for all.

The significance of the virgin birth is that by his virgin birth Jesus was a new creation, a new Adam. He, like Adam, was a miracle of creation directly from God, but unlike the first Adam who had no link with any earthly human being, Christ, the last Adam (I Cor. 15:45) was linked to humanity by his virgin birth to Mary. The first Adam was tempted in Paradise and fell, the last Adam was tempted in the wilderness and began the restoration of what man had lost in the garden. A contrast of the two Adams is seen in I Corinthians 15:45-49 and Romans 5:14-21. The reason for the curse upon both man and the earth was the action of one man, so also the lifting of the curse and restoration of God’s purpose was the action of one man: “Since by a man came death by man also came the resurrection of the dead. As in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive” (I Cor. 15:21, 22). All this shows salvation, the resurrection and eternal life are connected to the virgin birth. To deny the virgin birth is to deny the whole purpose and plan of God that he accomplished in Christ.



