

Many Questions About Christmas Unanswered

By GEORGE W. CORNELL, AP RELIGION WRITER
 Many an unanswered question still exists today about a birthday that millions of people are getting ready to celebrate.

The occasion: Christmas.
 It marks the birth of Jesus Christ, but on just what day or in what month or even in what year it happened is not definitely known, and popular pageantry has given some misleading features to the setting.

Not Born in 1 A.D.
 One thing that scholars accept as certain, Christ was not born in the year 1 A.D., as the calendar suggests. It was at least four or five years before, maybe six or seven.

Another thing, the "wise men" did not appear with their gifts at the time. It was weeks, months and probably a year or more later, as can best be calculated. Certainly they weren't present at the manger scene.

Besides, the idea that there were "three wise men" is only reasoned conjecture. The Bible doesn't specify. Some old writers say there were 12 of them.

Questions Unanswered
 And since it was just a census taking that caused Mary and Joseph to go to Bethlehem where the birth occurred, why did they remain there for months afterward? Why didn't they return home to Nazareth?

How long did that star hover over Bethlehem and what caused it? What made Christianity settle on December 25 as the birthday? Were the shepherds in the pasture in midwinter? Whence came the mistletoe?

Gospels Give Meaning
 Although the Gospels give the meaningful part of the story, it's an old human urge to try to reduce weightier truths down to simple, tangible things—names, dates, places and plain, step-by-step chronology.

The historians back in the beginning years of Christianity don't record these details about Christ's birth and life, apparently considering it of little consequence, but they do make general references to him.

Writes Judean historian Flavius Josephus:
 "About this time there lived Jesus, a man full of wisdom, if indeed one may call him a man. For he was a doer of incredible things...he thus attracted to himself many Jews and many Gentiles."

Tacitus Traces Name
 Roman historian Publius Tacitus says of the newly rounded Christianity: "This name comes...from Christ, whom the procurator, Pontius Pilate, under the rule of Tiberius, had handed over to torture."

They don't give the usual biographical data. But bit by bit, supplementing Gospel accounts with other ancient recorded information, pieces and threads have been drawn together, providing some historically based conclusions.

First of all, it is evident Jesus was born prior to 4 B.C., since that is the year of the death of Herod the Great, who ordered the slaying of infants under 2 in Bethlehem to try to kill the Christ child.

Herod Learned Late
 Since Herod didn't learn of the child until the arrival in Judea of the "wise men from the east," the baby already was many weeks, perhaps more than a year, old when Herod decided to act.

Exactly how long it took the wise men to get to Bethlehem after Jesus's birth is not established.

Gospel terminology and early church writers suggest the easterners came from Persia or Chaldea. This meant a trip of 1,000 to 2,000 miles. Counting preparation time, such a journey by camel must have taken many months.

Herod Died 4 B.C.
 Also, the fact that Herod ordered death for infants up to two years old indicates the child was then considered over a year old. More time went by, during Joseph's and Mary's stay in Egypt, before Herod died in 4 B.C.

Another factor enters here—the star over Bethlehem. Around that period, astronomy records some spectacular solar conjunctions—of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 B.C. and of Jupiter and Venus in 6 B.C.

These would have persisted for some time, as would have been necessary to guide the wise men all through their long journey.

Assuming Jesus was born in 6 B.C., what about the month and day?

Unmarked 300 Years
 It was nearly 300 years after his birth before his followers began to observe the anniversary. There were great differences about the date.

Strangely, there's no month in the year that hasn't been named as the proper one by some reputable authority back in early church times. They argued cases for various dates—May 20, Nov. 17, Jan. 6, April 19, March 25 and others.

