

Christmas - Why?

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In most Western countries, Christmas Day is celebrated on December 25th as the traditional birthday of Jesus, although no one knows for certain the exact day when Jesus was born, even though we know reasonably well when He was here on Earth. The Bible says: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son” (Galatians 4:4), so this was at exactly the right time in God’s master plan.

When this right time had come, God sent an angel named Gabriel to a young woman named Mary, who lived in Nazareth, to tell her that she would have a son and that she should call His name Jesus (Luke 1:26–33). Mary was greatly surprised to hear this because she was not married and so she was a virgin. However, the angel told her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). When Jesus lived on Earth, not only was He fully human, He was also God incarnate.

An angel from God also appeared in a dream to Joseph, who was engaged to be married to Mary. The angel said, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” Matthew (1:20–22).

The word ‘Jesus’ is the English form of Iesous (Ἰησοῦς), which is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew name Yeshua, a shortened form of Yehoshua (יְהוֹשֻׁעַ). This latter is an abbreviation of God’s four-letter name YHVH (יהוה Jehovah/Yahweh) combined with a form of the Hebrew verb yasha (ישע) meaning to save, deliver, or rescue. Hence the name Jesus means Saviour. The English word Christ is not Jesus’ surname, but is a title. It comes from the Greek Christos (Χριστός), meaning anointed one, which is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew Mashiach (משיח), usually rendered in English as ‘Messiah’. So Jesus Christ means Jesus the Anointed One, or Jesus the Messiah. Caesar Augustus fulfils an Old Testament prophecy

In due time, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. This came about because the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, wanted to have a census conducted and so everyone in the Roman world had to go to their ancestral home town to be registered there (Luke 2:1–7). The Greek wording suggests that this was a census before the famous one under Governor Quirinius (see Acts 5:37). Under God’s oversight, Augustus thus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecy in Micah 5:2, which said that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

Joseph had to take Mary from Nazareth to his own home town of Bethlehem, a distance of about 110 km (70 miles). While there, Mary gave birth to Jesus (Luke 2:1–7).

The very first people to whom God announced this were some nearby shepherds. An angel told them that Christ the Lord had just been born. When this happened, the glory of the Lord shone around them and a great company of angels appeared, praising God (Luke 2:8–14).

A year or so later, some ‘wise men’ (magi), living in another country to the east saw a strange new light in the sky. They thought it was a special star that announced the birth of a new king, whom they were meant to go and worship. Later, when they got to Jerusalem, they went to the palace of King Herod, expecting that this was where any new king would be. Herod was dumfounded. He sent for the Jewish leaders and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They told him that the prophet Micah had foretold that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1–6). So off the wise men went again.

The Bible doesn’t say how many wise men there were; just that there were three gifts.

The light led them to a house in Bethlehem where the infant Jesus now was. Stars, a conjunction of planets (formerly ‘wandering star’), or a comet, don’t normally move like that, and certainly don’t illuminate just one particular house. Therefore, it is more likely that the light that the wise men saw and followed was the glory of God, sometimes called the Shekinah glory or a divine visitation of the presence of God. This was “the glory of the Lord” that had appeared to the shepherds.

When the wise men saw the child Jesus, they worshipped Him and gave Him costly gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold was a symbol of Jesus’ kingship. Frankincense was incense used by the priests in the worship of God and so represented homage to the Christ-child as God, as well as being a symbol of Jesus’ priesthood. Myrrh was oil used to embalm bodies for burial and so was a symbol of Jesus’ future suffering and death. The Bible doesn’t say how many wise men there were;¹ just that there were three gifts.

God warned the wise men in a dream not to go back to Herod. This was because Herod was planning to murder all the male children two years old and under to make sure of killing Jesus, whom he now regarded as a rival. God also warned Joseph in a dream to take Mary and the child Jesus and escape to Egypt (Matthew 2:7–12). The gold was probably God’s provision to pay for their needs there before they could return to Nazareth after Herod died.

Does Christmas have anything to do with Genesis?

The first reference to Jesus in the Bible is in the promise given to Adam and Eve immediately after they had sinned against God (Genesis 3:15).

