



The First Christmas

Matthew 2:1-16

NOW when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem.

2. Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

3. When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

4. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.

5. They said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet,

6. And thou, Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda; for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.

7. Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.

8. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

9. When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.

10. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

11. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

12. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

13. And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy them.

14. When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt:

15. And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled with was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son.

16. Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men.

Luke 2:18-21

AND there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

9. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

10. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

11. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

12. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

13. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

14. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

15. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

16. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

17. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

18. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

19. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

20. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

21. And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called Jesus, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Christmas through the ages

The movement of the sun's rebirth, bringing the lengthening of the days, has always been a vital religious time. Because early people realized that their life depended on the sun as a source of life and light, so sun worship was prevalent among them.

Many centuries before Christ's birthday other religious groups had religious festivals during the winter solstice. The Romans honored their god of agriculture, Saturn, from the middle of December until the beginning of January. They exchanged gifts, did much eating, drinking, gaming and visiting.

In Persia they built great fires to Mithra, their god of light. Redating Christianity, Mithraism had many similarities with the newer religion. There was baptism, a sacred meal, the observance of Sunday, and the god was born on December 25th out of a rock. The idea of good and evil, the triumph of evil by salvation, and special appeal to the poor were present in both religions. Many of the Mithraic features were adopted from earlier religions.

Whether Christianity absorbed many of these features from Mithraism is not known. What is known is that they were competitors in the Roman Empire.

Saturnalia was celebrated throughout the Roman Empire. The medieval Feast of Fools, led by the Lord of Misrule, comes from the worship of Saturn. Roles were changed, with masters working for their servants.

When Emperor Constantine established Christianity as the state religion, the persecution of Christians ended. At first Christ's birthday was not celebrated because his followers did not want to follow pagan customs.

The exact date of Christ's birth was not known, so in the 4th century A.D. Julius I made an investigation into the matter and in A.D. 350, December 25th was selected as the probable date. The Feast of the Nativity was first observed in Rome and the custom rapidly spread.

About a century later most Christians accepted the December 25th date, except the Armenians who still keep January 6th.

As the Christmas festival spread throughout the western world it took on many aspects of the earlier pagan ceremonies, assimilating old traditions and myths into the new Christian celebration. Many of those myths and practices are now familiar aspects of the modern Christmas.

The Christmas holiday was first observed in England in A.D. 521 when King Arthur celebrated his victory in retaking York. Many guests sat at the famous Round Table, entertained by minstrels, jugglers, and pipe players.

During the ninth century Alfred the Great set aside 12 days for Yuletide festivities. While feasting in lavish style during the Christmas of 878, the Danes made a surprise attack, scattering Alfred's forces. Alfred escaped into the woods dis-

guised as a Christmas minstrel.

During the Middle Ages Christmas became the most important festival of the year. When the Puritan Cromwell came to power in 1642 he attempted to bar Christmas as a "heathen" practice.

With the return of the monarchy in 1660 Christmas returned from underground. But Charles II, who knew poverty during his exile, discouraged indulgence. Christmas continued through the ages but on a much smaller scale.

The nineteenth century was a period of major growth and development—the industrial age. People moved to the cities; rail and ship transportation and new ways of communication made the world smaller.

A new interest in Christmas also developed. Along with the Christmas feasts, carols and worship there has developed an intense commercialization.



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