

The History of Christmas

compiled by Keith Salvas

Introduction

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Christmas is an annual festival commemorating the birth of Jesus of Nazareth and is observed by billions of people around the world. Trinitarian and non-trinitarian Christians celebrate the religious aspects of the Christ Child's entrance into the world while many non-Christians celebrate the cultural aspects of Christmas that've developed in the 2,000 years since, but without necessarily recognizing Jesus' religious significance.

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Popular modern customs of the holiday practiced by both religious and non-religious people include gift giving; Christmas music and caroling; exchanging cards; Christmas decorations, including Christmas trees and lights, wreaths, mistletoe, and holly. In addition, several closely related and often interchangeable figures, known as Santa Claus, Father Christmas, and Saint Nicholas are associated with bringing gifts to children during the Christmas season.

To Christians Jesus is often lost in the modern-day celebration. So first we need to explore the question: Who is, or What was, Jesus?

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas>

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The Tanakh, often referred to by Christians as "The Old Testament," contains prophecies of a "messiah" or anointed one. Possibly the most closely related to Christianity is "Ha Mashiach." Literally, *The Anointed One*, this is to be a human leader and a direct descendent of King David. He's thought to accomplish predetermined things in only one future arrival, including the unification of the tribes of Israel, the gathering of all Jews to Eretz Israel, the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, the ushering in of a Messianic Age of global universal peace, and the annunciation of the world to come. The concept of "the Messiah" as a single individual isn't found in the Old Testament; it's strictly a post-Biblical tradition. It's in this post-Biblical tradition that Christians bring Jesus to the forefront.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eretz>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messiah>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebrew_Bible

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Christians concur that this "Messiah" is a descendent of King David (Matt, Luke; NT) and many, but not all Christians, hold Him up as the Physical Incarnation of God Himself. However, Christians don't concur that He's to make only one appearance; He's to make 2. In the first He atones completely for Adam's original sin and ends the Jewish sacrificial system of *The Law* and in doing so ushers in *The Era of Grace*. He does this at the end of His life by willingly dying on a crucifix. Poetically speaking; God becomes a human sacrifice to God for the sake of His creations. It's in His *Second Coming* to the Christians, which hasn't happened yet, that He accomplishes the remaining prophecies.

While, in this "Second Coming" He appears as He left; in adult human form. It's in His "First Coming" some 2,000 years ago that He's born into this world of a woman taking on human form. And it's His birth

into this world that forms the basis for the Christmas celebration. What's most interesting here is that it's His Death and Resurrection that forms the basis of the Christian religion. His birth, though chronicled in the New Testament, wasn't celebrated by the earliest Christians. Possibly because at that time celebrating individual birthdays was considered a pagan practice.

So how did the Birth of Jesus 2,000 years become one of humanities essential holidays today? To answer that question, let's first look at the New Testament's narrative concerning the Birth of Jesus.

[\(Author's editorial\)](#)

The Birth of Jesus According to the New Testament

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1 – Conception

In the traditional Christmas narrative, an angel approached a young Hebrew virgin by the name of Mary, to tell her she'd give birth to the long-prophesied Messiah. She became pregnant by God's Holy Spirit on the spot. But there was a complication. Mary was already betrothed to Joseph, technically married, and he found out she was pregnant. Not knowing this was God's doing, or just not believing Mary's explanation, Joseph sought to *put Mary away secretly*. That meant that he wanted to divorce her and at the same time avoid the public humiliation he'd have to endure should Mary's *indiscretion* become known. It also implies that he'd consulted a religious official who was knowledgeable on The Law. His choices were few and they weren't good (NIV; Matt, Luke).

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If Joseph could prove Mary wasn't a virgin when they'd wed, he could've had the marriage annulled. That still would've brought shame to Mary's family and humiliation to Joseph and his family. But Mary was pregnant, that option was out. Joseph's other option would have been to press for adultery. This would have necessitated a search for the adulterer, so the two could be brought outside the city walls and publicly stoned to death together. Egypt wouldn't be far enough away from the shame all parties would have endured. And Christianity would have died in the womb (Exodus 21:22-25).

