

What is the Story about Christmas?

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Warning: This article may be dangerous to your cherished beliefs!

What do we do on about December 25 and why do we do it?

Most Americans, Christian or not, will erect a tree in their living rooms, put all manner of lights and decorations on it, display mistletoe and holly trimmings around their homes, put up special lights and other decorations outside, mail Christmas cards and annual letters to friends and family, go to lots of parties and special church services, listen to special music, give gifts wrapped in special paper, and enjoy large dinners with family and friends. But, why?

Do we do it all because 2,000 years ago the son of God was born to a virgin in Bethlehem? Probably not. If Christians take their faith from the Bible, there is not much in there to support what we do and when we do it. There, of course, is nothing in the Bible about December 25, Christmas Trees, etc, etc, etc. The Western Christian version of the Christmas Story comes from the Gospel According to Mathew, Chapter 2 and the Gospel According to Luke, also in Chapter 2, but it is nearly impossible to explain the majority of what we actually do by these simple passages.

In fact, there has been much Christian disapproval of Christmas. Starting as far back as 245 AD, the Christian Theologian and church Father Origin of Alexandria stated that, "only sinners (like Pharaoh and Herod)" celebrated their Birthdays."

The idea of some kind of celebration timed around the winter solstice, with varying degrees of pagan, Christian, and folklore orientations, has been around from about the beginning of recorded history and certainly predates Christianity. The nature and dates of these holidays have ebbed and flowed with the changing political climates of the times. Most astute political leaders, certainly the Roman Catholic Church and the Roman Empire, to name a few, understood very well that connecting with our long standing desires for holidays, could and in fact must, be use to ensure the established order, or, the order they were attempting to establish.

In Colonial America, the Puritans of New England disapproved of Christmas. Celebration was outlawed in Boston from 1659 to 1681. Christmas did not become a national holiday until 1870. The way we celebrate Christmas 2008, like all Christmases of recent memory, is a combination of many elements, some Christian and some not. Weather you are offended when the word Christmas is replaced by "holidays", or don't think secular institutions, like various levels of government, should display the Nativity Scene, it's hard to avoid imagining that there is something unique about this time of year.

Many Christians are familiar with the phrases "the reason for the season", or "Keep the Christ in Christmas." The problem with that is, of course, that very little of what we actually do, (not to be confused with what we think we should do), even as practicing Christians, has anything to do with Biblical Christianity. There are about as many views of what does and what does not constitute being a Christian as there are Christians, but it might be helpful to establish a base line or two.

It seems reasonable to assume that if you are going to consider yourself a Christian, it means that you believe Jesus of Nazareth, was and is the one and only Son of the one and only God. Does that mean he was borne of a virgin? The virgin birth idea is mentioned in the stories in Mathew and Luke and nowhere else in the New Testament.

The Apostle Paul wrote 14 of the 26 books of the New Testament and he provides the first written account of the relationship of the Christian to the Risen Christ - what it is to be a Christian - and thus of Christian spirituality. Paul's influence on Christian thinking has, arguably, been more significant than any other single New Testament author. His influence on the main strands of Christian thought has been massive. And, he does not write anything about a virgin birth. In fact, in the only two places where he does write about Jesus' birth (Galatians 4:4 and Romans 1:1) he seems to indicate the birth was completely normal. Further, when he writes extensively about marital matters (1 Corinthians Chapter 7) he also makes no mention of Mary's virginity.

What Paul does write about over and over again, is the fundamental core of Christianity—belief that Jesus was the Son of God, that he was crucified, resurrected, ascended to heaven, and that his sacrifice is the foundation

for forgiveness of our sins and the only path to eternal life. Even though Paul wrote extensive amounts of the New Testament and that he is the focus of much of the Book of Acts, Paul had only one sermon to give and he is very clear about what the Christian must believe. His sermon does not include any reference to a virgin birth by a very young woman in a stable, missing is any mention of the three kings, the shepherds, the angelic choir, December 25, Christmas trees, presents, dinners, or anything else we generally associate with December 25.

Speaking of a very young woman, we seem to like the image of a 13 or 14 year old virgin girl, the embodiment of purity and innocence, devoted to serving God's needs. Unfortunately, like the rest of the Christmas story, there is precious little in the Bible to back this up. Even the two accounts of Jesus' birth give no indication of Mary's age, not to mention her imagined perpetual virginity. And, her age seems to get younger and younger as the years pass. We recently heard a reference to her being as young as 12 years old! But hey, we love the image.

So, from whence come the majority of our December 25 celebrations? Not the Bible.

