

THE BIRTH OF CHRIST AND THE CHRISTMAS TRADITION

GERRIE MALAN

INTRODUCTORY OBSERVATIONS

We were a week into November of 2016 as I started to work on this article. The business world around had already become active in its annual Xmas (NB) preparations and special sales exhibits. In my experience this has also become the time of year when guilt-manipulating emails start to do their rounds. The writers of those emails call on believers to shed their life of the whole Christmas thing because according to them

- Jesus Christ was not born on 25 December; and
- it is an adapted pagan (and thus demonic) event originally in honour of a pagan god.

From childhood most of us learned a typical traditional version of the birth of Jesus: that Joseph and Mary had to go to Bethlehem to register in a census ordered by the Roman Ceasar. He led her on a donkey to the town of Bethlehem where she began to go into labour on what we know today as the 24th December. They frantically searched for a place to stay and ended up in a stable because there was no room available for them in the local inn.”¹ Here the newborn baby Jesus was visited by nearby shepherds, as well as three wise men from the Far East. Careful examination of the biblical references, complemented by the 1st century context and archeological evidence, however, presents quite a different reality.

It is one thing to throw shadows of doubt on man-made traditions, of course, but quite a different matter if the Bible is presented in a questionable way. Sure, we may all make mistakes in our interpretation of the Bible seeing that we were not part of the culture and generation in which it was created, but that is no excuse for shirking the responsibility to do our utmost to understand and present the biblical content accurately.

My primary focus in writing this article is therefore the biblical record. What does the Bible teach us on the birth of the Person we know as Jesus of Nazareth (or the Hebraic *Yeshua MiNazaret*)? Because we live in a generation and in various cultures of the world that are far removed from the one that made up the foundation for this event, it is also necessary to fill in the context for proper understanding. Remember, the biblical writers did not explain concepts which were general knowledge among the readers of their time. If I write today about someone who climbed in his car and started it, I would not give a detailed explanation of what a car is, what starting it meant and how it was done. I would assume, of course, that everybody was familiar with that. Bear in mind that even that has changed considerably since the first car was built, which underlines the reality of accurate time context.

If we wish to have and understand the unpolluted truth of what was originally written and its meaning for the generations alive today, the importance of placing the biblical record within the applicable historical, cultural, geographical, literary and theological context cannot be compromised to any measure.ⁱⁱ It rightfully excludes any philosophying to



make Scripture say what I want it to say.

Once I have revisited the true biblical record within the proper context, I will also comment on the modern Christmas tradition and festivities before summing up the whole matter.

The role and impact of visual presentations

An academic research project I undertook in 2004/5 among members of various Christian denominations confirmed the impact of visual observation in the formation of knowledge as being far above that gained by hearing or reading. An internet search for pictures of the birth scene of Jesus (the nativity scene) presented 883,000 results, accentuating the widespread presence of these images through Christmas cards, small and large exhibitions, etc. Most had the presence of Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus in common. Some were cave scenes, some outdoor ones; others were the typical stable (or barn) scene one would find in Cowboy movies. There were even a number of gazebo-like structures. The shepherds were present in some pictures, the three wise men in others, while I also found pictures showing all of them around the manger at the same time.

I have no objection to visual presentations of this event, provided they illustrate the biblical record correctly instead of traditional deviations of man-made traditions. Sadly, this is not so, as I will show in this article. Unless otherwise mentioned, Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible.

THE BIRTH OF JESUS: THE ENVIRONMENTAL REALITIES

Was Jesus born in Bethlehem?

While this is a commonly accepted fact among most Christians, I have read opinions that He was actually born in Nazareth, based on the fact that He was known as Jesus of Nazareth. The Bible is clear on this matter:

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod (...) (Matt 2:1).

And Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family line of David, to be registered along with Mary, who was engaged to him and was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. Then she gave birth to her firstborn Son, (...) (Luke 2:4-7).

[**Note:** The Holman translation of Luke 2:5 quoted here would have the reader believe Joseph and Mary was not yet married when Jesus was born. This is unquestionably not so, as one can see from Matthew 1:20-25:

(...) an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to name Him Jesus, (...) When Joseph got up from sleeping, he did as the Lord's angel had commanded him. He married her but did not know her intimately until she gave birth to a son. And he named Him Jesus.

The King James Version renders it "his espoused wife," while the Lamsa Translation has "his ac-

quired wife.” Both Robertson’s Word Pictures and Vincent’s Word Studies affirm that the context indicates their position as married.ⁱⁱⁱ The notes to the NET Bible remark that Jewish marriages in this period were typically arranged marriages. In this sense the term *ἐμνηστευμένη* (*emnēsteumenē*) used by Luke may suggest that the marriage was not yet consummated, not necessarily that they were not yet married.^{iv} This is, as seen above, affirmed by Matthew.

