

# Christmas – Myth or History?

by Dr. Paul Barnett, retired Bishop of North Sydney, past Master of Robert Menzies College, and widely respected Ancient History scholar.



**You cannot but be impressed with the zeal of the modern sceptic and reciprocally unimpressed with the lethargy of the contemporary Christian.**

Right on track *the Sydney Morning Herald's* Good Weekend (3rd December, 2011) has a lengthy and well-researched article, 'Divine Intervention' (Fenella Souter) in which she debunks the historical basis for the first Christmas.

Her two main arguments are that there are only two gospel accounts and that they are contradictory, with the addition of many fictional details.

It's true that there are two accounts (Matthew and Luke) but it is no less true that John's whole Gospel is focused on the Eternal and Divine Word who 'became flesh'. John's description of a believer's rebirth 'without blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God' (1:13) seems to be based on the virgin conception of Christ (born 'without blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God'). Paul likewise taught the 'incarnation' of the Son of God from his pre-existent deity to his human life culminating in his degradation as a crucified felon (Phil. 2:5-8). Paul teaches that 'when the time had fully come' Christ was 'born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem...' (Gal. 4:4-6). So while it's true that there are only two sustained narratives of that first Christmas the writings of John and Paul are consistent with historical narratives like Matthew and Luke.

Matthew and Luke wrote independently of each other, arising out of source material peculiar to them. Matthew was a Jew writing for Jewish Christians and Luke a Gentile (God-fearer?) writing for Gentile readers. Matthew focuses on Joseph with little mention of Mary and Luke focuses on Mary with little mention of Joseph. Luke writes in terms of OT birth narratives; Matthew is more 'matter of fact'. Their respective genealogies are so different as to be irreconcilable.

By way of example, both *the Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian* reported on the ALP Conference. The journalists brought out different things from their respective viewpoint for their varying readership. Yet it was the same conference – (where) in Sydney; (when) 1st week of December, 2011.

Is it a problem that Gospel writers should put things differently?

Islam believes that the Qur'an was written as by God through a Dictaphone; there was no human involvement. Christianity, however, holds that the books of the Bible were each written by a human person each with distinctive vocabulary, grammar, personality, etc. Equally it believes that God inspired the writers so that what they wrote is trustworthy and authoritative, the Word of God.

So it is no problem that Matthew and Luke see things from their viewpoints for their respective readers. If Matthew and Luke said exactly the same thing in exactly the same way it would indeed be a problem and make us suspicious.

Despite fundamental differences in style (and genealogies) there is agreement:

	Matthew	Luke
Jesus was born in Bethlehem	2:1	2:2
In time of Herod (d. 4 BC)	2:1	1:5
Mother: Mary	1:18	1:26
Father: Joseph (named the child)	1:18	1:26
But not the biological father	1:16, 20, 22	1:34; 3:23
Brought up in Nazareth in Galilee	2:22-23	2:39
From the line of David	1:1	1:32

The biggest problem in the accounts is that Matthew already has Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem whereas Luke describes their journey there from Nazareth. Is this insurmountable? Perhaps Matthew did not know about the journey. Alternatively, his preoccupation with Jesus' descent from David may have inclined him to focus on Bethlehem, the city of David. Either way the difference is not fatal to the integrity of the accounts.

Another issue is that the census in Luke 2:2 appears to relate to a later census in AD 6 conducted by Quirinius. But it is possible that Luke is referring to a lesser known census that was held some years before the Quirinius census.

What about 'post card' items in the narratives? 'Magi' were students of astrology and astronomy that arose in Mesopotamia who might have been expected to be interested in spectacular 'signs' in the heavens, especially when such signs were held to be portends of great events. What about the 'star'? There was a conjunction of planets in 6 BC and a comet in 5 BC. *Time Magazine* 27/12/1976 wrote: 'There are those who dismiss the star as nothing more than a metaphor...others take the Christmas star more literally, and not without reason. Astronomical records show that there were several significant celestial events around the time of Jesus' birth.' What about the 'shepherds'? Bethlehem was 'sheep' country; the whole middle-east is sheep country. Sheep were also needed for sacrifice in the temple in nearby Jerusalem. And the 'manger', is that feasible? Stone food troughs are still to be seen in Israel, e.g., at Caesarea Maritima near the theatre. It is a problem that 25th December should be the date since this is mid-winter and shepherds would not have been outside at night and the sheep secure in sheep pens. The Gospels do not give the date of the first Christmas.

When we read Matthew 1:18-23 we learn the following:

1. Jesus was 'born king of the Jews' (Matt. 2:1). He was the long-awaited Messiah, of line of David.
2. Joseph was 'the husband of Mary', not the father of Jesus (Matt. 1:16).  
The child was 'conceived... from the Holy Spirit'; he was the Son of God.
  - truly human, yet uniquely the Son of God (Emmanuel); no mere prophet.
  - uniquely able to teach us and show us the will of God.
3. It was to fulfil ancient prophecy, God's word of promise: Emmanuel, God with us.
4. David saved his people from their enemies; the Son of David saves us from our sins.
5. We cannot separate Christmas from Good Friday.

Christmas is one huge step down, followed by other steps down into the deepest pit.

In Phil. 2:5-8 Christ, in obedience to God, did not hold on to equality with God but emptied himself to become a man, in fact a slave, who submitted to crucifixion. The journey the Son of God took at Bethlehem he finished in Jerusalem, nailed to a cross.

All for us.

Who could invent such a story?

So don't let the sceptics and atheists take away your hope. The narratives of the first Christmas are grounded in historical reality and tell the story of God's unbelievable love for lost folk, such as we all are due to our selfishness and sins.

*Paul Barnett*