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An interesting point to be made here is that the Talmud was still under development. More than that, Joseph's need to get solid council may have coincided with the highest point of a rivalry between two rabbinical colleges. The question here being: did Joseph receive an opinion from a student of the more permissive Hillel, who taught that one could divorce his wife for as simple a reason as burning his dinner, or from an adherent of the stricter Shamai who taught that one could only divorce for reason of adultery. The difference being a simple certificate of divorce or being stoned to death.

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That debate never entered into the story because Joseph never got the chance decide what opinion to follow. As he slept on the matter (and I suppose the miracle here is that he could sleep at all) he was advised in a dream to not put Mary away but to take her as his wife because the Child was, in fact, conceived by the Holy Spirit and was truly the long-awaited Messiah.

That drama was over but just like in any reality TV show the drama that concludes at the end of one episode, dovetails into the drama of the next:

In an arrangement between Herod and Cesar, Israel was still a “free” nation. Herod could remain king so long as he allowed Roman *Peacekeeping* forces on the ground and didn’t resist Roman taxation. And that taxation enters the story at this point.

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As a part of what may have been a long-range feasibility study for a complete takeover of Israel, which did happen 12 years later, Cesar ordered a census of the inhabitants of Israel. Every man was ordered to return to the town of his birth, along with his family, to be counted and taxed. Joseph, with a very pregnant Mary, made the trip to Bethlehem. Let’s assume that Joseph made the trip very slowly so as not to cause Mary to give birth while on the road. This assumption is backed up by the Gospel record that states that when they arrived all the hotels were full. Everyone else arrived ahead of them. Joseph and Mary were given permission to sleep in a stable and there Jesus, the Savior of all Mankind, was born and his swaddled infant body was laid to rest in a feed trough. A humble beginning for the King-of-Kings and it set the tone for this classic “*Rags-to-Resurrection*” story.

This brings us to the origin of the Christmas celebration found in the New Testament record.

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2 – The Nativity (or birth of Jesus)

The Gospel of Luke records the actual nativity; Joseph and Mary lodge in a stable and there Jesus is born. Luke also records that angels appeared to shepherds as they slept in the fields to tell them that their “Savior is born” and to go take a look. This passage forms a major part of the Christmas Story. It’s seen in Nativity displays and is heard in many Christmas songs today.

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The Quran gives an expanded version of Jesus’ birth; and academics have noted that the account in Surah 19 is particularly close to the Gospel of Luke.

The Quran affirms that Mary was a literal virgin when Jesus was conceived. The angel Gabriel appeared to her in the form of a man and stated that “she is honored over all women of all nations... he (Gabriel) has brought her glad tidings of a holy son. God breathed through the angel and Mary conceived. In the Quran Mary is single. She’d been pledged to God by her mother and was being raised in the Temple (in Bethlehem) under the care of the prophet and priest Zechariah. This is the same Zechariah in the New Testament who’d become the father of John the Baptist. Mary’s birth pangs drove her to a palm tree. After giving birth, Mary carries baby Jesus back to the temple. She is asked by the temple elders about the Child. She’d been commanded by Gabriel to a vow of silence, so she pointed to the newborn infant who spoke for Himself and proclaimed that He is God’s servant.

The Quran doesn’t concur with the Catholics that Mary was free of original sin, though it does say that she and Mary were protected from Satan’s touch. Nor does it concur with Christians in general that Jesus’ was/is God Himself, but it does agree that Jesus will have a second coming.

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The Book of Mormon prophesied much about the coming of Jesus but gives a brief version of His birth. 3rd Nephi records that on the day of Jesus’ birth there were 2 days of continuous daylight. The sun set on the 1st day, but it remained as light as the day all night long. It wasn’t until the sun set on the second day that nightfall returned.

Neither the Quran nor Book of Mormon appear to have entered into the modern Christmas celebration but a passage in the Gospel according to Matthew, which occurs a year or more after His birth, does.