The reason for their travelling to and being in Bethlehem at a time of such discomfort for Mary, who was highly pregnant, was a decree by the Roman Ceasar Augustus for all in the Empire to be registered or enrolled. The purpose for the census is not mentioned, but scholars accept it may have been for the purpose of ascertaining the population, or taxation or both.^v Whatever the purpose may have been, it was required of all who were out of their own district (referring in this sense to the village of family origin) to return there to register. Even though an Easterner may not have been born there, his home or family village was an integral part of his identity.^{vi} A census conducted in Judea would have respected strong attachment of Jewish tribal and ancestral relationships: the tribe first, followed by the extended family or clan and then the household (see Num 1:1-44).

Was Jesus born in a stable?

No, he was not!

All the sermons and teaching to this effect aside, the stable scene has conscientiously been embedded in the minds of Christians through the centuries by the visual representations. Let us consider the Bible on this:

Then she gave birth to her firstborn Son, and she wrapped Him snugly in cloth and laid Him in a feeding trough--because there was no room for them at the inn (Luke 2:7).

And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn (Luke 2:7, KJV).

And she gave birth to her first-born son; and she wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because they had no place where they were lodging (Luke 2:7, Lamsa).

Anyone not familiar with the history and culture of that time would easily be led to understand that Joseph and Mary could not find a proper place to stay and so landed up in a stable, the assumed natural environment in which to find a manger or food trough. **The Bible text itself does not have the expression ‘stable’** and references to such are based on deductions from the expression ‘manger’ or ‘feeding trough.’ That would again lead to the understanding that the birth took place on the night of their arrival in Bethlehem. Luke 2:4-6, however, affirms a time lapse between their arrival in Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus.

While they were there, the time came for her to give birth.

Hebrew scholars and others intensively involved in Middle Eastern New Testament studies fill in the environment with insights from the cultural realities of the time. The cultural evidence points to the birth of Jesus in a private Hebrew home and is rooted in two realities:

- The place and role of the Middle Eastern extended family

- Physical structure of the ordinary home.^{vii}

A small town like Bethlehem, situated off the main routes would in all probability not have had an inn. Even if there had been, the Jewish culture would have brought the couple to relatives who would have welcomed them in their home. In terms of the prevailing culture and customs Joseph had been honour bound to go to family.

The average or peasant homes of the Middle Eastern cultures were simple, single room structures, consisting of a living area for the family, with a small area somewhat lower than the living area for the family's animals. The family cow or donkey, for example, was brought inside at night, but taken out early each morning:^{viii}

But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, responded by telling the crowd, "There are six days when work should be done; therefore come on those days and be healed and not on the Sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "Hypocrites! Doesn't each one of you untie his ox or donkey from the feeding trough on the Sabbath, and lead it to water? (Luke 13:14-15).

Other homes would have been built around a courtyard, with rooms attached for family members and a dug out basement or 'cave' used for storage. The family's prized animals would be brought into this basement cave for protection.^{ix} Still others may have been double-story buildings with an upper room for guests. All of these facilities for the animals had a manger built into the floor or hollowed in stone. According to Gustaf Dahlman, a 20th century authority on Palestinian life and the New Testament this was a situation which still existed in 1935 when he wrote his *Sacred Sites and Ways*.^x

Jesus could have been born in such a basement type area, then wrapped in swaddling clothes and placed in the manger as it is written in the gospel according to Luke. The animals would have been moved out and the area cleaned. Some of the women would have helped Mary to deliver the baby while the men would have sat apart.^{xi} Anyone who grew up in the Middle East would immediately understand the birth took place in a private home.

Why then does the Bible mention an inn?

Then she gave birth to her firstborn Son, and she wrapped Him snugly in cloth and laid Him in a feeding trough--because there was no room for them at the inn [*kataluma*]. (Luke 2:7).

The Greek word used by Luke is *kataluma*. While this is commonly translated as 'inn,' it has several meanings of which one is 'guest room.' This is the context or meaning of Luke's only other use of *kataluma*, which is found in Luke 22:11:

Tell the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks you, "Where is the guest room [*kataluma*] where I can eat the Passover with My disciples?"'

In Luke 10:36 he uses the word *pandokheion* to indicate a commercial inn:

But a Samaritan on his journey came up to him, and when he saw *the man*, he had compassion. He went over to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn [*pandokheion*], and took care of him. (Luke 10:33-34).

