

Is Christmas a Legend?

Is Christmas a legend? Year after year I go to sleep on Christmas Eve and wake up Christmas morning thrilled with family and the smell of coffee. I enjoy coffee on Christmas morning with Danish pastry of some kind, hugs and kisses from my family. Oh! I am sorry! Were you expecting me to mention Christmas presents?

Louisa May Alcott captures the feelings of most people when she said,

Christmas would not be Christmas without any presents.¹

I think that is true for many families. That is not true for me and my family.

For us Christmas would not be Christmas without Jesus! Christmas would not be Christmas without knowing that God took on human form, and we call His name Jesus. It just would not be Christmas without reading

the biblical account on Christmas morning. That is what we have done, year after year. We do that before we open the Christmas presents. We remind the children and one another that God actually gave the best present of all. That best present of all is Jesus—God in human flesh. We take the time on Christmas morning to read the accounts from Matthew and Luke to get the setting correct. Why do we do that? Because we believe the Christmas story is true. We

believe exactly what the Bible says. I hope the same is true of you and that you take some time to read what Scripture says.

ATTACKS ON THE CHRISTIAN FAITH. Have you noticed in recent years how Christians are being attacked? Christians have been attacked through movies. One such movie was called “The Golden Compass.” It is a direct attack on our faith. Typically, people tend to pick on the obvious errors and sins of churches and ministers, and then they imply that is true for all believers. They claim all Christians are dishonest and unfair. But this year, the attack came from someone who once claimed to be a Christian. It came from the Archbishop of Canterbury. His name is Dr. Rowen Williams.² He

is the head of the World Anglican Church, and the attack came during an interview on BBC Radio 5. It occurred last week. He claimed in that interview that the Christmas story of the wise men is simply a legend.

We agree

with him that there were not three magi, but to call it legend is error. He also said that Jesus was not born on the 25th of December. He also said, “As for the star rising and then standing still, stars just do not do that.” He said that he was not sure Jesus was born in a stable, and that the belief in the virgin birth is unnecessary. He believes a person can be a good Christian and not believe in the virgin birth. He claims that we can only be confident that there was a baby,



1. Swindoll, Charles. *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart*. W. Publishing Group. 1998, p. 82.

2. Sophie Borland. “LONDON: Archbishop says nativity ‘a legend’” *Virutal Online - The Voice For Global Orthodox Anglicanism*. December 20, 2007.

and that he had parents named Mary and Joseph, and that is it. It is very sad that someone who is the Archbishop of Canterbury, the head of a major denomination, would actually say those things.

So this morning I want to teach the truth about Christmas. I have often made the statement that we all claim to be teachable. I will repeat my statement: I have yet to ask any group of adults, by a show of hands, whether they are teachable, and have anyone tell me they are not. Now if you really are teachable, you will be willing to reevaluate the truthfulness of the things that you believe are true, even if it means learning you have been wrong. So this morning I would like to revisit some things that you once thought were true, and just check to see whether or not Dr. Rowen Williams is correct.

YEAR OF THE BIRTH OF CHRIST. I would like to start with Luke 2:1. The first verse states,

Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census . . . Luke 2:1 (NASB)

Actually, it should read “enrollment.” The New American Standard says “census.” It was really an enrollment or a registry. It was “taken of all the inhabited earth.” That is, the Roman empire.

This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. Luke 2:2-7 (NASB)

Luke tells us the events in verses 2-7 occurred in the days of Caesar Augustus and during the time of Quirinius, while he was governor of Syria. Later in Matthew 2, we will learn

that Jesus’ birth also occurred during the time of Herod the Great. The dates we are interested in are that Caesar Augustus reigned from 43 B.C. to roughly 14 A.D. Quirinius was governor actually a number of times. But the time to which Luke refers, we believe, is between 3 to 2 B.C. Herod the Great reigned from 35 B.C. to 1 B.C. This information reveals that Jesus was probably born, based upon the latest research, somewhere between 2 to 1 B.C.