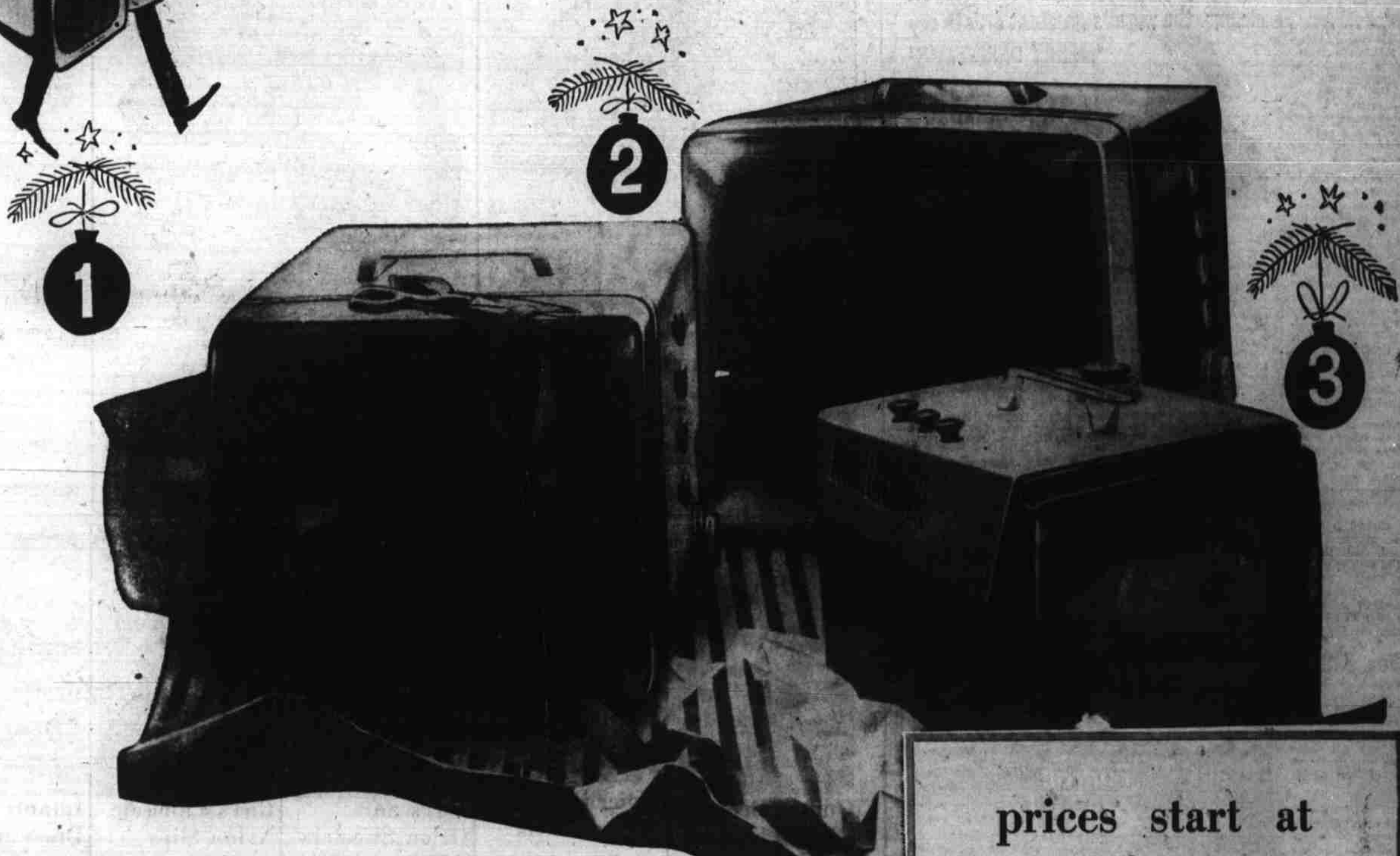
Eventually, about 350 A.D., Western churches centered in Rome began to use Dec. 25. Eastern churches termed this idolatrous, since the same date was celebrated as the birth of the sun god, Mithra. They stuck temporarily to Jan. 6.

Whatever the influences, by 400 A.D., both Eastern and Western churches had accepted the Dec. 25 date, and it became the norm. By then, Christianity was emblazoned across the Roman Empire and Mithraism was dead.

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