It consequently appears that the accurate translation of Luke 2:7 would be “*no room in the guest room.*” The reason for no room in the guest room (where Joseph and Maria would also have been staying) is simply that the presence of the other people afforded no privacy for the birth, or that the guest room was full indeed when they arrived, causing them to be accommodated among the family in an acceptable way of the village culture. Baily accentuates that while Luke’s meaning of a guest room has long been recognised, it has been adapted because of inadequate understanding of the cultural background and environment. He points out that we all face the enormous weight of church tradition insisting on the “*no room at the inn*” misrepresentation.^{xii}

Did the shepherds visit newborn baby Jesus in Bethlehem?

Once more the Bible is clear. An angel of the Lord appeared to a group of shepherds out in fields taking care of their flock and said to them:

“Don't be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people: today a Savior, who is Messiah the Lord, was born for you in the city of David. This will be the sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped snugly in cloth and lying in a feeding trough.” (Luke 2:10-12).

The shepherds then hurried off to Bethlehem and found Joseph and Mary with the baby who was lying in the feeding trough.

Did three wise men from the East visit the newborn baby Jesus in Bethlehem?

We grew with a clear picture of three wise men that visited the baby Jesus lying in the manger, and therefore in Bethlehem. The many pictures and other illustrations that have abounded through the years have certainly served to embed this as truth in our minds. But the Bible does not describe a number of these persons:

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, wise men from the east arrived unexpectedly in Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” (Matthew 2:1-2)

The number of three was probably deducted from the three gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh they presented Jesus with. For the time and place of the visit, let us turn to the Bible again:

And when the days of their purification according to the law of Moses were finished, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (just as it is written in the law of the Lord: Every firstborn male will be dedicated to the Lord) and to offer a sacrifice (according to what is stated in the law of the Lord: a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons). (Luke 2:22-24)

When they had completed everything according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. (Luke 2:39).

Vincent points out that the mother of a child was levitically unclean for forty days after the birth of

a son, and for eighty days after the birth of a daughter.^{xiii} Thus, according to the Bible, the family left Bethlehem forty days after the birth of Jesus, completed all the specific requirements of the law in Jerusalem and **then returned their own home in Nazareth, Galilee.**

The Bible does not specify exactly when the wise men from the east turned up in Jerusalem in search of the One who was born King of the Jews and whose star they saw. Matthew 2:1 simply states that they arrived unexpectedly in Jerusalem **after** Jesus was born in Bethlehem. How long after is not specifically stated. Also, let us be clear on this: they did not follow the star to Jerusalem, they only saw it in the east. The implication is that they interpreted the sign of the star and came to Jerusalem being the seat of the Jewish king, expecting to find the one who has been born the King of the Jews there.

According to Vincent these men were a priestly caste among the Persians and Medes, which occupied itself principally with the secrets of nature, astrology, and medicine.

Herod and all Jerusalem were disturbed by this news. He asked the chief priests and scribes, who advised him the prophet (Micah 5:2)^{xiv} indicated that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, in the land of Judah (distinguishing it from Bethlehem in the territory of Zebulun). In a secret meeting with the wise men, Herod asked them the exact time the star appeared. They were then sent to Bethlehem with request to report back to him when they find the child in order that he may go worship him too.

The wise men went on their way and then saw the star again, which led them and stopped above the place where the child was. They entered the house and found the young child (KJV) or infant boy (Lamsa) with his mother Mary. In view of Luke's record given above, this happened in Nazareth. Being warned in a dream not to go back to Herod they returned to their country by another route.

THE DATE OF JESUS' BIRTH

This is a topic that has received the attention of scholars and others alike throughout many centuries. There are several variations of thought, both as far as the year of Christ's birth and the specific day is concerned. Unfortunately some writings have unnecessarily been made in a destructive spirit. I am not going to analyse the available sources and discussions in detail – this article is not intended to be a detailed academic dissertation. Readers who wish to go deeper can follow up in the resources mentioned in the endnotes.