MONTH OF THE BIRTH OF CHRIST. Luke gives us data that helps us roughly determine the year in which Jesus was born. But what we do not have is any information as to the month in which Jesus was born. The Archbishop, Dr. Rowen Williams, said Jesus was not born in December. He believes our celebration of Christmas occurs in December because the date would coincide with the Winter Festival. But Dr. Williams did not do a very good job of research. One of the major reasons contemporary theologians have said that Jesus’ birth could not have occurred in December was that sheep would not have been out in the December cold.

We can thank God for a gentleman who many years ago visited Jerusalem during the month of December and saw sheep and shepherds outside. He added that historically it is not too cold for shepherds and sheep to be outside in December.

Dr. Rowen Williams also ignored the fact that several of the early church fathers said that Jesus was born on December 25. The alternate date has been January the 6th. The names of some of these early Church fathers are Clement of Alexandria, Epiphanius, John Chrysostom, and Hippolytus of Rome.

Some of the early Church fathers indicate that perhaps Jesus was conceived in May. We are not really sure how they arrived at that conclusion. So Dr. Rowen Williams evidently did not check out the historical information that is available to us.

CITY IN WHICH CHRIST WAS BORN. Next, verse 4 says,

Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem . . . Luke 2:4 (NASB)

The trip they took was about 69 miles. It would have taken three to seven days to travel the distance, depending upon how they made the trip. Mary and Joseph traveled from the northern part of Israel up to Bethlehem which is about 5 miles south of Jerusalem. I could not help but think about Mary being pregnant and how it must have been difficult for her to do that. The gospels tell us she was ready to deliver because we find out that after she arrives in Bethlehem, she gives birth to Jesus. That means she was imminently due. She must have been anxious. Joseph must have been burdened with the responsibilities of a new wife, who is struggling with her pregnancy. He would have been wondering where they were going to stay and how everything would come together.

I wonder if they talked about their parents' reaction to their circumstances. How did Mary's parents feel? We know the angel talked to Joseph and encouraged him. Joseph believed the angel, but did mom and dad? We do not know. I wonder what Mary was thinking about on the trip? Did they struggle or were they rejoicing as they traveled up to Bethlehem?

Why did God want them to travel to Bethlehem? The answer is that Bethlehem was the city of David. It is the place where David was born. Luke 2:4 says Joseph "was of the house and of the family of David."

Joseph's genealogy is given to us in Matthew, and the genealogy in Luke is Mary's. The genealogy in Matthew is the legal one. That is why Jesus has the legal right to David's throne. The genealogy in Luke is Jesus' physical descent. Mary was a descendant of David too! So Jesus was a descendant of David. On one hand Jesus is a physical descendant through Mary by the virgin birth. On the other hand, through Joseph He has the legal right to the throne.

JESUS WAS BORN IN A MANGER. Verses 5-7 tell us that Jesus was not born in an inn but in a stable where he was laid in a manger.

... in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in

a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. Luke 2:5-7 (NASB)

Yet, Dr. Rowen Williams says that Jesus was not born in an inn. It is his opinion that Jesus was born outside of a house because there was no room in the house for Him. He adds that it is highly doubtful Jesus was born in a stable.³ He doubts there were any oxen or sheep or goats present at all.

But it is important to know that the Greek word translated as "inn" in verse 7 means inn. The Greek word is *katalyma*. It just means "inn." The Greek word translated as "manger" actually means feeding trough. So I am not sure where Dr. Rowen Williams checked out his information. Jesus' first bed was a manger. He was born in a stable for sheltering animals. More than likely there were animals present. Yes, he is correct in that we do not know for sure if there were oxen, goats, or sheep, or other animals present because the passage does not mention them.

I have found an interesting quote from Jerome, an early Church father. He says that Jesus was born in a stable. He said,

He found no room in the holy of holies that shown with gold, precious stones, pure silk and silver. He is not born in the midst of gold and riches, but in the midst of dung, in a stable where our sins are filthier than the dung. He is born on a dunghill in order to lift up those who come from it: "From the dunghill He lifts up the poor. From the dunghill he lifts up sinners."⁴

That is what Jesus did! He came to a stable. He was born in Bethlehem. He was born amongst the dung, and our sins are worse than the dung. He did it because He came to save sinners from their sins. That is why He came.

