

# The "Christmas" Story vs. The Bible Story

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This time of year presents great opportunities to talk with people about the birth of Jesus—one of the most significant events in the history of the world. The great majority around us believe, in one way or another, that December 25<sup>th</sup> is **the** day Jesus was born. As a result, Jesus and His birth will be on many minds for the next several weeks. That means **you** have an even greater opportunity to share a little bit about your faith in Christ. But let's all make sure we know how it **really** happened and **where** these important details are when the time to share the **real** story comes.

To begin, carefully read the details of *Luke 2:1-14*:

*In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

*And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,*

*"Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among  
those with whom he is  
pleased!"*

What can we **know** from this passage of Scripture?

**The date of Jesus' birth is unknown.** It comes as a shock to many that the Bible doesn't actually tell us the exact date of Jesus' birth, but we can be reasonably certain

that December is not a great guess. Take a look at what just one of many scholars has readily offered in commenting on *Luke 2*:

*"According to this statement, Jesus cannot have been born in December, in the middle of the rainy season, as has been since the fourth century supposed...according to Jewish history, the driving forth of the flocks took place in March, the bringing in of them in November" (Critical And Exegetical Handbook To The Gospels Of Mark And Luke, H.A.W. Meyer, pg. 273).*

While such is not absolute evidence against this time of year, it does seem to raise big questions. The bottom line is this: **we don't know** the month and the day of Jesus' birth. God didn't tell us. Even *The Encyclopedia Britannica* plainly reveals:

*"Christmas was not among the earliest festivals of the church, and before the fifth century there was no general consensus of opinion as to when it should come in the calendar, whether January 6<sup>th</sup>, March 25<sup>th</sup> or December 25<sup>th</sup>."*

**Other important details.** To whom did the angel appear? The shepherds (*Luke 2:8-10*). What did the angel tell them? *"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord"* (*Luke 2:11*). For what were they supposed to look? *"And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger"* (*Luke 2:12*). What was their reaction? It's recorded for us in *Luke 2:15-20*:

*When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

What happened next? We don't know, until *Luke 2:21*: *"And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb."*

What happened next? We don't know, until *Luke 2:22-24*:

*And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the*

*womb shall be called holy to the Lord") and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons."*

When would this have taken place? *Leviticus 12:1-4,6-8* indicates that it was to be done when the baby was **forty days old**. It's obvious, from their trip to Jerusalem, that Joseph and Mary were concerned with keeping the Law. Does it not make sense that they would have presented Jesus when Moses had commanded?

Finally, *Luke 2:25-38* details the scene of Joseph, Mary and Jesus at the temple. Take the time to read in your Bible these additional details.

Having read those Scriptures, is the typical "manger scene" true to the Word? Picture it in your mind. You've seen it a thousand times. A place that looks like a shed. A shining star above. Shepherds on one side, bowed in adoration. Three wise men on the other, having come to bring their gifts. Mary with the baby, a halo around her head. Angels singing above them. Sound pretty accurate?

**Not if you took the time to carefully read the Biblical account!** Where did Luke mention a star over a shed? Did you run across any wise men in his account? Do you remember reading of angels singing over the stable? Me neither. So where are those details to be found?

Matthew's account continues the story. But realize that as *Matthew 2* opens, the time frame has jumped ahead, perhaps by as much as two years! How many wise men were there? Your friends won't bat an eye lash in saying "Three!" But do we know that for sure? We know that there were at least two, but for all we know, there could have been twenty!

Carefully read what Matthew's gospel actually says:

*Now **after** Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:*

*"And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who will shepherd my people Israel."*

*Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them **what time the star had appeared**. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh (Matthew 2:1-11).*

Did you notice the importance of the details? The "*baby*" of Luke's account is now a "*child*" in Matthew. The family is *not* in a stable, still entertaining shepherds; the family is in a "*house*," and the wise men bring their gifts into that house.

When they had done what they came to do, *Matthew 2:12-18* gives us the rest of the story. Read it carefully for yourself:

*And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."*

*Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were **two years old or under**, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:*

*"A voice was heard in Ramah,  
weeping and loud  
lamentation,  
Rachel weeping for her children;  
she refused to be comforted,  
because they are no more."*

Remember, Herod had wanted to know *exactly* when the star appeared, and he was told. Then, when he discovered that he had been deceived, he commanded that all male children **up to** 2-years-old be killed. Doesn't that tell us something about what he had heard? Considerable time must have passed since Jesus was born and laid in the manger.

Clearly, there's a lot that we don't know. What we *do* know is that it **didn't happen** the way millions naturally assume, based on what they have always been told. We don't read of the shepherds and the wise men ever appearing at the stable together...or the star shining above the stable...or the angels singing over the stable.

Make no mistake. The angelic sentiment still stands—"*Glory to God in the highest!*" But let's make sure that we give God the glory by telling this wonderful story accurately. Take the time to do your homework. Make sure you're ready to talk about it during this opportune time of year. Who knows where your honest efforts could lead?