In the process of studying the topic, the historical record of various events and dates of birth were commonly used. Even here there are differences of opinion due to flaws and errors in timelines. There are differences on events such as the death of Herod, the period of Quirinius' governorship and whether he had that position once or twice, etc. Some Biblical chronologists point to April 19th as the date of Jesus' birth, others to May 30th, while Clement of Alexandria assigned the event to November 17th. Unfortunately the series of attacks on Rome by barbarian armies in the 5th century have destroyed any documentation that may have existed. In addition, the celebration of one's birthday was a pagan custom to the Jews.^{xv}

Hunt states that this view may have changed to acceptance as the number of Gentile converts grew. In his lengthy discussion of the topic, in which Simmons gives attention to two important theories that have developed, viz. the History of Religions Theory and the Calculation Theory, he concludes that neither can adequately account for the origin of the Christmas date. However, chronological evidence strongly points to 25 December as the actual date of Christ's birth. The assumption by

many that Christmas is unconnected with the date of Christ's birth is no longer academically defensible or sound.^{xvi}

In view of the evidence before him, Simmons states that the transmission of the date of Christ's birth by tradition from the apostles and the holy family, cannot logically be ruled out. Since the traditional date of the nativity is fully consistent with various chronological indicators available through the Gospels and historical records, we have every reason to accept it as the true source and origin of the Christmas date.^{xvii}

There is also wide agreement amongst the early Christian writers going as far back as Irenaeus in the second century, that the Christ was born in the year 2 B.C. (with 10 January of the year 1 B.C. the true date of King Herod's death).^{xviii}

How should we approach the modern Christmas season?

There can be no doubt that we need to discern between two aspects, of which one is the naked commercialised and intense material event at hand. It is one in which the gods of the modern material world are worshiped openly. A former colleague of mine openly stated that Christmas (or should I rather say Xmas?) for him is a time to drink and party.

J. I. Packer has a different view and it is the one I choose to say "Amen" to:

The Christmas message is that there is hope for a ruined humanity—hope of pardon, hope of peace with God, hope of glory (...). It is the most wonderful message the world has ever heard, or will hear. (...) the 'Christmas spirit' (...) ought to mean the reproducing in human lives of the temper of Him who for our sakes became poor at the first Christmas. And the Christmas spirit itself ought to be the mark of every Christian all year round.^{xix}

SUMMARY

Based on the Biblical record as I have identified it and complemented by historical and cultural evidence, we can safely say that

- Jesus of Nazareth was born in the town of Bethlehem in the land of Judah.
- He was born in a peasant home and not a stable.
- A group of shepherds visited the family on the day/night of his birth.
- The family left Bethlehem 40 days later when Mary had fulfilled the purification law.
- They went to the temple in Jerusalem, where they presented the boy according to the requirements of the law.
- Having completed this, the family returned to their own town Nazareth in Galilee.
- Here Mary and her son, Jesus, was found by a group of wise men, members of a priestly cast from the east.

The resources I have studied convince me that 25 December is indeed the day on which the Christ was born (and which happened in the year 2 B.C.).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Well Gerrie, what if your acceptance of 25 December as the date on which Jesus of Nazareth was born in Bethlehem, in the land of Judah is wrong? And how can we take part in celebrations that many say was adapted from a pagan festival celebrating a pagan god?

I recognise that positions like this always pose the danger or rationalisation or twisting of facts to suit a specific outcome. We have no qualms though in using the names of pagan deities to describe the seven days on our calendar. When we get married we proudly and lovingly wear our wedding band which is of pagan origin. In astrology the ringfinger, for example, is specifically associated with the sun. We even faithfully go to our institutional churches full of the stains of Greek philosophy and Roman traditions where the centrality of Christ has been replaced by the centrality of the preacher and his or her sermon. In this environment some teach that growing bonsai trees is a demonic activity. Having a little water fountain in your home supposedly attracts demonic water spirits. Celebrating our birthdays is a common event throughout the Christian world. And so the list goes on.

Consider Paul. Acts 17:22-34 describes how Paul went about Athens. We find him speaking to the Greeks in their Areopagus: “(...) as I was passing through and observing the objects of your worship, I even found an altar on which was inscribed TO AN UNKNOWN GOD”. He then took that pagan altar and turned it into a Christ opportunity!

If Paul could do this, then why should we not take a pagan situation (if it is one) and turn it into a Christ opportunity? We bemoan the worldliness that have seized Christmas for commercial purposes instead of seizing it as believers in the Christ as a day to truly walk our talk. How better can we do that than proclaim and show on Christmas day and the days around it not only our love for the Christ, the Son of the Father’s love for us, but our love for one another as families? Sadly believers are passively satisfied to let the disciples of the occult hijack whatever they want for their purposes. They take the butterfly and turn it into an occult symbol and we do nothing.

How many of us make our opinion heard when legislators make laws legitimising abortion, for example? Think of the people who are regularly arrested for slaughtering rhinos. They make headlines in probably all newspapers. But abortion has become a daily and unnoticed ritual murder reality. Yet, from within the church we'd rather fight Christmas. If 75% or so of the South African population are Christian as statistics would have it, then how is it possible that these Christians elect people who blaspheme God (or are ‘Christian’ hypocrites at the very least) to govern our country? Something seems to be very, very seriously wrong with our values.