ANGELS APPEAR TO THE SHEPHERDS. Verses 8-14 are about the shepherds. Verses 8-10 say,

In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in

3. Sophie Borland. Ibid.

4. Thomas Oden. New Testament. Ancient Christians Commentary. InterVarsity. 2006. III. p. 39.

the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people . . .” Luke 2:8-10 (NASB)

Notice in verse 9 we are told, “And the angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them.” Where was the angel? The angel was not in the sky. The angel stood before them. The angel was on the ground.

Verses 11-12 add,

. . . for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Luke 2:11-12 (NASB)

The angel gave them a clue to help them find Jesus. There could have been other babies in Bethlehem. But the angel is specific and tells them the baby is lying in a manger. He tells them the city is Bethlehem. So there is no doubt about where they should look for the baby.

Verses 13-14 state:

And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,
“Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.”
Luke 2:13-14 (NASB)

I find it interesting that the angels did not come to a pastor. The angels did not come to the rich. The angels did not visit some politicians. Instead, the angels visited some poor shepherds. Notice why I said that. Shepherds were not typically looked upon with a great deal of respect. These angels visited some poor people.

MESSAGE OF THE ANGEL. The angel’s message is found in verse 14:

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace . . .

How many times have Christmas cards talked about peace on earth? But notice the rest of the verse says,

... peace among men with whom He is pleased.

That is a very good rendering of the Greek. This does not mean God is giving peace to everyone on earth. When Jesus came, He did not come to institute peace. If He was coming to institute peace, why do we not have worldwide peace? Jesus was not coming to institute universal peace.

Jesus came to give individuals spiritual peace, and spiritual peace is only possible by believing in Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1 tells us that we can have peace with God by faith in Jesus Christ. If you do not know Jesus Christ, you cannot have the peace about which the angel was speaking. Jesus came to give us spiritual peace, peace between us and an almighty, infinite God. He came to forgive our sins. That is the reason He came.

Verses 15-19 give us the shepherds’ response.

When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, “Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.” So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. Luke 2:15-19 (NASB)

Here we learn the shepherds left the angels and found Jesus. In the process they must have told people about the birth of the Messiah.

Next, verse 20 says the shepherds gave God glory for what they had learned and seen.

The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God . . .
Luke 2:20 (NASB)

If we continue reading from verses 21 to 38, we learn Jesus

was taken to Jerusalem after eight days where He was circumcised. There the prophet Simeon pronounced a blessing on Jesus and announced a warning to Mary. Then Anna, a prophetess, also greeted them and gave thanks to God for Jesus. Sometimes we miss this information.

MAGI ARRIVE IN JERUSALEM. Matthew 2 tells that some magi arrived in Jerusalem. Dr. Rowen Williams claims they were not three kings.⁵ Ruth Gledhill adds this about Dr. Rowen Williams's beliefs.

The Archbishop said: "Matthew's Gospel doesn't tell us there were three of them, doesn't tell us they were kings, doesn't tell us where they came from. It says they are astrologers, wise men, priests from somewhere outside the Roman Empire, that's all we're really told." Anything else was legend. "It works quite well as legend," the Archbishop said.⁶

As far as Dr. Rowen Williams is concerned, the story about the magi is strictly nothing more than a legend, but he is wrong.

Yet, Dr. Rowen Williams is correct when he pointed out that stars do not stand still. I would like to point out several important things in Matthew 2. First, in verse 1 we are told,

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?
Matthew 2:1 (NASB)

We are told the magi arrived in Jerusalem. We will soon discover the magi arrived about two years later. The reason we believe that is because Herod asked the wise men how long ago they saw the star. After hearing their answer, he ordered the killing of every male child that was two years and younger born in the vicinity of Bethlehem. So we believe the magi came to Jerusalem about two years later.