What about Hanukkah? This 8 day Jewish period of celebration frequently, but not always, includes December 25. This year it begins on December 21 and goes to December 29. Judaism, like Christianity, probably has as many perspectives as there are Jews. So nailing down exactly what our practice of Hanukkah is all about, is not any easier than doing the same thing for Christmas.

Just as most Christians can say that Christmas has something to do with the birth of Christ, most reasonably educated Jews understand that Hanukkah has something to do with purification of the Temple a very long time ago.

As the story goes, after Judas Maccabee recaptured Jerusalem in 165 BC, he rededicated the defiled and desecrated altar. The problem was that this required relighting the eternal flame, but there was not enough consecrated olive oil. It required 8 days to prepare more oil, but there was only a one day supply on hand. A miracle happened when this one day supply lasted for the entire 8 days, and hence an 8 day celebration centered around lighting 8 candles.

The problem is, of course, that this story does not come from the most sacred Jewish source, the Hebrew Bible, and it is entirely missing from

The Mishna (the first of two parts of the Talmud) outside of a single passing reference. The story mainly comes from the Gemara (the second part of the Talmud), in tractate Shabbat 2. Hanukkah is also mentioned in the deuterocanonical books of 1 Maccabees and 2 Maccabees. The version of the story in 1 Maccabees states that an eight day celebration of songs and sacrifices was proclaimed upon rededication of the altar, and makes no mention of the miracle of the oil. Further, Joseph P. Schultz, in "Judaism and the Gentile Faiths: Comparative Studies in Religion", states "Modern scholarship on the other hand considers the Maccabean revolt less as an uprising against foreign oppression than as a civil war between the orthodox and reformist parties in the Jewish camp."

In modern Israel, Hanukkah was transformed into a celebration of military strength, a kind of antidote to a powerless Diaspora Jew. In North America especially, Hanukkah gained increased importance with many Jewish families in the latter half of the twentieth century, including large numbers of secular Jews, who wanted a Jewish alternative to the Christmas celebrations. Though it was traditional to give "gelt" or money coins to children during Hanukkah, in many families this has changed into gifts in order to prevent Jewish children from feeling left out of the Christmas gift giving. Hanukkah has taken a place equal to Passover as a symbol of Jewish identity. Both the Israeli and North American versions of Hanukkah emphasize resistance, focusing on some combination of national liberation and religious freedom as the defining meaning of the holiday.

Whatever the reasons for the celebrations, Hanukkah usually involves lighting the candles, special prayers and songs, gift giving, family dinners with special foods, and special games, such as the spinning dreidel game. Just like Christmas, it is a family time. Also, just like in Christianity, if you rely on the Hebrew Bible to explain your Hanukkah celebrations, you will not get very close to what is actually practiced. If you expand your reference material to a broader field, you will get closer, but there still would seem to be a bit of a gap between the ancient writings and today's practices.

Beyond the Christmas Story and Hanukkah, this time of year is a time for completely non-religious celebrations. In some atheist homes, December 25 is celebrated as a special family day. It may even be called Christmas and include many of the trappings, such as Christmas carols, found in the most devoted Christian households. According to Fred F. Peters, a local resident, recent law school graduate, and a self avowed atheist, "I like getting together {with my family} and cooking a large meal together, exchanging gifts, talking about old times talking about lost loved ones. It's much more something my family does out of tradition there's just no religious overtones to the holiday when we celebrate it. I'm not a very Christmassy kind of person, but I like the idea of sharing old memories, seeing family and it's that time of year. What I'm celebrating is the tradition that has been set up with my family."

So, what does it all mean? Late December, particularly December 25, is clearly a time of better than usual good cheer, however, there seems to be a gap between what we would like to think we are supposed to do and what we actually do. It seems that what we actually do is try to have a good time with the family and friends we love. Nothing wrong with that, of course.

If we are drawn together, to remember good times, share in each others company, and try to make each other happy, is it nothing more than social programming or tradition? Or, is there something more at work here? According to James Wilson, Senior Pastor at Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church in Los Alamitos, "Christmas does bring out in us a sense of deep longing for connection with our family and the wanting to give to others and I think that comes out of the value, whether we are conscious of it or not, which has to do with us being made for relationship with God, who, at the birth of Christ, gives himself for us, comes into our world, connects with us, ultimately provides the sacrifice that reconciles us to God, and basically satisfies that longing that's in our inner person, and in our hearts."

Whatever your perspective, your editors wish you a wonderful holiday.

If you agree, leave a comment. If you don't agree, leave a comment.