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The Gospel of Matthew recounts the appearance of a new Star thought to be a sign of the Messiah's birth. Magi, under the direction of King Herod, investigate. Although the number of Magi is unknown it's often counted as 3 because they bring 3 gifts: Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh. They visit Jesus, Joseph, and Mary at their family dwelling when Jesus was between 1 and 2 years old. This scene is often combined with Luke's account of the Nativity in the stable and is often depicted that way in modern times.

There's an ancillary passage of the 3 fleeing to Egypt for a time to protect Jesus' life from Herod who saw Jesus as a threat to his dynasty. The episode adds to the drama of Jesus' life but isn't a main theme concerning the celebration of His Birth.

The Celebration of Christmas Throughout History

As stated, the importance of Jesus to Christianity throughout the ages has hinged mostly upon His Death and Resurrection. His birth wasn't a major factor for about 300 years.

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As early as 200 AD, in the Eastern Roman Empire, Jesus' entrance into this world was celebrated in connection with the Epiphany, or his baptism, on January 6. It wasn't until 313 AD, when Christianity was legalized in the Western Empire by the Emperor Constantine in what is known as the "Edit of Milan," that Christians were free to celebrate all aspects of their faith. But there aren't any records showing that Christmas was observed beginning in 313 AD.

The chronography of 354 AD does reveal that a Christmas celebration took place in Rome in 336 AD, on December 25th. This might be the first record of Christmas being celebrated on December 25th, but Christmas wasn't an official holiday. In fact, it only ran for a short season fueled by the Arian Controversy.

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The Arian controversy was a series of Christian theological disputes that arose between Arius and Athanasius, (Alexander) of Alexandria, Egypt. The most important of these controversies concerned the substantial relationship between God the Father and God the Son. These disagreements divided the Church into two opposing theological factions for over 55 years, from the time before the First Council of Nicaea in 325 AD until after the First Council of Constantinople in 381 AD. When the controversy finally fell to the wayside the Christmas celebration went with it. It'd be another 500 years before Christmas re-emerged as a major celebration. As an important point of interest, Roman scholars during the time of this controversy did affix Christmas Day to December 25th because that coincided with their Winter Solstice. This symbolically represented the day when all days would get longer.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constantine_the_Great_and_Christianity

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas>

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During the years following the Arian Controversy Christmas was still celebrated amongst the peoples of both the Eastern and Western Roman Empire but they were still celebrated 12 days apart. That discrepancy became a problem for economy.

This was addressed in 567 AD. The Council of Tours proclaimed that the entire period should be considered as part of one celebration. Thus, creating what became known as the twelve days of Christmas. However, this was more of an administrative effort to bring the two economies in line. It could also be considered the first attempt to commercialize Christmas. Still, Christmas wasn't an essential holiday.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelfth_Night_\(holiday\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelfth_Night_(holiday))

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That changed in 800 AD when Charlamagne chose December 25th as the day of his coronation. In the next 200 or 300 years more European kings followed suit. Christmas per se was now firmly established in Europe. But the traditions we know today were still in flux. However, as early as 900 AD the Germans incorporated the practice of decorating trees as a part of the celebration. It caught on, although not everywhere at once. Other traditions would precede it that weren't universally accepted.

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By the 1600s, though, Christmas was firmly established in England, but it was celebrated with singing and carousing. That was to the ire of the puritans who thought Christmas to be a promotion of Man's worst qualities. It was! And there were riots in London over its celebration.

The Plymouth Pilgrims, Puritans in their own rights, put their loathing for the day into practice in 1620 when they spent their first Christmas Day in the New World working – thus demonstrating their complete contempt for the day. Non-Puritans in New England deplored the loss of the holidays enjoyed by the laboring classes in England. Christmas observance was outlawed in Boston in 1659, there were even riots in Boston over its celebration in 1650. The ban by the Puritans was revoked in 1681 by English governor Edmund Andros, however it was not until the mid-19th century that celebrating Christmas became fashionable in the Boston region. As a historical note: Christmas was officially banned in Scotland until the Scottish parliament lifted the ban in 1958.