It is amazing that many people just read Scripture and assume certain things are true. We have seen the nativity

scenes, Jesus is in the manger, and Mary is there. The shepherds and magi are there. But the magi came two years later! Matthew 2:11 tells us that when the magi arrived, Jesus was not in a manger. He was in a house. This reveals that the typical stable scene is incorrect if it includes the wise men.

But what is very interesting is that when the magi arrived, verse 3 says all of Jerusalem was troubled. Now it is very difficult to believe that just three men riding on camels into the city of Jerusalem would trouble about half a million people. There was probably a large entourage accompanying the magi. It is very likely that the magi and their caravan had a military escort. These magi were wealthy individuals. We know that in part because of the gifts they gave Jesus. They would not have been wise to travel by themselves with all the marauders and thieves along the way from Persia to Israel. So it is more reasonable to assume the entourage of wealthy men had a military escort. That would have excited and upset the inhabitants of Jerusalem. That would have concerned Herod the Great, and I believe that is exactly what happened.

Next, verses 8-10 add,

And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him." After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star . . . Matthew 2:8-9 (NASB)

MAGI ARRIVE IN BETHLEHEM. Watch this now.

... which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.
Matthew 2:9-10 (NASB)

These last two verses capture a very important fact. First, they indicate the star had disappeared. Then they had arrived in Jerusalem. The reason that they were asking for directions is because they had lost the star. As soon as they found out Jesus was to be born in Bethlehem, they started on their journey, and the star reappeared. Then the star led

5. Sophie Borland. Ibid.

6. Ruth Gledhill. "It's all a Christmas tall story Three Wise Men." Virutal Online - The Voice For Global Orthodox Anglicanism. December 20, 2007.

them to the city of Bethlehem. You may wonder, “That is not a star. Since when does a star move out in front of a person?!” When the star arrived at Bethlehem, it was stationary. In reality, we know the stars are moving; but relatively speaking, they appear to be stationary to our eye. Stars do not appear to move before us! The “star” was a miracle. It was not a normal star. Dr. Rowen Williams did not believe the star moved and then stood still. He said “stars just don’t behave like that.”⁷

Verse 11 tells us the magi finally found Jesus and worshiped Him.

After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him . . .

Matthew 2:8 (NASB)

It is amazing that Dr. Williams claims he adheres strictly to the teachings of the Bible. The truth is he does not adhere strictly to the

Bible in all of his statements. He has unjustly discredited the Bible. He has denied Jesus. To claim that a Christian does not need to believe in the virgin birth is a very serious error. He has eliminated the manger scene, and he has cast the magi as nothing more than legend.

IS CHRISTMAS A LEGEND? In summary, when Dr. Rowen Williams claims that Christians do not need to believe that there was a baby, who had a mother named Mary and a father named Joseph, he has minimized the Christmas story to a young couple in a house with a baby. There is nothing special about a young couple having babies. That happens all the time. In short, Dr. Williams claims Christmas is a legend. There is historical data to support the biblical account. The census did occur. Shepherds do attend sheep in December in Bethlehem. The magi did exist in the

east. The prophets prophesied of Jesus’ birth. Yet sadly, Dr. Rowen Williams missed the point that without the miraculous birth of Jesus, there is no Christmas!

There is a very interesting story that I would like to read for you here. It captures the point.

Little seven-year-old Johnny yelled out and said, “Daddy, guess what is missing.” The place was ringing with excitement as the family put up a familiar scene, a manger scene, out on the front lawn. And the father said, “What?” as he was fastening Joseph to a pole and putting it in the ground. Johnny spoke up and said, “Baby Jesus! Daddy, if we cannot find the baby Jesus, then there is no need for us to put up the manger scene at all.”

The little boy was right: if there is no Jesus, there is no reason for Christmas.