Yes, very much so. The Lord Jesus, is none other than the Creator God who brought the whole universe into existence. In his Gospel, the Apostle John, a great creation evangelist, referring to Jesus, tells us that, “All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:1–3). And the Apostle Paul, speaking of Jesus, tells us that all things “in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible ... were created through Him and for Him” (Colossians 1:16).

The first reference to Jesus in the Bible is in the promise given to Adam and Eve immediately after they had sinned against God. In Genesis 3:15, God says to Satan, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.” Eve’s descendant would be the Lord Jesus Christ. He is called the “seed” of the woman because He had no human father, but through the miraculous power of God would be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:20, 23). He would then live a sinless life, die on the cross for the sins of the whole world, and be resurrected back to life, thereby defeating the power of the devil (Hebrews 2:14).

The reason for the Christmas season is that Jesus came to Earth to die for the sins of the world, and then to rise again to give new life to all who put their faith and trust in Him.

Why was it necessary for Jesus to be a descendant of Adam?

In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah calls the coming Messiah a “Kinsman-Redeemer” (Isaiah 59:20). This meant that the Messiah must be a blood-relative of those He redeems. So it was necessary for Jesus to be born into the human race, via physical descent from Mary, a descendant of Adam, not just for Him to suddenly appear, as angels did from time to time in the Old Testament. This means that only Adam’s descendants can be saved. (We are all descendants of Adam.) Angels could not save us; indeed angels themselves that sinned cannot be saved through the death of Christ (Hebrews 2:16), because they are not Adam’s descendants.

Was Jesus born on Christmas Day?

Nobody knows exactly which day Jesus was born. But an argument against December 25th that some people have made is that shepherds would not have been watching their flocks by night in December because it would have been too cold. But it’s most unlikely that these people have ever been to Bethlehem, because shepherds really do have their flocks out in December. Actually, Bethlehem is not usually very cold at Christmas—a ‘white Christmas’ is very rare. The average minimum temperature in December is 6°C (43°F). It is also a lot rainier in December than the previous half-year, and much grass had grown by then, so it is a good month for sheep.

These claimants are also likely unfamiliar with sheep farming. Sheep have their own home-grown insulation all over their bodies—their wool, which keeps them warm

even in snowy weather, and the wool's lanolin stops any moisture on the wool from penetrating to the skin. Jacob tended his uncle Laban's flocks outdoors even when the nights were frosty (Genesis 31:38–40), and this was much further north in Haran, so a lot colder than Bethlehem.

If sheep are kept indoors in cold weather, they are more likely to catch pneumonia due to a build-up in barns of ammonia and stale moisture that promote the spread of viruses. Sheep are much healthier living outdoors, provided they can shelter from winter winds, such as by means of a few trees. Finally, it would be very labour-intensive to provide all the water and grass for a large flock of sheep inside, as well as to regularly clean out their droppings—far better to let them forage.

What does Santa have to do with Christmas?

In countries today that celebrate Christmas, it is only Christians who truly worship Jesus for coming to Earth as God. Everybody else just has a party and perhaps a holiday. And, indeed, Christmas trees, lights, decorations, exchanging cards and presents, family reunions, and enjoying a delicious Christmas dinner are all fun things to have or to do.

However, all this means that Christmas for most people is just a giant shopping spree, with people giving gifts to each other, but not paying homage to Jesus as the shepherds and the Wise Men did. Also, nowadays, the celebration of Christmas often involves a jolly fat man in a red suit, who supposedly lives at the North Pole and travels all over the world by snow sledge on Christmas Eve distributing presents to children who have 'been good'. This of course is a fairy story, but it is also idolatry when used as a substitute for worshipping Jesus. God, not Santa, is the One who knows all that we say and do.

The modern Santa Claus is a corruption of the name of a real man, Saint Nicholas (270–343). He was Bishop of Myra in modern day Turkey and famous for his generosity. A legend says that he provided dowries for three daughters of a poor man—under the cover of night, he threw three purses full of gold coins through the window. But the real Nicholas would be horrified at the claims about Santa Claus.

So as we enjoy all the good things about Christmas, we also need to remember that the 'reason for the season' is that Jesus came to Earth to be born, to live, and to die for the sins of the world, and then to rise again to give new life to all who put their faith and trust in Him.