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Back to America; the division over Christmas created by the Puritans raised its head once again during the American Revolution. George Washington considered it to be an English custom and attacked Hessian (German) mercenaries on the day after Christmas during the Battle of Trenton, December 26, 1776. The strategic aspects of General Washington's decision are recognized to this day, but his motivation is mostly ignored: Christmas was much more popular in Germany than in America at this time.

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But this anti Christmas sentiment wasn't even across the land. Christian residents of Virginia and New York observed the holiday freely. Pennsylvania German Settlers, pre-eminently the Moravian settlers of Bethlehem, Nazareth and Lititz in Pennsylvania and the Wachovia Settlements in North Carolina, were enthusiastic celebrators of Christmas. The Moravians in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania had the first Christmas trees in America as well as the first Nativity Scenes. The Germans also brought with them the practice of

gift giving. This practice of gift giving originated much earlier in Germany as a custom between parties in legal relationships, mostly tenets to their landlords.

The Modern Celebration of Christmas

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The idea of a jolly fat man delivering gifts got a jump when the newspaper *The Sentinel* in Troy, New York published the poem "A Visit from St Nick" anonymously on 23 December 1823. The poem continued to be published anonymously yearly because Clement Clarke Moore, who created it, was very erudite and thought the work to be well below his station.

Moore, who's favorite saint was St. Nicholas the Wonder Worker of Turkey, used a Dutch store owner as his model for Santa Clause.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Visit_from_St._Nicholas

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Santa Claus himself may have been created as the antithesis of Krampus. Krampus is a horned, anthropomorphic figure described as "half-goat, half-demon," who, during the Christmas season, punishes children who've misbehaved. The Feast of St. Nicholas is celebrated in parts of Europe on 6 December. On the preceding evening of 5 December, Krampus Night or Krampusnacht, the wicked hairy devil appears on the streets. Sometimes accompanying St. Nicholas and sometimes on his own, Krampus visits homes and businesses presumably to seek out children who were naughty, not nice.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Krampus>

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The reinvention of Christmas in its modern sense was completed in 1834 when Charles Dickens wrote "*A Christmas Carol. In Prose. Being a Ghost Story of Christmas*" commonly known by its shortened title "*A Christmas Carol.*"

Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* during a period when the British were exploring and re-evaluating past Christmas traditions, including carols and carousing, and newer customs such as Christmas trees. He was influenced by the experiences of his own youth and by the Christmas stories of other authors, including Washington Irving. Dickens had written three Christmas stories prior to the novella and was inspired following a visit to the Field Lane Ragged School, one of several establishments that provided a free education for London's street children.

A Christmas Carol captured the zeitgeist of the mid-Victorian revival of the Christmas holiday. In it, Dickens had acknowledged the influence of the modern Western observance of Christmas and later inspired several aspects of Christmas, including family gatherings, seasonal food and drink, dancing, games and a festive generosity of spirit.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Christmas_Carol

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Today, some people are quick to point out that Christmas may be a layer over the top of some pagan rituals. While that might be true for the Tannenbaum the assertion that Christmas began in the 3rd century as a replacement for a pagan holiday might be incorrect. In 1743, German Protestant Paul Ernst Jablonski argued Christmas was placed on December 25 to correspond with the Roman solar holiday Dies Natalis Solis Invicti and was therefore a "paganization" that debased the true church. This has become "common knowledge" and dominates the opinions of the origin of Christmas to this day.

However, it has been argued that the Emperor Aurelian instituted the holiday of the Dies Natalis Solis Invicti in 274 AD to take place on December 25th as an attempt to give a pagan significance to a date already of great importance for Christians in Rome. Prior to this date the Roman god of the sun didn't have a formal holiday.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sol_Invictus

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas>

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So, while the path to Righteousness as taught by Jesus may be straight and narrow the path to the celebration of His birth was not. And whether one celebrates Christmas to honor the life of Jesus, or just a great break from the gloom of mid-winter, Christmas is today one of the world's essential holidays

The End