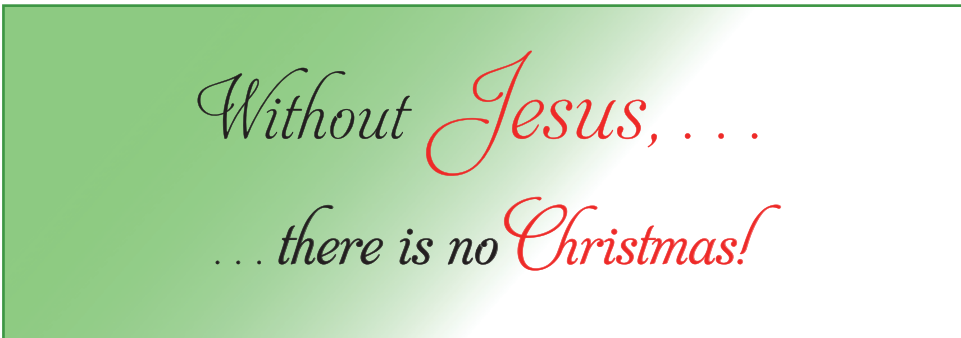
If there is no Jesus, there is no manger scene. If there is no Jesus, there is no nativity. If there is no Jesus, there are no shepherds. If there is no Jesus,

there are no magi. If there is no Jesus, there are no angels. If there is no Jesus, there is no God who came in human flesh. If there is no Jesus, Christmas is empty. If there is no Jesus, then all that is left are presents, morning coffee, hugs and kisses and family. That is all Christmas is, if there is no Jesus. If Jesus did not come, if God did not come in human flesh, Christmas day is a hollow event.

Did you know that we are not solely dependent on Matthew and Luke for the virgin birth? Romans 1:2-3 says,

. . . which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh . . . Romans 1:2-3 (NASB)

This verse says the Son of God was born in human flesh, and



⁷ Ruth Gledhill. Ibid.

verse 4 adds,

... who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead . . . Romans 1:4 (NASB)

Jesus was declared to be God by the fact that He returned to life. There is the Christmas story! The Christmas story is that God took on human flesh and after His crucifixion, He returned to life as proof He was and is God. The Christmas story is historical truth. It truly happened and Dr. Rowen Williams was not careful or accurate in his criticism of the Bible.

CONCLUSION. 1 John 4:2-3 is a very important passage. It says this:

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God . . . 1 John 4:2-3 (NASB)

Notice that it says every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God,

... this is the spirit of the antichrist . . . 1 John 4:3 (NASB)

The Spirit of God says that Jesus came in human flesh. You may say, "That does not make any sense. That just means Jesus was a man in human flesh." No! The Holy Spirit is talking about a sign. He says by this you will know the spirit of truth! He says Jesus came in human flesh. That is what happened on Christmas Day: Jesus was God in human flesh.

Romans 5:12 tells us that when Adam sinned, everyone became sinners. Psalm 51:5 tells us that we were conceived in sin. John 1:29 tells us that Jesus was the perfect Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Then Hebrews tells us that Jesus was without sin. Jesus was not like us!

The only way Jesus could be without sin, the only way Jesus could be the perfect Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, is that He was not born in the same way you and I were born. We were born as sinners, but not Jesus. There is only one way He could be born sinless. It is the

virgin birth. Christmas is the virgin birth of God in human flesh. That is the essence of Christmas. He came to die for our sins so that He can save every believer from an eternal hell.

I would like to close with a poem.

A gentle, humble couple had traveled long and far to a little town called Bethlehem in a stable beneath a star. There among the cattle God sent His Son to earth, with only an angel chorus to celebrate His birth. As shepherds heard their message and knelt there in the straw, amazed and filled with wonder at the baby whom they saw. Then wise men came to worship with precious gifts to bring, knowing that before them was their Savior and their king. Christ came to us from heaven and did not count the cost, yet behind His humble manger stood a waiting, rugged cross.

Do I believe in the virgin birth? Absolutely, because all the prophecies from ages of old, prophesied it would occur. I do not believe in a hollow, empty book. If you are not a Christian, I trust that you will consider the truth that God took on human flesh for the purpose of rescuing anyone who believes in Him from an eternal hell. His name is Jesus. I trust you have a Blessed Christmas!