Perhaps we should all enjoy Christmas as a day to celebrate and worship the King of kings and Lord of lords by looking at ourselves. In his book on Fundamentalism and the Word of God, J.I Packer made the following observation:

We do not start our Christian lives by working out our faith for ourselves; it is mediated to us by Christian tradition, in the form of sermons, books, and established patterns of church life and fellowship. We read our Bibles in the light of what we have learned from these sources; we approach the Scripture with minds already formed by the mass of accepted opinions and viewpoints with which we have come into contact, in both the church and the world...It is easy to be unaware that it has happened; it is hard even to begin to realize how profoundly tradition in this sense has molded us. But

we are forbidden to become enslaved to human tradition, either secular or Christian, whether it be “catholic” tradition, “critical” tradition, or “ecumenical” tradition. We may never assume the complete rightness of our own established ways of thought and practice and excuse ourselves the duty of testing and reforming them by Scriptures. ^{xx}

With all of this said and done, the message of God through His prophet Isaiah (29:13) to the people of Judah, and repeated by Jesus of Nazareth to the scribes and Pharisees in Jerusalem (Matt 15:8), still rings clear as a reminder to us all today:

Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near *me* with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men (Isa 29:13; KJV).

Where, one can truly ask, do we stand we now?

This article is dedicated to daughter-in-law, Riana, and our eldest granddaughter, Anyshia. Both of them were born just days before Christmas. Our prayer for them is that they will experience the tangible loving presence of Christ Jesus every day of their lives.

29 November 2016, Hibberdene, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

The following website presents a wide range of insightful material on this topic, including sources from previous centuries: <http://www.dec25th.info/index.htm>

ⁱ Mitchell, C. 2008. *Nazareth Village, Re-creating Jesus' Birth*.

http://www.cbn.com/special/christmas/mitchell_nazareth_village.aspx. Retrieved 14 December 2015.

ⁱⁱ Ancient Scribes picture. [Florida Center for Instructional Technology](#). *ClipArt ETC* is a part of the [Educational Technology Clearinghouse](#) and is produced by the [Florida Center for Instructional Technology, College of Education, University of South Florida](#). Downloaded 18 November 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robertson's Word Pictures & Vincent's Word Studies. E-sword addon version.

^{iv} NET Bible.

^v *ibid.*

^{vi} Baily, K.E. 2008. *The Manger And The Inn*. www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2008/11/08/The-Manger-and-the-Inn.

Safati, J. 2011. *The Census Of Quirinius: Did Luke Get It Wrong?* http://creation.com/quirinius-census-luke?utm_media=email&utm_source=

^{vii} Baily, *op.cit.*

^{viii} Baily, *op. cit.*

^{ix} Mitchell, *op. cit.*

^x Dahlman, G. 1935. *Sacred Sites and Ways*. Quoted by Baily, *op. cit.*

^{xi} Professor Claire Pfann, who explained this during a visit by Chris Mitchell to the recreated 'Nazareth Village' in Israel is academic dean and instructor in New Testament at the University of the Holy Land in Jerusalem. She is currently pursuing her Ph.D. under the direction of Professor Michael Stone at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and is an adjunct faculty member of the Centre for Biblical Formation at Ecce Homo in Jerusalem. She is well known as an expert in First Century Jewish life.

^{xii} Baily, op.cit.

^{xiii} Vincent

^{xiv} Micah 5:1 in the Hebrew text.

^{xv} Hunt, M.E. 2015. *Dating The Birth Of Jesus Of Nazareth*. Agape Bible Study. [www.agapebiblestudy.com/documents/dating the birth of jesus of nazareth.htm](http://www.agapebiblestudy.com/documents/dating_the_birth_of_jesus_of_nazareth.htm).

^{xvi} Simmons, K. 2015. The Origins Of Christmas And The Date Of Christ's Birth. *The Journal Of The Evangelical Society*. Vol. 58. http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/58/58-2/JETS_58-2_299-324_Simmons.pdf. p299.

^{xvii} *ibid.* p324.

^{xviii} Simmons, K. *Dating The Birth Of Christ And Death Of Herod The Great*. [http://www.dec25th.info/Dating the Birth of Christ and Death of Herod the Great.html](http://www.dec25th.info/Dating_the_Birth_of_Christ_and_Death_of_Herod_the_Great.html). Retrieved 29 November 2016.

^{xix} Packer, J.I. *Knowing God*. p55-56.

^{xx} Packer, J.I. 1958. *"Fundamentalism" And The Word Of God*. Eerdmans Publishing. P69.

Our website: www.hoseaconnection.org